

The logo for 'JUST 3' features the word 'JUST' in a yellow, sans-serif font, stacked vertically. To its right is a large, bold yellow number '3'. Below the text is a horizontal bar composed of three segments: a light blue segment on the left, a medium blue segment in the middle, and a dark blue segment on the right. The entire logo is set against a dark blue background.

JUST 3

JUST THREE Podcast: A Conversation with Alyssa A. L. James

February 5, 2021

Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 13:56

[*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*]

[00:58] **Alyssa A. L. James:** None of us are free until the least of us are free. And in a world where White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, and ableist violence exist, our liberation means everyone's liberation.

[01:11] **Catherine:** Today on the JUST THREE podcast, I am thrilled to talk with [Alyssa James](#). Alyssa James is a third-year anthropology Ph.D. student at Columbia University. She's a 2020 SSHRC Doctoral Fellow whose research centers the stakes of commodifying the colonial past in the contemporary revival of coffee production in Martinique. She's an editorial assistant for the Small Axe journal and a co-host of the Black feminist anthropology podcast, Zora's Daughters. In her free time, you'll find Alyssa dancing, traveling (in pre-COVID times) and writing about it.

[01:48] **Alyssa:** Alyssa is the Graduate Student Coordinator for the [Black Atlantic Ecologies working group](#) here at the Center for the Study of Social Difference. This group supports and

elaborates scholarship that centers the enduring effects of coloniality and the dynamic power of protest in African diasporic confrontations with environmental crisis. My conversation with Alyssa was recorded on February 5, 2021.

[02:25] **Catherine:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast. I'm here with Alyssa James. I'm so excited to talk with her. And Alyssa before we get into our three questions of the JUST THREE podcast, could you just introduce yourself briefly, maybe say where you are and how you're doing and tell us a little bit about what you do?

[02:44] **Alyssa:** Sure. My name is Alyssa James. I am a SSHRC Doctoral Fellow, third-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University and co-host of Zora's Daughters, which is a podcast where we distill academic literature and critique popular culture through a Black feminist lens. I'm currently in New York City and I'm healthy, safe, and well. Thank you so much for having me, Catherine.

[03:10] **Catherine:** I'm so glad to hear it. I'm glad you're healthy, safe, and well. It's something I feel we all need to qualify in these times. And thank you for mentioning Zora's Daughters podcast which is so excellent. I'm going to go ahead and dive into the three questions because I feel like they could get into some really interesting places with you. So we're just going to go to question one. And question one of the JUST THREE podcast is: how does your work engage with issues of social justice?

[03:38] **Alyssa:** So my research examines the contemporary revival of coffee production in Martinique. And so I'm interested in the process of constructing heritage and the stakes of commodifying the colonial past for a supposed post-colonial present and future. And so while my research is explicitly about the making of heritage, the questions that are the current of my scholarly project emerged from my position as a Black woman of Jamaican descent.

And so in the Caribbean, landscapes and people are commodified and exploited through touristic fantasies and those have evolved from a history of the European desire for exoticized tropical nature and Black bodies. And so this vision of the Caribbean, among other things, created these conditions of possibility for the region to be a site of extraction. And that could be the extraction of natural resources and labor. And so if these conditions persist through repetition—so, for example, in the revival of the production of a commodity that was introduced to the Caribbean by way of colonialism and then circulated widely and around the globe by way of labor of enslaved people—then where does freedom lie? And so the Martiniquan, Frantz Fanon, he wrote: "The present always serves to build the future of my century, my country, and my existence." And so, by century, I don't think he meant the time period per se, but was actually referencing a Martiniquan saying: "A Black man is a century." So I'm thinking about what does the "post" in post-colonial even mean when the colonial past carries so much weight in the present and, by implication, the future. And also what are the limits or the impossibilities or possibilities of Black liberation when the colonial past is built into our visions of the future?



And so that brings me to what I'm aiming to do with the podcast which I also consider part of my work. And it's something that's not just for academics. My co-host, Brendane Tynes and I, we make the podcast so that people in our communities—many of whom may not have gone to university because my co-host and I are both first-generation graduates—will listen and take something away from it. And so we're not doing this work to give a theoretical explanation of what Black women experience but rather to affirm that Black people are theorizing every day regardless of whether it's institutionally certified. And so in that way, we aim to enact a Black feminist future, one that does not rely on White supremacist and patriarchal logics of exclusion, but one where no one is left out or left behind. And we give others the tools to do the same. So in all of my projects, I'm thinking about how Black people negotiate the present in order to realize a decolonial future.

[06:23] **Catherine:** Thank you, Alyssa. That sounds great and I loved hearing a bit more about what you're trying to do with Zora's Daughters. Could I put you on the spot a little bit and just ask if you could give us maybe a few examples of some of the favorite episodes that you've done for Zora's Daughters—maybe just the rough areas that you covered—to give our audience an idea?

[06:45] **Alyssa:** Yes. So just as a broad explanation, as anthropologists, we use culture—and, in this case, popular culture—as an entry point into discussing broader sociocultural phenomena. And so our most recent episode was about Latinidad and anti-Blackness and the intersections of that.

I think one of my favorite episodes was an episode we did about respectability politics and we talked about Carolyn Cooper's essay and about dancehall and dancehall dancing. And I really enjoyed doing that because we were reading a Caribbean writer and then, you know, trying to understand respectability politics in the Black community and in the world broadly.

[07:35] **Catherine:** Fantastic. That's a really great episode. I was just listening to it the other day. So thank you.

I'm gonna go ahead and get us into our second question, because it's a big one and I'm curious to hear what you have to say about this. The second question of the JUST THREE podcast is: what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?

[07:57] **Alyssa:** Yes, that is a big question. And as someone still learning and growing in her Black feminist politics, I hesitate to name one challenge as the biggest of our time when we can effectively point to one source of most injustices in the world. I think that we know the symptoms. We're living in them, living in their wake, but we need to treat the disease.

And so, instead, I kind of wanted to turn this question around and understand it as: what's the biggest challenge to social justice? What's the greatest hurdle we need to overcome in order to arrive at social equality? And, in my opinion, the obstacle is White supremacy and its little play cousins: colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. And these structures and the logic that

accompany them are responsible for so many things. Where does one even start? They're responsible for the marginalization of Indigenous ways of knowing and the elevation of the White Western philosophical paradigm of duality, rationality, universalism, the theft of Indigenous land, theft and enslavement of Black bodies, the underdevelopment of Africa—to use Walter Rodney's phrase—the climate crisis, anti-Blackness, the exploitation of labor, the prison-industrial complex, violence against queer and trans people, gender inequality.... And of course, I could go on; you could add some as well. And so I think that for every injustice and even some of the moves towards supposed justice, we always need to be asking ourselves: which of these structures could it be serving? And so until people—and especially White people, who are today the descendants and beneficiaries of these structures of oppression— come to terms with their role in perpetuating these systems and actively work towards dismantling them, we will not have social justice. So I would say that is the biggest social justice challenge of our current time.

[09:48] **Catherine:** Thank you for getting to that as a “turning it to the source” question. I think that's so important. And, of course, we've heard a lot of people talk about White supremacy, often for the first time, in the past year which is—I'm really so thankful that you are talking about these issues. I'm so thankful you're doing your podcast as well, which also touches on all of this. So thank you for that. It is indeed a big thing.

And so we need to get into our third question which will get into that source issue further perhaps. But the third question of the JUST THREE podcast is: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[10:31] **Alyssa:** Yes. So there's a quotation that I keep quite close to me. And I think it actually encapsulates the reason I became an anthropologist. And it goes: "People need to see that far from being an obstacle, the world's diversity of languages, religions, and traditions is a great treasure, affording us precious opportunities to recognize ourselves and others." And I think that is a powerful starting point for change. It's refusing exceptionalism and chauvinism and embracing the idea that other people are other faces of yourself, to paraphrase Audre Lorde. And so I think, given my podcast and what I just explained, you know, that proposition may lead folks to ask, "Well, why do you focus on uplifting Black women and not everyone?" And I think that the Combahee River Collective—which was a Black feminist lesbian socialist organization in the seventies— they give us an excellent blueprint for a liberatory practice. And so they declared that if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free, since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression. So, what does that mean? None of us are free until the least of us are free. And in a world where White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, and ablest violence exist, our liberation means everyone's liberation. And so we start with freeing ourselves.

[11:58] **Catherine:** That is powerful, too, and I thank you for sharing that quote. You say you keep that quote close to you. Do you actually have it written out in front of you? Do you look at it, do you read it?



[12:07] **Alyssa:** Yes, I do. *[laughs]*

[12:11] **Catherine:** Alyssa, thank you so much. This is really fantastic to hear about the work that you're doing. And I would love if you could tell our listeners where they could find out more about Zora's Daughters as well because you really do some deep dives into a lot there, way beyond what we can get into in the JUST THREE podcast, and I would love for our listeners to check it out.

[12:33] **Alyssa:** Yes, if you'd like to learn more about misogynoir, colorism, you know, Black liberalism and what all of those things mean, you can head to our website, www.zorasdaughters.com, or our Instagram page, which is [@ZorasDaughters](https://www.instagram.com/ZorasDaughters) or Twitter, which is [@Zoras Daughters](https://twitter.com/Zoras_Daughters).

[12:52] **Catherine:** Alyssa, thank you so much. Thank you for taking the time today to talk about these issues of social justice and tell us more about your work. It's been really an honor to hear from you.

[13:02] **Alyssa:** Thank you. Thank you so much for having me on the show.

[13:08] **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 this show is by Blue Dot sessions and our episodes are mixed by Craig Eley. If you liked 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.

