

BEYOND HOMOPHOBIA CONFERENCE

RECAP FROM INTERN TARA CHEN

JAN 26-28TH,
2017

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RECAP OF THE CONFERENCE

In October 2015, UWI held a symposium “Beyond Homophobia: Exploring Identities and Sexualities in Jamaica” leaving two attendees with an inspiration to hold a conference within the following years to continue the sharing of knowledge. This year’s theme converses around “Centering LGBT Experiences in the Caribbean”. The conference was held at the University of the West Indies Mona Campus from January 26th-28th, 2017 in the Multifunctional Room. Unfortunately due to illness, I was only able attend two days of the conference.

The conference began with a panel session on activism and scholarship to instill ideas into the participants on what to expect within the conference and what type of questions to think about going forward. The panelists asked the attendees to rethink the politics of knowledge across the Caribbean Region.

- Have we finished with understanding homophobia? Do we know what we want to know on how it operates, in everyday lives? What is it in the frame of homophobia that we can still learn?
- Think about the words, phrases that symbolize the social exclusion of queer folks. We should look beyond these images and think about how it relates to social class, proximity to social consumption, sexuality, etc.
- What does it mean to be free? How can we imagine the Caribbean as a space without borders?
- What does it mean to be activist vs an advocate?

These questions led to the excitement of the audience to continue with the sharing of knowledge in this sector research.



Guest Speaker: Rinaldo Walcott

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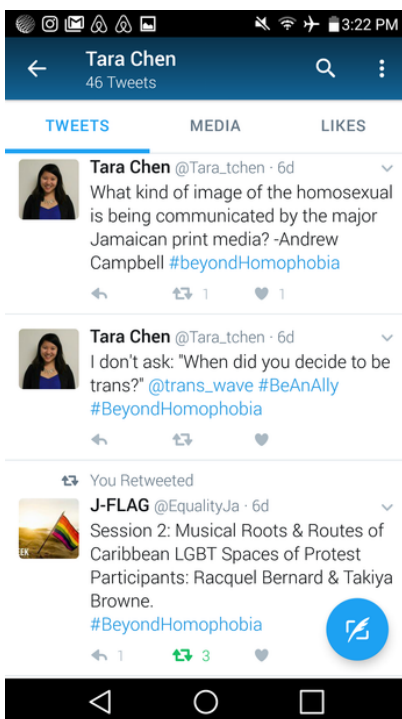
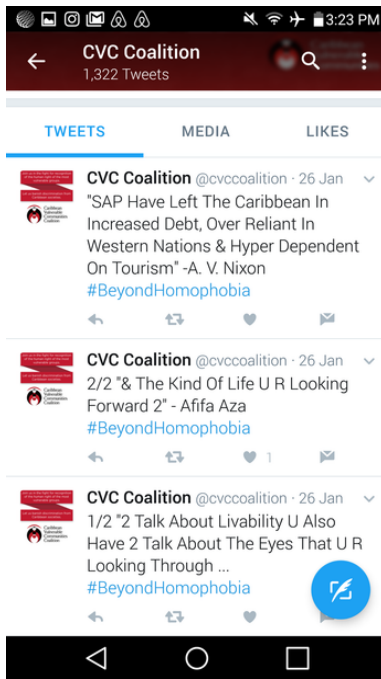
Each of the sessions shared in the conference explored many themes in the LGBTQI community and the challenges that are faced. The last session of the first day, “Supporting and Building Communities” was very focused towards what I have been learning at CVC and I hope to use their research towards my blog posts for ICAD. The discussions in these sessions were around what is supporting individuals in the LGBTQI population. One speaker highlighted that in MSM individuals in Jamaica, their social relationships fostered their support system and assisted their coping skills. The participants that were in the study all had a patriarchal figure in their life – whether it was biological or non-biological to provide them emotional support and encouragement. Additionally, their intimate partners were a source of love and validation, not simply sexual gratification. It is positive to see that the MSM research is diverting from simply centring on the risk of HIV infection and the negative effects of stigma and discrimination. However; the study has a rather small sample size with only thirty participants and the results were all positive relationships. I hope to see more research done in this area with a larger population and looking towards whether their patriarchal and social relationships play a negative role in their support system as well. Another paper discussed “A Guide for Clinicians Working with Transgender Clients in the Caribbean” which discusses the importance of being educated on transgender issues. Although the guideline is a basic general line of practice, there needs to be a concise guide that is developed and shared in the teachings of not simply practicing Clinicians but at the beginning of their education. Medical students are taught about patient care but by instilling best practices towards not only transgender issues but LGBTQI guidelines at the start of their education will assist towards providing better care in the future.



Me & Juanita, Audience at the Conference

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Neish from Transwave and Screenshots of #BeyondHomophobia Social Media Campaign



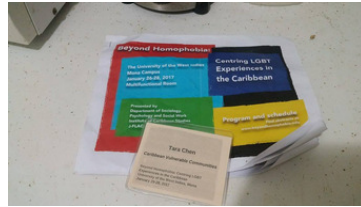
The second day of the Conference began with a roundtable reading of Dennis Tyson's book- "Love on the Wire" which is a fiction story about a gay male living in Jamaica. The themes of the book focus on living a double life, HIV/AIDS, religion, masculinity, and political hypocrisy. Although the book is fiction, it is a story that many individuals may relate to and forces the readers to have a conversation about what is love, and the risks that can be taken to be happy. I see this book to be used as a resource for primarily young males that are struggling with their sexual identity in Jamaica. After talking to Dennis afterwards, I learned that no bookstore and class has accepted to sell or use his book. This book can be bought in Canada but I wonder what the accessibility in Jamaica is.

A highlight of the conference was the Trans Workshop held by Transwave, lead by Neish McLean. The workshop created an interactive atmosphere through sharing of personal stories and video presentations to foster greater understanding about persons of trans experience. Neish had the audience split into two sections where one had to come up with questions to "burn" and the other to come up with questions that were "bright". This practice was to show what type of questions are okay and not okay to ask transgender individuals. When sharing these questions, the thought behind why it is okay and not okay to ask was discussed. Some questions that were thought to be okay were simply not in the matter of context. Although many of the attendees in the audience are part of the LGBTQI community or are allies, it showed that learning is continuous.

RECAP OF THE CONFERENCE



When you don't smile in photos!



Although the conference contained in-depth information in the academic community of the LGBTQI population, it did not fulfill its goal of focusing in the wider Caribbean. The audience mentioned this multiple times throughout the sessions in their questions raising concerns that the research is primarily focused on the Anglo-speaking countries. Additionally, there was a lack of presenters discussing individuals that identify themselves as Lesbians, Transgender, or Bisexual. Much of the research was focused on the MSM population; specifically in Jamaica. However- it is said that the third day would have more focus on the wider Caribbean which I was not in attendance for. Regardless, this shows that there is a lack of research in this area. Additionally, the conference itself had issues in its organization. There were many times I questioned whether it was indeed a safe space with questions from the audience that seemed at times to be homophobic. There were a lot of claims made and comments that made others feel uncomfortable. There are questions that will push the research but the conference goal is to create a safe space for academics, activists and stakeholders in this sector to share the knowledge and continue the activism and advocacy of the LGBTQI community. It is important to realize that there are boundaries regardless of how long you have been in working in the sector. Overall, the conference has expanded my perspectives and brought new ideas towards research for my academic studies which I hope to continue in the future. I am excited to continue learning about not only the LGBTQI situation but other vulnerable populations affected by HIV/AIDS and other social conditions based on human rights. Thank you for this opportunity!