The LGBT activism of Jason Jones

Jason Jones and Amar Wahab

Jason Jones is an LGBTQ+ human rights defender originally from Trinidad and Tobago who has lived and worked in Britain for over 30 years.

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ABSTRACT

Scholar Amar Wahab, co-editor of the Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies, interviews LGBTQ+ human rights defender Jason Jones about his advocacy spanning four decades in Trinidad and Tobago and the UK. Jones shares his experiences about the intersections of homophobia and racism to highlight the complexities around LGBTQ+ human rights. He discusses his successful landmark legal challenges against state-sponsored legal homophobia in both spaces.

KEYWORDS

Jason Jones, LGBTQ+ human rights, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, advocacy

AW: I’ve followed your work for the last four or five years, so I wanted to talk to you about that, but let me tell you a bit more about how the interview is going to be situated. The Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies focuses on the histories of indentureship, but also attempts to focus beyond that, to think about how legacies of indentureship have organized the current moment, not just in the Caribbean,
but a more global picture of indentureship through its diasporic anchorings and connections. We are focusing on genders and sexualities, particularly queer sexualities, with the goal of unsettling the current scholarship on indenture, which reinforces a heteronormative lens. And so, we are interested in conversations about LGBT activism more broadly, as well as the connections of such activisms (in the Caribbean and globally) with indentureship’s legacies. This is how we would like to situate your own activist work in relation to the journal.

Before I ask you about the 2018 legal case, would you be willing to share a bit of background in terms of your own work as an LGBT activist and your own ways of thinking, the spaces that you’ve inhabited and how they have made life and living possible and impossible in certain kinds of ways.

JJ: I’m a child of independence, so I was born in 1964, two years after our [Trinidad and Tobago] independence and, interestingly, my father, Mervyn Telfer, was the TV announcer that night in 1962 when we became independent. So, he actually was the voice of independence. I grew up from a very well-known background and my dad read the news every night on the only TV station, so in many ways, my father was better known than even the prime minister, because he was in people’s homes every night at 7pm. He trained Trevor McDonald, so he was the first black TV announcer in the entire Global South, south of Miami. There was nobody pre-1962 so I grew up very empowered in my racial background, even though I’m mixed race and my mother’s white British. I grew up very powerfully black and very aware of black consciousness and black awareness, especially in the 1960s when we had the rise of the civil rights movement in the United States, which again was fuelled by a lot of Trinbagonian people, you know Stokely
Carmichael – Kwame Ture – was the second in command of the black power revolution, black power movement in North America, and of course he coined the term ‘black power’. My family were very close friends with C.L.R. James. These were all people who shaped who I am, and these are people who sat on our veranda speaking with my parents.

I didn’t actually come out as queer. I was outed as queer. It’s like most of the former colonies of Britain are endemically homophobic and anybody that steps out of the gender binary is immediately quite viciously put down. I was doing ballet and I sang in the church choirs. I was quite a well-known male soloist. I was one of those boy soloist tenors, and so I was receiving very serious and violent homophobic bullying in the playground, in schools, in the family home, in the neighbourhood – everywhere.

My parents were both in the media. My mother was a print journalist and my father obviously in radio and TV. They both were very close friends with a lot of gay men, so they said to me, ‘listen, this is what’s happening’. I mean I didn’t even know what it meant to be gay. I was being bullied for something I had no idea what it meant. So, when I was about 14, my parents sat me down and explained what it meant, and they put me in touch with three of their very close gay male friends who became my fairy godfathers. So, I had this incredible support network around me of very powerful black people and very powerful queer people. I think that really is what informed my activism, and you know my shamelessness in demanding my human rights.

I left Trinidad in 1985 because I have dual citizenship with Britain. I had the opportunity to get out and I did, and one of the big pushes for me to leave Trinidad was in 1984 when Nina Simone came to Trinidad, and she was staying with the theatre director of the theater company that I was with. Nina was in a very bad way. Her brother had just
stolen all of her money. She was in a lesbian relationship with her manageress, and she was literally couch surfing across the world and her relationship with the prime minister of Barbados, had just broken up. And she was also bipolar, had terrible alcohol and substance abuse issues and when she was in Trinidad (carnival 1984), I was 19 years old. A friendship developed. It was very odd; I think it was because I didn’t know who Nina was. She was just kind of palmed off on me because she was being so belligerent and angry all the time and fighting with a lesbian lover. So, I used to drive around in the day, take her to the beach, take her to the Caroni swamp, take her to the beauty spots of Trinidad and we developed this amazing friendship over this three-week period and spent carnival together. And, at one point, she said to me ‘Jason, get off this rock’. She said, ‘there’s a big wide world out there, get off of this rock and go and see it’. And that was one of the big pushes for me, you know of why you leave your hometown. You know, a lot of people think that we in the diaspora, when we leave, it’s purely about the negativity that we face back home. But it’s also about adventure and seeking adventure and seeking our fortune and I also just wanted to see what’s out there, you know it’s not all about the negative stuff that we deal with back home. And when you look at somebody like Nina Simone who left her little, small town and went to the ‘bright lights, big city’ there’s not a lot of difference. In fact, she travelled a lot further than I did. It is escaping that small town myopia.

So, I left a small island myopia and came to London in 1985 and, of course, London, in the mid-1980s was the Emerald City. It was vibrant with fashion, music, everything was happening, and there was a huge upsurge of queer identity – Boy George, Marilyn. That whole romantic pop music scene, new romantics, there was a huge upswing of
queer identities and, of course, I fell right into it and loved it and I was having a fabulous time. Then in 1987 Margaret Thatcher started to push Clause 28 – people know it as either Clause or Section 28 – which was a piece of legislation that focused on denying access to anything that promoted homosexuality. So, in schools, you could not have books around about homosexuality. Teachers can’t speak about it; libraries couldn’t stock books. I mean it was a complete zero and, of course, within a perfect storm was the rise of HIV, AIDS. And Trinidad was also hit very hard by HIV, AIDS. In fact, we have the second highest mortality rate per capita in the world, second only to New York City between 1982 and 1992. In the middle of this storm of HIV, AIDS, you then had this law criminalizing the promotion of homosexuality. In 1988, as that bill was being read in Parliament, Section 28 marches began in London and other cities in the UK. I was a student, and I became very involved with the marches. It really was a catalyst for me to say ‘look, you know I’ve come here to find freedom’ and now having the rug pulled out from under me. So I always say you can blame Margaret Thatcher for the activist that I am today. And it was definitely a catalyst for so much, I mean, Stonewall, the largest UK LGBT organization began because of Section 28. A number of different activists and groups all started out of that fight against Section 28. So, for me, I’ve always had one foot in each place and particularly as I’m biracial and binational, I don’t have this very static way of looking at colonialism and looking at racism and looking at homophobia. For me, I have a vision from both perspectives – my white English grandparents in the East End of London were racist and they would speak as racists in front of me and black people don’t know how racist white people are because it doesn’t get down to your face in that very upfront manner and it’s the same with
homophobia, you know cis-gender queer people – who are straight-presenting – do not encounter the rampant homophobia and transphobia that a trans sex worker or an effeminate gay man or butch dyke gets in the streets. So, when you’re looking at how we move forward with activism, I think we are making huge mistakes in all forms of activism against discrimination, because the activism is being led by people who do not face the full brunt of discrimination, you know, the heads of the largest LGBT organizations across the world are all white, middle class, cis-gender, tertiary-educated gays and lesbians. These people don’t know what it is to be beaten in the street or be thrown out of their homes. You had Ruth Hunt, who was the head of Stonewall for 14 years, saying that it was harder for her to come out as a Catholic than to come out as a lesbian. I mean when you make a statement like that, it just shows how easy life is and how you do not understand the minorities within the minorities that you are supposed to be representing.

So, for me, my work has always been about the underdog; it’s always been about finding the marginalized voices that don’t get platforms, because I’m very lucky, I’m light skinned, I have light skin privilege, I have pass-for-white privilege, I have cis-gender gay man privileges, I can go in and out of being queer at will. I grew up with a very good educational background, very good social background, so all of these privileges have allowed me to access power in a way that most activism doesn’t. And yet, retain a sense of my humanity and to remember that I am doing this for others. This is not about me wanting a nice white wedding in a posh country club somewhere out in the sticks with all the nice pretty gays and lesbians. These are the things that, when we look at activism – especially around race and queer identities – the people leading this work do not take
into consideration the broader picture. When you had white gays and lesbians fighting for marriage equality, they had no concept of the fact that marriage as a construct of the straight world has no benefit to anybody. It’s not what we should have been fighting for, but for a recognition of the relationships that matter to us, for me as a single gay man. I would love to marry my best friend, so that if I’m incapacitated, he can take care of me, he can make medical decisions, he can look after all of my stuff because I can’t trust my family. I’ve seen so many times, especially in the Indian community, where a queer person dies and the family flock in to steal all of their wealth, their property and then have the audacity to bury them in clothes that do not represent who they were in life. You will find queer people who may have dressed as trans people or cross dressed or effeminately and you walk into the church and there’s this person laid out in a suit and tie; something that they don’t even own in their closet.

When we look at activism, we have to look at being on the margins of society and try to find new ways forward, not just mimicking what the straight world has done because it’s not fucking working, you know. Marriage doesn’t work; it’s ending in divorce for over 50 per cent of them, so don’t tell me this is what we should be fighting for, and when you get into these conversations, especially with white leadership and black leadership, they are so enrolled in heteronormative patterns that they are they’re totally unwilling to have these conversations and their whole advocacy is focused on heteronormativity, trying to fit in and not rock the boat. When I filed my case in 2017 with the High Court of Trinidad and Tobago, not one LGBT organization in the world supported it, not one. And, in fact, the largest LGBT organization in Trinidad, led by a deceased gentleman, Colin Robinson, said he wrote letters to all international
organizations saying do not support Jason Jones; we do not support this on the ground in Trinidad and Tobago. His argument was that these laws were not being used punitively, so why waste our time removing laws that are not being used against us. What he failed to realize is that these laws had a much broader impact on society and on policy change. Policy change cannot happen when these laws exist because these laws state that the mere existence, our lives is against the law. We are unapprehended criminals, so you can’t ask government to change policy around your security, your health and well being when you are an unapprehended criminal. So, you have to start with criminalization; that’s the cornerstone. And unfortunately, Colin and the black leadership of the LGBT community in the Caribbean all joined against me and said ‘no, we don’t support him’, and, of course, there was a lot of racism and classism involved. So, when I’m fighting, I’m not just fighting on one layer, I’m fighting on multiple layers. I’m fighting race, I’m fighting class, I’m fighting education, I’m fighting homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and patriarchy. If you don’t think in that broad enough spectrum, then you are, as we say in the Caribbean, spinning top in mud; you’re not going to get anywhere.

I think my case was successful because I challenged two pieces of legislation: Section 13, which is a very famous buggery law about anal sex, which was also illegal for heterosexual couples; most people don’t realize that, but it wasn’t just same-sex sex that was characterized, it was a mix between men and women. The second law that I challenged was Section 16, which is a sexual offences act called serious indecency, and this was a law created by the independent Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago in 1986 to criminalize same-sex intimacy and adult consensual same-sex intimacy between women. And when I and my lawyer
started working on my case, I said, you know, don’t leave out Section 16, and he said, Jason you can’t do that you’re not alone. I said no we’re doing it, I’m not leaving anybody behind, this is about the freedom of the LGBT community not just gay men. That would be misogynistic for me to just focus on gay issues and leave women out of it. So, we challenged both of them and they found a way to do it, you know, when you tell people what to do, they find a way to do it, and my lawyers did it. When we were in court, the advocate for the attorney general said, ‘Oh, Mr Jones cannot challenge Section 16’. These are his words: ‘he is not the owner of a vagina’. And the judge said no, I understand what Mr Jones is doing; he’s looking out for his entire community. That twisted in the judge’s head, ‘oh wait a minute this guy is looking at the broader picture’. It’s not just about gender; it’s about his community. He’s doing this for his entire community and I’m pretty sure that that’s what led to such a resounding victory. Because you have to remember that Justice Rampersad, in my case, he’s a Hindu pundit in his private life. So, this is a man of God, and he made it very clear before the hearing; he said, ‘I am a pundit; if you don’t want me to be the judge on this case I will recuse myself, but I will tell you I’m a man of God.’ I said no, thank you for telling me and no I think you’re absolutely fine. I think you will give us justice as you see justice to be fit. All of these things come to play when you’re doing this kind of work, especially in a country like Trinidad. I mean I don’t think there’s any country as diverse as Trinidad, where over 50 per cent of our population is now Indian. We have a huge Muslim population, we have Shouter Baptist, which is an African religion that’s been hidden in Christianity. There’s a whole range of people – Syrian, Lebanese, Chinese, Portuguese. A lot of people escaped persecution in their own countries to come to
Trinidad and Tobago. We had the Jews escaping World War Two. We had Catholic Syrians escaping the Middle East at the turn of the century, coming to Trinidad, for safety. So, Trinidad has a history of being a welcoming place for different people and what I have found is we have this weird relationship with LGBT. It’s fine to be LGBT as a hairdresser, fashion designer, costume makeup or carnival; anything flamboyant, you’re fine. But when you start becoming political about it, like I have, that’s where the problem starts, because you know what you do in terms of hot climates, sex, you know, what two men will do behind the bike shed on a hot day when there’s no women around – that is not seen as being queer. They don’t identify that act as being queer. That’s just sex; that’s just raw unadulterated sex and in hot climates that happens all the time. When you become political about it and you start identifying as being a politically aware queer person, that’s when the issue starts to change because we don’t have that language. That language has never existed for us, you know, the whole western world concept of coming out and being out or visible and all, we don’t have that chip in people of colour, you know Indian families, for example, until an Indian man gets married to whoever they’ve arranged him to get married to. Until that point it’s very recognized that he may have a man as a lover and that lover will be part of the family and that lover would stay over at the house and it’s very recognized in Indian culture. That happens, until the arranged marriage happens and then he moves on to the woman. All of these parts of black and brown culture – of people of colour – are all things that we have never spoken about. We’ve never needed to. You’ve never needed to come out as queer in the black community; you just bring your lover home a couple of times and they realize, Okay, this one is sticking. And they accepted it into the
family, you don’t have to put that into language. That’s not how black and brown communities work.

**AW:** Thank you very much. You shared so many different things and raised so many questions, for me. I wanted to get back to the case in terms of what prompted you to file this case and also, what are some of the implications of the results of this case within the wider Caribbean and even globally?

**JJ:** Well, I moved back to London in 2014 for personal reasons, mainly around health, and unfortunately, I don’t have very close family connections in Trinidad, and Trinidad has no social safety net. So, if you are ostracized from your family that’s your social safety net, if you don’t have family support that’s it, you literally will find yourself on the streets. And so, I came back to London in 2014 and I started volunteer work, helping to develop the Commonwealth Equality Network, which is an umbrella organization to pull together all the organizations working on LGBT advocacy in the Commonwealth and it is the first Commonwealth accredited LGBT organization in Commonwealth history. In 2015 we went to a government meeting in Malta and we delivered two LGBT sessions; the first two LGBT sessions in history at the people’s forum. I had never done that level of policy stuff. I was part of the Stonewall Immigration Group, now known as a Rainbow Railroad in the UK, and me and my then partner were one of the forty test cases to change the law in the UK, so the overseas partner could get residency based on four years of cohabitation. That was the first positive gay legislation in the UK in 30 years post-decriminalization (1967). So, I’ve been part of changing laws in two countries, and the only activist in the world who has done that. But I got on the plane from Malta after this week and they communicate at the end of every CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting), to say what was decided. Here were
these first historic LGBT sessions and they were completely ignored in the communique and the big politicians completely ignored us, including Baroness Scotland who was voted in at that CHOGM as the new Secretary General of the Commonwealth. Since 2015, she has done nothing for LGBT people. I mean it’s quite shocking, so I got on the plane from Malta, and I just thought that can’t be all there fucking is? What a waste of a week! And I literally got off the plane at Gatwick. I called up a friend of mine, Jonathan Cooper, who is an executive director of the human dignity trust. They were helping Caleb Orozco with the decriminalization case in Belize, and I said, Jonathan, there must be a way to bring a case in Trinidad. He said, ‘savings law clause’. When a number of former colonies of Britain became independent, Britain forced us to put into our Constitution something called a savings law clause. And that clause insulates from legal challenges, all laws that pre-date our independence, so death penalty, beggary, all of it – everything below Section 6 of the savings law clause cannot be challenged in a court of law. So, he said ‘savings law clause’. I said, Jonathan, there has to be a way! I’m not going to accept it. So, we started work on searching for a way around the savings law clause, to bring this challenge. Eventually, human dignity just dropped my case; no reason has ever been given. But I hear that there was a fight between Jonathan and the executive director, Tea Braun, who predicted that this case would fail. I then went on independently and this entire case from then on was independently run by myself. I really was at that point, after CHOGM, where I thought this is ridiculous; this is a load of people doing a load of this in rooms, where they’re safe, and you know, there are people literally dying. In all countries, you know where people are being murdered on the streets of Jamaica, on the streets of Trinidad and Tobago,
on streets across Africa, being murdered simply because they are LGBT. So, I said that there has to be a way and that really was the impetus for me to do it and I’ve done this case entirely independently. It’s cost close to a million pounds. I’ve raised all of it myself. All of my lawyers and myself work pro bono and I raised all the extra costs. For example, my photocopying bill for court was £4,000 and I raised all of that myself. So, you know, it was a pretty much a David and Goliath thing, but I think I am very blessed that I grew up with people like my parents. I grew up around people like C.L.R. James. I grew up around people like Nina Simone. These are people that I actually knew, so for me, I don’t see how I couldn’t have done this. I think to have that kind of background, to have those shoulders to stand on and not achieve something big would have been such a waste. You know, I thank my ancestors. I thank my ancestors.

**AW:** Are there ways in which you’re seeing the results of this case reverberate across the globe?

**JJ:** Absolutely, I mean after we won the judgment, and I do hope that everybody reads that judgment. It’s one of the most powerful LGBT judgments in law across the globe and it’s currently being taught in law schools in Canada, the University of the West Indies and law schools in London. The power of this judgment cannot be underestimated. It was then used immediately in arguments for decriminalization in India, Antigua and Barbuda, and St Kitts and Nevis. We use a precedent of a case in India, where a High Court judge took the government to court for privacy, and he won, and we then used that precedent for my argument and privacy. So then, when they were arguing for decriminalization in India, they said well, Jason Jones argued privacy using this judgment in India. If they can use it, how can our judges not recognize it? My case is
mentioned twice in the judgment to decriminalize in India, and of course with 1.2 billion people, that equates to about 75 million LGBT people who would be decriminalized using my judgment. So it’s enormous and moving on that, my case will move to the appeal court, which is the Privy Council here in London and the Privy Council has never heard an LGBT decriminalization case, so this will be the first time in history that an LGBT decriminalization case will be heard at the Privy Council and that judgment – my victory there – will assist decriminalization in 11 countries, so all of the English-speaking Caribbean and Mauritius. Interestingly, Mauritius just filed a decriminalization case. That case will come under a Jason Jones judgment, so the work that I’m doing now is to make sure that each jurisdiction has a decriminalization case launched with their courts. And my victory of the Privy Council will guarantee all of those cases will win. It will create a domino effect and decriminalize two continents. It will decriminalize both North and South America and over 55 million people will be decriminalized.

AW: That is a huge potential impact! I want to return to some things that you said earlier, because in talking about Trinidad you were saying that it seems like the claim to queer identity, LGBT identity, did not necessarily need to be made in Trinidad as people kind of know. That became part of existing and normalized social relations. But there is a push now to come out, to be visible through these very particular identities that have specific histories in the Global North. These identities may not necessarily always have the same kind of traction in places in the Global South. I’m not saying they don’t have any traction, but they may not have the same kind of traction because they are entangled with different histories. Yet, many of these countries are assessed in terms of how LGBT-tolerant they are.
I’m wondering if ‘tolerance’ is the best way of thinking about these spaces. Can we see that places like Trinidad or places in the Global South have already had different ways of ‘tolerance’ or does ‘tolerance’ matter?

JJ: ‘Tolerance’ is one of the watchwords of Trinidad and Tobago, and I think tolerance does matter. I think it’s gotten a really bad rap because people have really bastardized the actual intrinsic ideology that tolerance means. When you look at a country like Trinidad and Tobago that has so many different religions – we have, I think, at last count 17 different religious groups from Rastafarian to Islam to so many different branches of Christianity, Judaism, we have it all – when you have religions that have such strict rules. For example, Christianity, you know one God. And then comes Hinduism – we have this huge Hindu population – with huge festivals and gods everywhere, and it’s tolerated, and people don’t understand how important that is; the fact that these two diametrically opposed religions can live side by side. I mean you will see Christians celebrating Diwali, you will see Hindus celebrating Christmas. It’s not mutually exclusive; everybody celebrates each other’s diversity. So that came from a space of tolerance. It’s like here’s this little rock we’ve all been shoved on to, not out of our own free will. We just need to get along, and that that begins with tolerance. That’s how that starts. And so, when I hear queer people saying I don’t want to be tolerated, I’m like fuck you, that’s where you want to start. You want to be tolerated. You want to be able to walk down the street. I mean, I was walking here this morning from the grocery, and I am wearing lavender track pants and people turn and stare at a gay man, still, in London. That level of tolerance, where you can walk past a queer person and not turn around and not be engaged by them; that level of tolerance is important, it’s the building block for everything
else to happen. For all equality, that’s the building block, so I really hope people stop saying tolerance is a dirty word. I think it’s a really good word.

AW: You mentioned the complexities that are informed by the different histories that come together in the Trinidad context. There may be room for thinking about what tolerance means and it may not necessarily mean the same thing as formal tolerance. There are two things that I noticed in the kind of the journeys that you mapped out in this storyline. It seems like if with the shift to independence in the Trinidad context, that there was a kind of a hardening of state-endorsed or state-based homophobia, whereas prior to independence there was a bit more flexibility, a little bit more room to manoeuvre. With the advent of independence, it seems as if the postcolonial nation state made a conscious effort – for example, Section 16 – to basically revamp some of these laws and to strengthen them and even broaden them in terms of its criminalization of the LGBT population.

JJ: Well, they went into our buggery act, and they extended the jail time by 20 years. So you know, we as black people, we have to say, wait a minute, this is our homophobia, we need to own that. That’s no longer British colonial era rule. That’s us doing it. That’s how I was able to win my case because the savings law clause insulates laws that predate our independence. But those homophobic parliamentarians went into that law in 1976 when we became a republic and extended the jail time by 10 years, increasing it to 15 years. They then went back into the law in 1986 extended it another 10 years to 25 years and then created the law against lesbians. So, this is no longer blaming white people, this is our shit. How we identify that is really important. When you look at Hindu culture, it has been probably one of the queerest religions on the face of
this earth; multiple gods that are intersex, multiple gods that exhibit queerness. There are no rules in Hindu texts that prescribe against homosexuality. You have the third gender, hijra. There’s all of this rich queer culture that’s deeply embedded in Hinduism, so why the hell would the Hindu organizations in Trinidad join to fight my case? They actually are spending their money on lawyers to fight against queer people in Trinidad and Tobago. That didn’t exist until the Europeans came and colonized us, so what’s going on? It’s an interesting question and I think it needs a lot of debate. I am not a historian, to comment on it. The one thing that I would comment on is the very dark homophobia that we see exhibited in Afro-Caribbean culture and African American culture. I always say to people, you know in slavery, this the child of your slave became your slaves, so what would they do with a queer slave? What they would do is kill that slave and make sure that they died painfully in front of all the other slaves to make sure that they understood ‘make me more slaves’. So, I think in African culture that is where that rampant homophobia comes up, this fear of queerness, because this would have been equated with a very violent and painful death. In the Indo-Caribbean context, it really confuses me. I don’t know how that kind of switch happened within Hindu religious leadership. I mean Hindu religious leadership right now in the Caribbean is rabidly homophobic. With the African community, I can see why. With a Hindu community, I don’t.

AW: This is why I think race, ethnicity and nationalism matter to these queer histories. It concerns the reach of this journal, which is trying to open up spaces where we can attend to these kinds of questions. Why is Hinduism regarded as queer, but at the same time how do we account for broader Indo-Caribbean formations (not only Hindu-centric ones)
that increasingly mirror the homophobic stances of the postcolonial state? I also want to ask, where do you want to take the activism that you’re doing now? You mentioned about the appeals and the implications of the appeals for other countries. What is your vision of future activism within the Caribbean? What are the kinds of projects – beyond decriminalization – that are still needed, still need to be done?

JJ: I always tell people that the Caribbean is the only region on the planet that has had 500 years of successive human rights abuses, so we went from the decimation of the indigenous populations to colonialism, slavery and indentureship. There’s no other region on the face of the earth that has had all of this successively for hundreds of years. So our ‘DNA’ does not even understand what the basic human rights opportunities are. For me, I really start these conversations at point zero because how can I, as a light skinned privileged queer person who lives in the Global North, and has access to power, how can I ask a straight black man from a ghetto in Port-of-Spain to respect my rights when he has none? So, I lift people up, I have to lift everybody up with me and that conversation around human rights has to include everybody, not just queer people. The work that needs to happen is very basic, you know, where Britain was at the turn of the century, where we saw suffragettes, where you saw all of those fights; we need those fights happening, we’ve not had those fights. So, we need those fights to happen for people to understand and be empowered with their basic human rights. We’re starting at zero and we and people need to remember that when you ask about racism, when you ask about homophobia, when you ask about transphobia, when you ask about misogyny and patriarchy, you’re talking to people who don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.
They don’t know what you’re talking about when a black woman or an Indian woman gets hit by her man. So, we’re starting at a very different level, and we have to be cognizant of that.

AW: And the ways in which we inhabit ourselves now is so much related to those histories of violence that are entangled and informed each other across 500 years. You mentioned the UK context, for example, people looking at you this morning with lavender track pants. How useful are some of the learnings from the Caribbean context for thinking about the British context, especially in terms of the Caribbean diaspora? We tend to hear the narrative that things are so good in the British context or in the Global North, i.e., people have rights, they’re supposedly free. What is the British context like for the Caribbean diaspora in terms of queerness and LGBT identity?

JJ: Well, I think the main things that we have to recognize are these nuances of culture, race and geography. We are still becoming a very globalized world and what happens in downtown Port-of-Spain will reverberate in London. What happens in Ukraine is going to reverberate in Toronto. We need to now see the global conversation which must include everybody. For example, they’re having a Safe To Be Me LGBT conference in June and I’ve been screaming blue murder, where are the people of colour, where are the people from the Caribbean, where are the people from the former colonies? Finally, I got a message from Crispin Blunt MP (former chair of the APPG LGBT) to come in for a conversation on Thursday, but I have to literally bitch and scream and be the angry queer person of colour in every space that I inhabit before somebody will listen. So that’s how we move forward globally with the conversation and the advocacy. I say this all the time in interviews; one of the biggest problems with activism is most people come to
activism from desperation not inspiration. So if you have somebody who is desperate because they’re in fear of their life, they fear their job, they fear their family, they fear their safety and security; when that person comes to activism they’re not thinking straight, especially if they’re living in a space that is a prison. For example, in Trinidad when the local LGBT organizations turned against me and said, oh no we’re not supporting you, we’re not fighting for you, I understood it, because they live in that world that is shaped in a very small box. For me, this whole idea of global thinking is that you have to get out of those spaces. That’s why Nina Simone told me – ‘get out’ – to get off the rock. And we all have to get off the mental rock that we’re all in, whether it be your identity, whether it be your education. I have educated people saying you’re talking bullshit. I don’t want to know what degree you have because it doesn’t relate to what’s happening on the streets. So global thinking and global listening is the future of activism, and we need to start training people to this work. People should not be forced into this way because of desperation. People should be inspired to do this work, be able to do a degree at LSE on LGBT advocacy. These are the things that we should be putting in place.

**AW:** We’ve used the term queer a lot. Whenever I am in the Caribbean or am writing about the Caribbean, folks are a bit apprehensive of using the term ‘queer’. I wonder if you have any reflections on the kind of the traction of that term, especially when folks may embrace terms like gay and lesbian, but not queer?

**JJ:** I’ve been working a lot with queer youth and in Trinidad two organizations, UniPride and UWI LGBT. They’re very happy using the word queer, so you know the old dinosaurs, I don’t have time for them, I really don’t, and I use queer now. I use whatever language is right and pertinent
at that time. When I stood on the High Court steps the day of the judgment, I walked out with this historic victory that has changed the constitution of my country and I am the first citizen to change my constitution as an independent citizen. I walked out onto the court steps and was being interviewed by 15 to 20 journalists and this guy saunters past and shouts ‘bullahman’. And I said to the journalists, that’s my lived experience, every day, every night, walking the streets. That’s what I deal with – verbal abuse. And so I don’t stray; I don’t sugar-coat my language at all, when I throw in a ‘bullahman’ it’s to shake you up and wake you up so that you know I deal with it. I get that people call me ‘bullahman’ in the streets, people call me ‘bullahman’ in the shops. So if I can deal with it on the streets and in the shops, you can deal with it at dinner, or when we’re talking at a university event. So I pepper language, and I use language as a tool to really not just pass on ideas, but to pass on the emotion, you know, when you get shocked out of your daily existence by that word, you know it’s a powerful reminder that you don’t belong, and that you are a pariah and it’s important that we keep people on their toes. You know these nice polite conversations that we have about this issue in polite spaces. That’s not the lived experiences for the average lesbian, gay or trans person on the streets of Trinidad and Tobago. For me, language is supposed to be big, and it’s supposed to shake you up. I remember Derek Walcott said, ‘I’m a red nigga with a good education’. This is very beautiful quote from Derek, and I know people have problems when he says this, but the point is for you to be bothered by it, because a lot of people would have said, ‘look at that red nigga getting a Nobel, looking at that red nigga doing that. Who does this red nigga feel he is?’ He would have been facing that. So, when
he calls himself it and takes ownership of it and takes the sting out of the two, I am doing the same thing myself.

**AW:** You mentioned you work with the UWI LGBT collective. Can you tell me a bit about that initiative?

**JJ:** Yeah, it’s actually very, very exciting. We’ve been talking right through lock-down. They’ve been doing monthly Zoom events. And I loan them a Zoom because they have no money, so I let them use my Zoom for their events. I try not to dominate the space because I am very well known and I have very specific ideas, but my job with queer youth is not to direct. My job is just to give platforms to them to lift up their voices and for them to direct their own future. I’m nearly 60 years old; I’m not going to be around forever. My job in terms of how I support queer youth is really to just create platforms for them to do their own stuff. I’ve supported them creating the Caribbean Queer Youth Network. They’re going to be pulling together Caribbean youth organizations from around the Caribbean. And there’ll be hosting a conference sometime later this year to have discussions about under-30 queer youth – their futures, their advocacy, what is important to them – and I’m supporting them to do that. Hopefully we can get a couple of them up to the Safe To Be Me Conference, so that they can witness that level of policy as well. That to me is the legacy work, I think. What I’ve achieved has already put me in a certain place in history which I’m hugely proud of, but it’s the legacy work that I think is important to focus on now. How do you impact on youth, and how do you support youth work moving forward? So that’s one of my big things right now.

**AW:** Well Jason, you’ve given me a powerful interview. Thanks for your time and also for sharing. I return to that image of you on the steps, when you came out of court; it was an iconic image, an iconic moment.
JJ: There is a documentary about it. It follows me waking up that morning right through the court and the night before we have received bomb threats. I don’t know if it’s probably important to document on this, but Trinidad has the highest number of ISIS recruits per capita in the western hemisphere, so when we got the bomb threats and stuff that night, it literally was a touch and go feeling. I really thought ‘God is this going to turn into a mess?’ Thankfully it didn’t, but it’s so easily could have. David Kato was murdered in his own home in 2012 in Uganda. We’ve had activists across Eastern Europe being murdered. When you look at the Pulse massacre in Florida, when you look at what’s happening in Chechnya to LGBT people, when you look at what’s happening to LGBT people in African states, you know we have to be aware that this is serious stuff and it’s dangerous and we have to fight harder. We’re not fighting hard enough!