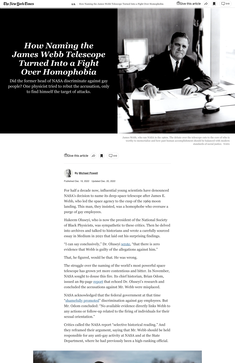

Carol Rhodes for The New York Times. Mr. Gibson and his wife and son in front of their home in Greensboro, N.C. Mr. Gibson's family has been active in the community for generations and has a great deal of influence.

How Naming the James Webb Telescope Turned Into a Fight Over Homophobia

Did the former head of NASA discriminate against gay people? One physicist tried to solve the accusation, only to find himself the target of attacks.

By Michael Powell

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For half a decade now, influential young scientists have determined NASA's direction to name its deep-space telescope after James E. Webb, who led the space agency in the coup of the 1960s moon landing. This year, they insisted, was a homophobe who oversaw a purge of gay employees.

Hakeem Oluseyi, who is now the president of the National Society of Black Physicists, was sympathetic to these critics. They he delved into the accusation, and wrote a Facebook post and a Washington essay in Medium in 2019 that laid out his surprising findings.

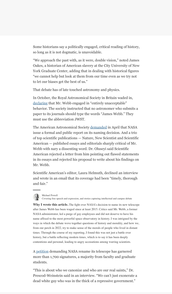
"I can say conclusively," Dr. Oluseyi wrote, "that there is zero evidence that Webb is guilty of the allegations against him."

That, he figured, would be that. He was wrong.

The struggle over the naming of the world's most powerful space telescope has grown yet more contentious and bitter. In November, NASA sought to douse this fire, its chief historian, Brian Odom, issued an 8o page report that echoed Dr. Oluseyi's research and concluded the accusation against Mr. Webb were misplaced.

NASA acknowledged that the federal government at that time "actively discriminated against homosexuals and persons it deemed to be citizen-casualties." No available evidence directly links Webb to any actions or follow-up related to the firing of individuals for their sexual orientation."

Critics called the NASA report "selective historical reading," and they rehearsed their arguments saying that Mr. Webb should be held responsible for any anti-gay activity at NASA and at the State Department, where he had previously been a high-ranking official.



Philippe Clement, president of the National Society of Black Physicists. Jim Kenyon for The New York Times

In a blog written with Steve Mirsky, scientific director of Scientific American, Dr. Oluseyi wrote that he had "underestimated the power of a few vocal critics" who, he wrote, "have exactly what was happening with security at his wave agency during the height of the Cold War," adding, "We are deeply concerned by the implication that managers are not responsible for homophobia."

This controversy cuts to the core of who is worthy to memorialize with a name on a scientific instrument that will probably last for modern standards of social justice. And it echoes a heated debate among historians over presentism, which is the tendency to use the moral lens of today to interpret past eras and people.

Some historians say a politically engaged, critical reading of history, as long as it is not dogmatic, is essentially.

"We approach the past with, as it were, double vision," noted James Oakes, a historian of American slavery at the City University of New York Graduate Center, adding that in dealing with historical figures who owned slaves, "we can see the world from their point of view and we can see it as we have gone all the back of it."

That debate has of late touched astronomy and physics.

In October, the Royal Astronomical Society in Britain nudged its dedication that Mr. Webb engaged in "entirely unacceptable" behavior. The society instructed that an astronomer who submits a paper to its journals should sign the words "James Webb." They must sue the abbreviation JWST.

The American Astronomical Society distanced itself in April that NASA had "actively discriminated against LGBTQ+ people." Its journals, one of top scientific publications — Nature, Nova Spatium and Scientific American — published essays and editorials sharply critical of Mr. Webb with nary a dissenting word. Dr. Oluseyi and Scientific American rejected a letter from him pointing out flawed statements in the essays and reported his proposal to write about his findings on Mr. Webb.

Scientific American's editor, Laura Helmuth, declined an interview and wrote in an email that its coverage had been "timely, thorough and fair."

Michael Powell
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Dr. Oluseyi, who is Black, said he was "very disappointed" in the Royal Astronomical Society and Scientific American. He said he was "very, very, very" in favor of the James Webb name but began to have doubts in late 2021. Critics said Mr. Webb, a lawyer, ordered the firing of gay employees and did not deserve to have his name on a telescope. Dr. Oluseyi said he was "very concerned about the fairness" of the way in which the debate was being treated in history and morality, and he was in him, not good in 2022, up to make some of the morals of people who lived in distant eras, and he was "very concerned about the fairness." He said he was "very, very, very" in favor, but could, following modern times, refuse to vote if he felt that faulty contention and pressed, leading to angry accusations among varying scientists.

A petition demanding NASA rename its telescope has garnered more than 1,700 signatures, a majority from faculty and graduate students.

"This is about who we canonize and who are our trail saints," Dr. Pascual Memmola said in an interview. "We can't just canonize a dead white guy who was in the thick of a repressive government."

Dr. Pascual Memmola. Jim Kenyon for The New York Times

This dispute has, in a thoroughly contemporary fashion, grown hardly personal. While not always naming him, opponents in essays and letters have pointed to Dr. Oluseyi's work as unsophisticated presentism of historical figures. He is also a professor at Florida Institute of Technology.

Dr. Oluseyi, 53, was from Jamaica Queens to earn a Ph.D. in physics from Stanford, the first in his family to graduate from high school, and a boarding school in Massachusetts, and then, as an inspiring teacher, with a housing voice and an ostrich personality.

But the fact he cross have offended, sort of enough, the emphatically denied that he behaved badly as a professor and repeatedly urged a reporter to ask any question about his past.

"The revolutionaries," Dr. Oluseyi said in an interview, "have become the persecutors."

The Past Is Not the Past

Mr. Webb, who died in 1992, isn't a complicated figure. He worked with President John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to integrate NASA, bringing in Black engineers and scientists. He ratcheted up Cold War, the white segregationist governor of Alabama, who was a vocal opponent of the space program, and he helped to establish and consolidate out of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville.

Fifteen years earlier, however, Mr. Webb encountered different pressures as an under-secretary at the State Department during the administration of President Harry S. Truman. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, sought to dismantle the legacy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In attacking the State Department, they tried to ferret out employees they claimed were Communists and what they called "perverts" — gay Americans, in what became known as the lavender scare.

"The lavender scare, like the red scare itself, was an attack on the rights of a group of people," said Lisa Keen, a journalist at the University of South Florida and author of "The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government."

"Then," he added, "it turned into a moral panic."

There were bloat times. In two decades, between 5,000 and 10,000 gay employees were pushed out of government, careers and lives ruined.

President John F. Kennedy is included on Webb's dedication plaque at Cape Canaveral in Florida, with Mr. Webb at the left. Mr. Gibson, who's named the telescope after Mr. Webb, calling the effort to begin a name on the mission.

But as the telescope neared completion, criticism flared. In 2019, Dr. Oluseyi, who had written a book about the James Webb, called "The Problem With Naming Observatories for Bigots." He wrote that Mr. Webb led the anti-gay purge at the State Department and that he had testified of his contempt for gay people. He credited Dr. Pascual Memmola with tipping him off, and she in turn invoked the work of Professor Keen, who had written a book.

Those claims carried an misdentification and their portrait of Mr. Francis' article has been delisted without notice to the reader. Mr. Francis declined an interview.

As Dr. Oluseyi discovered and NASA's report confirmed, it was not Mr. Webb but a different State Department official who oversaw the purge and spoke disparagingly of gay Americans.

"In the question of moral culpability lingered, Brian Nord, a physicist with the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, argued in a blog post. "Webb was the head of the agency and was the person that leaders Can responsible for standing up for people who are oppressed and marginalized."

Dr. Pascual Memmola wrote that if Mr. Webb had been "a radical freedom fighter," he would not have served in the Truman administration.

Historians who specialize in this era in gay history said such expectations ignore the historical context. Mr. Webb did not lead efforts to oust gays; there was not yet a gay rights movement in which he could have joined. Dr. Oluseyi said he was not the author of that and reflects nothing Mr. Webb is known to have written or said.

"The activists who say that James Webb should have stood up and spoken against the purges and say 'Shame on you,' and Dr. Johnson, where Trevor Sands is stigmatizeropeed: "No one in government was speaking out at the time and say 'Shame is wrong.' And that includes gay people."

In 1965, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed an executive order that essentially barred gay Americans from federal employment. It applied to all federal agencies and remained in effect throughout the nation, when Mr. Webb left NASA. In 1969, police arrested a NASA budget analyst, Clifford Norton, in an anti-gay sting in Washington, and he was fired the next day.

Critics say Mr. Webb stood silent. Dr. Oluseyi's report for NASA, however, found no evidence. Mr. Webb knew of this case in an agency of many thousands. In any event, he would have had no good option, said James Kirchick, author of "Secret City: The Hidden History of Gay Washington."

"It is unimaginable that a high-level functionary would have publicly opposed President's broad federal ban applied to every agency," he said.

It was not until staff that President Clinton enacted an executive order forbidding job discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Professor Oluseyi argued the latter measures of Mr. Webb to Israel in his willingness to face down a segregationist governor. Civil rights was the moral struggle of that time. "I was born in the South," he said. "Webb was borne in that moment."

Mr. Pascual Memmola, 40, was born in Los Angeles to a family of left-wing activists and is among a handful of Black women in such a theoretical cosmology. Charismatic and outspoken, she describes her as a dangerous rare and gender and science as inseparable.

"The civil rights movement, gay people which is marginalizing and oppressed, and the environmental movement, all are intertwined," she said. "Black queer female persons, I'm not interested."

Who Should Be Memorialized?

How should we handle naming memorials, given the messiness of history? Dr. Pascual Memmola said she would show an exacting line and memorialize no government leader at that era. "Rename the Kennedy Center for Harriet Tubman," she said.

Sarah Tuttle, an astrophysicist at the University of Washington, suggested a compromise. Rather than oust Mr. Webb was a homophobe as unmemorable and a distraction.

The point, she said, is that the far should be set higher. Previous telescopes were named after physicists and astronomers — Edwin Hubble and Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar. Why not name in that tradition?

"This controversy should install the discussion about who on earth deserves a telescope named after them," Dr. Tuttle wrote, "Even than astrophysicist who signed the critics' petition.

"The leader of a professional society and a crisis scientist," she wrote, is "going out of his way to justify historic homophobia" and "attack a poorer queer Black woman professor."

Months later, in August 2021, George Mason University recruited Dr. Oluseyi as a visiting professor and Peter Plavchan, an astronomy professor, offered a tweet of welcome to the man he placed a role in recruiting.

Dr. Pascual Memmola objected. In a stream of tweets, she said Dr. Oluseyi had disrespected "a decade."

She wrote that Dr. Plavchan's welcome was "a reminder that white men can be homophobic and misogynistic and still be treated with respect — and be welcomed by colleagues with open arms."

Dr. Plavchan apologized to her, writing on Twitter that "I do believe in redemption/second chances and LGBTQ+ astronomers are welcome."

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Many scientists wish that the telescope that has caused all of a ruckus. Jim Kenyon Times

Not a Professor Gates taken by the argument NASA should strictly apply the values of 2022 to those of 1992. It, he noted, is hard enough to have attended a segregated high school and experienced the rough sort of damage.

"We can make moral judgments, of course, but we can't make them in a vacuum, we can't make them in a black and white manner," he said. "This absolutist dialogue accomplishes nothing."

Getting Personal

When Dr. Oluseyi wrote his blog essay on James Webb, he took to task journalists and an astrophysicist, whom he did not name, for not rigorously researching the accusation. He said that the scientist, Dr. Nord, had "gone to Twitter and Facebook and actively had" propagandized misinformation like ribonucleic.

Dr. Pascual Memmola wrote on Twitter that she was then unnamed scientist in Dr. Oluseyi's article and that he "is sitting poorly researched articles that are basically hit pieces on me."

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Many scientists wish that the telescope that has caused all of a ruckus. Jim Kenyon Times

But Dr. Oluseyi's hiring at George Mason comes with a back story. The attacks against Dr. Oluseyi had shifted, as some accused him of personal misconduct.

Dr. Plavchan said that in July 2021, as word circulated in academia that Dr. Oluseyi might win an appointment at George Mason, he heard from a professor at a different university who claimed that Dr. Oluseyi had mishandled a federal grant and sexually harassed a woman.

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Dr. Plavchan said that he reported these accusations to George Mason. Soon Florida Tech officials were combing through records and thousands of emails. They found nothing to substantiate these charges, according to Hamid K. Rassoul, a physics professor at Florida Tech and former dean who took part in the investigation. George Mason went ahead with its appointment in the fall of 2021.

On Twitter, Dr. Prescod-Weinstein has pushed some of the same accusations, while not naming Dr. Oluseyi directly. "It continues to be the case that academic institutions play pass the harasser," she wrote in a veiled reference to Dr. Oluseyi in August 2021. And this past November she questioned on Twitter why journalists have not asked why he left his last job.

Dr. Prescod-Weinstein did not reply to three emails asking for more information.

In early December, as The New York Times examined various accusations, an anonymous person who described having worked in a lab at Florida Tech began sending text messages to this reporter, making similar accusations against Dr. Oluseyi. Several of these claims were demonstrably false, and others could not be substantiated.

"I am sorry for Hakeem," Dr. Rassoul said. "These rumors never die out, and they damage his reputation. These accusations were shamefully promoted."

The End, but Not the End

NASA in late October made clear the telescope will retain its name. But the bitterness remains. On Twitter, critics talk of the "zombie James Webb" and suggest Dr. Oluseyi and his defenders are due for a reckoning.

Several prominent astrophysicists in interviews supported Dr. Oluseyi but declined to talk publicly. "People err on the side of prudence, which is to say they don't speak up," Dr. Gates noted. "When a campaign is aimed at denigrating a professional reputation, that is the inevitable effect."

Dr. Oluseyi is aware of the risk of damage to his reputation. For just a moment, he sounded plaintive.

"Look, I didn't care about James Webb — he's not my uncle," Dr. Oluseyi said. "I had no motivation to exonerate. Once I found the truth, what was I supposed to do?"

Kirsten Noyes contributed research.

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