

Dark Matter

Race hustling in astronomy.



Images from the James Webb telescope

by Bruce Bawer

In 2017, when then-president Donald Trump responded to the ongoing fever of far-left iconoclasm by predicting that radicals would soon be toppling statues of the Founding Fathers, mainstream commentators responded with mockery. Then, sure enough, the statues of our greatest presidents started coming down.

And it's still happening – not just to political leaders, and not just to statues. It's happening in every field, including astronomy. Which brings us to the case of the James Webb Space Telescope, launched on Christmas Day 2021. Articles published in *Scientific American* last July, when it began sending back images, make it sound like the marvel of marvels:

* *"The most [powerful](#) observatory ever made promises to produce some of the most incredible discoveries of our lifetime and beyond."*

* *"This is the [picture](#) we've all been waiting for[:] the deepest image of the cosmos ever captured. Humanity has never seen so far back and so clearly into the depths of the universe's history."*

* *"The next great era of [astronomy](#) truly began this morning...the James Webb Space Telescope has at last delivered a complete set of first full-color images."*

Who was James Webb? As administrator of NASA from 1961 to 1968, he oversaw the development of the Apollo program – which in 1969, of course, in one of the great triumphs of human history, landed a man on the moon. In his time (he died in 1992), Webb was a revered figure at NASA, and the naming of the telescope after him seemed, at first, entirely reasonable and certainly uncontroversial.

But in March 2021, just over a year before the above-cited articles appeared, *Scientific American* ran a very different [piece](#) about Webb and the telescope named after him. Carrying the bylines of no fewer than four scientists – Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, "an assistant professor of physics and a core faculty member in women's and gender studies at the University of New Hampshire"; Sarah Tuttle, a University of Washington astronomer; Lucianne Walkowicz, an astronomer at Chicago's Adler Planetarium; and Brian Nord, "a scientist at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory and the University of Chicago" – it was headlined "The James Webb Space Telescope Needs to Be Renamed."

Why renamed? Because Webb – who before his years at NASA was a State Department official, serving as Undersecretary of State under Truman – is, like Washington and Jefferson, guilty of having lived in a time when homosexuality was illegal. "When

he arrived at NASA in 1961,” write Prescod-Weinstein and her coauthors, “his leadership role meant he was in part responsible for implementing what was by then federal policy: the purging of LGBT individuals from the workforce.”

What to comment on here? First, there’s the glaring anachronism: in 1961 no one had ever heard the term “LGBT.” Back then, the current delusion that homosexuals and men who want to be women (or vice-versa) somehow belong to the same category would have been considered ridiculous (because it is). The term “transgender” didn’t exist. Gender dysphoria was not yet mentioned in the *DSM*. (It didn’t appear until the 1980 edition.) To conflate gays with trans people is to ignore the fact that the Nazis sent gays to death camps while leaving cross-dressers alone. Similarly, during the Lavender Scare, beginning in 1950, thousands of gays were fired from U.S. government positions, while cross-dressers, again, weren’t affected.

Second, there’s the contention that Webb played a role in purging gays from the workforce. Specifically, Prescod-Weinstein and her coauthors accuse Webb of acting as “a facilitator of homophobic policy discussions with members of the Senate” and of having “handed over homophobic material,” apparently to those senators. Before being leveled in Prescod-Weinstein’s article, these charges had been floating around the astronomical community for years: they’d been aired in a 2015 [piece](#) for Forbes (which accused Webb of leading “State Department witchhunts”), in a 2015 [article](#) for The Stranger (which blamed Webb for the entire Lavender Scare), and on a closed online message board frequented by high-level scientists.

But while the same accusations kept being repeated, there was little if anything in the way of substantiation. So Hakeem Oluseyi, a highly respected figure who is president of the National Society of Black Physicists, did some actual research – a great deal of it, in fact – and published his [findings](#) at

the website Medium in January 2021, two months before the *Scientific American* attack on Webb.

In brief, Oluseyi found “zero evidence that Webb is guilty of the allegations against him.” On the contrary, Webb was “a hero of diversity and inclusion in American government” who “worked with Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy to use NASA facilities in America’s southern states to promote racial integration and equal opportunity in employment.” As James Kirchick [wrote](#) in Politico last February, NASA, during Webb’s tenure, was “the leading federal agency to promote racial integration, aggressively recruiting and promoting Black scientists. In 1964, when Alabama’s segregationist governor George Wallace attempted to block the hiring of African-Americans at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Webb threatened to remove personnel from the facility. That same year, he declined to speak at the Jackson, Mississippi Chamber of Commerce after two Black activists were denied entry to the event.”

How striking is it that scientists – purportedly devoted to the scientific method – had repeated vile calumnies about Webb without bothering to check them out? How much more striking is it that, after Oluseyi cleared Webb of the charge that he’d had contact with the Senate in relation to antigay policies, Prescod-Weinstein et al. repeated this allegation?

Part of the answer to this question is that, in Prescod-Weinstein’s view, the specifics of Webb’s antigay actions (if any) don’t matter, since he “was in leadership as the lavender scare unfolded” and “bore responsibility for policies enacted under his leadership.” Apropos of the contention, by some, “that if Webb was complicit, so was everyone working in the agency’s administration at the time,” Prescod-Weinstein comments: “We agree. But NASA is not launching a telescope named after its entire administration.”

Prescod-Weinstein is forty. The degree to which she really

does believe in canceling pretty much everybody who lived before she was born becomes clear in a *New York Times* [article](#) by Michael Powell, published last December 19, about the Webb brouhaha. When it comes to naming things after people in the past, wrote Powell, “Dr. Prescod-Weinstein said she would draw an exacting line and memorialize no government leader of that era. ‘Rename the Kennedy Center for Harriet Tubman,’ she said.”

This kind of stuff is, of course, right out of the French Revolution: rename the months of the year and the days of the week. Or, if you will, the Stalinist era: either radically rewrite the roles of now-disfavored historical figures or banish them from history entirely. Your call! “This is about who we canonize and who are our real saints,” Prescod-Weinstein told Powell. We can’t just exonerate a dead white guy who was in the thick of a repressive government.” *Saints? Canonize?* Apparently, Prescod-Weinstein is one more devotee of woke ideology for whom it’s nothing less than a religion. And hey, while we’re canceling imperfect “dead white guys,” why not go after Galileo, Newton, and Einstein, too? (One more detail about Prescod-Weinstein, by the way: according to a HuffPo [profile](#), she’s “agender,” i.e., genderless – a ridiculous label for a supposedly serious scientist to attach to herself.)

As for Webb’s civil-rights record, Prescod-Weinstein was unimpressed. “The civil rights versus gay people schtick is marginalizing and pathetic,” she told Powell. “It’s straight people arguing about the straight canon. As a Black queer Jewish person, I’m not interested.” What about Oluseyi’s meticulous article clearing Webb’s name? In her view, Oluseyi was guilty of writing “hit pieces on me,” of “going out of his way to justify historic homophobia,” and of attacking “a junior queer Black woman professor” – i.e., her.

Powell’s *Times* article, to his credit, makes it clear what’s going on here: Prescod-Weinstein, like many other contemporary

academics who belong to multiple so-called victim groups at once, is using that status to don the cloak of virtue while flailing people of earlier generations for failing to live up to the standards set by today's social-justice warriors. She faults Webb for not being part of a gay-rights movement that didn't even exist when his career began. She doesn't seem to comprehend that without the civil-rights movement, in which Webb played a noble part, it would be hard to imagine the subsequent movements for women's rights and gay rights. In short, absolutely everything she says about Webb is a cheap shot, served up by a woman with extraordinary privilege (her B.A. is from Harvard) who loves posing as oppressed on several fronts.

When my attention was first drawn to the Webb controversy, I immediately thought of Frank Kameny, a Harvard-trained astronomer whom I was honored to know for many years (although our contact was almost entirely online). Kameny was described by the [author](#) Caleb Crain as a "square" and by the historian Douglas Shand-Tucci as "the most conventional of men"; but after being fired in 1958 by the U.S. Army Map Service for being gay, he became the first victim of this brand of injustice to take his case to the courts (unsuccessfully, alas). In 1961 he formed an early gay-rights organization called the Mattachine Society, which, unlike many later gay groups that were little more than Marxist fronts, was rooted in American values. In 1965, outside the White House, he led nine other gay men wearing jackets and ties in the very first gay-rights march ever.

Living alone all his life, and never holding down another regular job, Frank spent the next several decades fighting tirelessly for gay equality and winning numerous victories, big and small, along the way. Finally, at a formal ceremony in 2009, the director of the U.S. government's Office of Personnel Management – an openly gay man named John Berry – officially apologized to Kameny for his firing fifty-two years

earlier. Kameny is reported to have “cheerfully accepted” the apology.

Yes, cheerfully accepted.

Kameny died in 2011, aged eighty-five. If not for unjust government policies, he could have had a remarkable career in astronomy – and a far more rewarding personal life. He was a true victim of antigay prejudice. Prescod-Weinstein never has been. Yet what a remarkable contrast there is between his generosity of spirit and her petty, preening narcissism – between his extraordinary forgiveness and her calculated grudge-holding.

I’ve read through some of Prescod-Weinstein’s writings on race and politics and it turns out that this woman is a first-class whiner, drenched in self-pity and in anti-white, anti-male, anti-straight, and anti-“cis” animus: she’s [complained](#) that the physics department at Harvard wasn’t a “fun place to be a Black woman”; she’s [called](#) academia “a hierarchical system of abuse” that favors “a chosen few,” who are primarily “white cis men”; she [supports](#) BLM and [buys](#) into Robin DiAngelo’s fatuous “white fragility” thesis; and she’s [maintained](#) that when she was a child in East Los Angeles, “I understood...that police would shoot on sight people of my skin tone and darker.”

There’s more. For instance, she’s [stated](#) that “business as usual in America means death, mass incarceration, and living, constantly, under totally fearful conditions – if you’re Black. If you’re not Black it means choosing whether to care about the fact that we, Black people in America, live under these terrorizing conditions.” Repeatedly, Prescod-Weinstein makes it clear that she’s one of these people who think that the tough parts of her life happen because of the identity groups she belongs to and not, quite simply, because life is occasionally tough for everybody.

I don't ordinarily presume to speak for the dead, but I believe I knew Frank well enough to say, with a good degree of confidence, that despite everything the U.S. government put him through, and despite the career in astronomy he never had, he'd have had no problem with the naming of the James Webb Space Telescope. And one more thing: James Kirchick – who is the author of *Secret City*, the definitive history of gay Washington, and who was a longtime friend of mine and of Frank's – proposed in his Politico piece that nothing would be more fitting than to name the next great telescope after Frank Kameny. I'd suggest that, instead of waiting for that big leap forward, Kameny be awarded a posthumous Medal of Freedom for devoting his life to genuinely selfless, truly productive activism of a sort that the jumped-up likes of Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, who apparently can understand all kinds of remarkable things about the cosmos, could never grasp in a million years.

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