

AAPT Statement regarding concerns about the naming of the space telescope called JWST

As many are aware, the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) was successfully launched on December 25, 2021. The telescope will open new avenues of exploration for astronomers and astrophysicists around the world. AAPT celebrates the scientific achievement of the hundreds of scientists and engineers that worked for over three decades to see this historic project come to fruition. We are also compelled to acknowledge concerns regarding the naming of the instrument. Last January, Lucianne Walkowicz [called attention to evidence](#) suggesting that James Webb, for whom the JWST is named, may have been complicit if not culpable in creating an unwelcome environment and enacting policies that resulted in egregious homophobic discrimination during a period of anti-gay moral panic known as the [Lavender Scare](#).

For example, in 1963, while Webb was administrator of NASA, NASA employee Clifford Norton was arrested and interrogated by police (“Morals Squad officers”) on suspicion of engaging in gay activity. He was further interrogated about his sexual history by NASA Security Chief Fugler until after 6:00 am the following morning. Norton was ultimately fired from NASA for “immoral, indecent, and disgraceful conduct” and “traits of character and personality which render [him] unsuitable for further Government employment.” Norton filed a lawsuit regarding these discriminatory practices, and ultimately settled with NASA ([Norton v. Macy 1969](#)).

Earlier this year, astronomers Lucianne Walkowicz, Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, Brian Nord, and Sarah Tuttle drafted and circulated a [petition](#) to rename the JWST. To date, the petition has been signed by over 1700 people. Nevertheless, [NASA chose not to rename](#) the telescope.

As an association, AAPT is committed to equity and inclusion for all those interested in physics. Our strategic plan prioritizes issues of diversity and equity, and one of our core values entails “keeping aware of the main issues facing the physics world and of the overarching questions to be tackled by the physics community and providing a forum for discussion of these issues at National Meetings”. We have only recently become aware of the painful manifestations of the Lavender Scare within NASA and the impacts on people like Clifford Norton. We want to lean into the gray area of celebrating the scientific marvel that is JWST while also acknowledging that the telescope’s namesake may have behaved in ways that are antithetical to our organizational values and harmful to our lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, and queer or genderqueer (LGBTIQ+) members.

AAPT is grateful to Norton, Walkowicz, Prescod-Weinstein, Tuttle, Nord, and others who have raised awareness about this issue through [lawsuits](#), [open letters](#), [articles](#), and [petitions](#). At the bottom of this letter, we have compiled links to relevant documents to support the self-education of interested readers.

Going forward, in order to give attention to and further explore the historical context and current impact of the naming of the JWST, AAPT will host a webinar on Thursday January 27 from 6-8pm EST, with a historian from the AIP Center for the History of Physics to help with our discussion. In addition, AAPT will plan a plenary session on this topic for the SM2022.

Sincerely,
Jan Mader, AAPT President
Toni Sauncy, AAPT President Elect
Duane Merrell, AAPT Vice-President
Chandralekha Singh, AAPT Past President

References:

Please note that these references may contain detailed descriptions of anti-queer interactions that may be upsetting for some readers.

- [Clifford L. Norton, Appellant, v. John Macy et al., Appellees](#), 417 F.2d 1161 (D.C. Cir. 1969).
- [“The Straights Are Here To Save Us: On naming telescopes, complicity, and the rewriting of history,”](#) Lucianne Walcovicz, Substack (blog post), Jan. 25, 2021.
- [“The James Webb Space Telescope Needs to Be Renamed,”](#) Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, Sarah Tuttle, Lucianne Walkowicz, Brian Nord, *Scientific American*, Mar. 1, 2021.
- [“NASA investigates renaming James Webb telescope after anti-LGBT+ claims,”](#) Alexandra Witze, *Nature News*, Jul. 23, 2021.
- [“NASA won’t rename James Webb telescope — and astronomers are angry,”](#) Alexandra Witze, *Nature*, Oct. 1, 2021.
- [“Shadowed by controversy, NASA won’t rename its new space telescope,”](#) Nell Greenfieldboyce, *NPR Morning Edition*, Sep. 30, 2021.
- [“Why I’m Resigning from Advising NASA,”](#) Lucianne Walcovicz, Patreon (blog post), Oct. 12, 2021.

- [“The telescope stumbled over its own name”](#), Dennis Overbye, *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 2021.
- *The Lavender Scare*, David K. Johnson, The University of Chicago Press (2006)