

COMMENTARY

Hidden from History, Searching for a Future: A Commentary on the Unverified Homosexual Tendencies of Biological Anthropologists

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I would like to start this commentary by verifying in print some information about me: I prefer to have sex with men. I have also had sex with women, and so have in the past said I was bisexual. To keep things simple, I usually identify as queer. People of a certain generation find that word offensive, though, and I'm about to talk about that generation, so let's just say that I'm gay.

That I can say all of this in print and not fear reprisals in my life and work—being ridiculed, fired, physically harmed, killed—is a privilege that has only recently been possible in much of the United States (and is still not possible in many parts of the world, including many parts of the United States). When reflecting on this, I often think of Harvey Milk's impassioned call to come out in his "Gay Freedom Day Speech" of June 25, 1978:

Gay brothers and sisters, you must come out. Come out to your parents, your relatives. I know that it is hard and will hurt them, but think about how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your friends, if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors, to your co-workers, to the people who work where you eat and shop. Come out only to the people you know and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths; destroy the lies and distortions for your own sake, for their sake. (Milk 2013, 219)

Countless people put everything at risk to follow Milk's call, and in so doing to make my own coming out today a possibility without severe consequence. Many others did not feel free to come out, and still do not. People often chose carefully where and when they came out; we still do, and that's okay. However, that does not mean that the closet of that past was a preference, or even a reality. Even when not publicly or overtly out, many still did come out contextually through the use of coded or cryptic language (e.g., Kulick 2000), or just to close friends and family, or to select societies. Being out in whatever ways that also protect us is a good thing (e.g., Kosciw, Palmer, and Kull 2015).

The need for the closet, for codes, for secrecy has made it difficult for queer people in my generation and younger, however, to find personal and professional role models—in biological anthropology as in every other field. When I was a

graduate student first attending primatology and biological anthropology meetings in the early 2000s, it was unclear if anyone was queer. Nobody was publicly out. There was no visibility. I felt like I didn't belong. This invisibility, and lack of any sense of belonging, has been a critical factor in the outsized loss of both queer students in the sciences (Hughes 2018) and of queer faculty who make it beyond that level (Yoder and Mattheis 2016). I asked around to see if there were any queer scholars in our field and heard whispers and rumors about senior scholars that some people confirmed and other people denied. It wasn't until several years later, when the American Association of Physical Anthropologists' Committee on Diversity sponsored the LGBTQQIAA Interest Group, that coming out publicly seemed a widely viable professional option. This has led to some wonderful visibility in the biological anthropologists at my current academic level (assistant professor) and younger, but the more senior corners of the present and more distant past maintain a veneer of total heterosexuality with nothing more substantial than rumors to the contrary.

Given this, it was with some pleasant surprise that, while reading Rebecca Rogers Ackermann's (2019) article "Reflections on the History and Legacy of Scientific Racism in South African Paleoanthropology and Beyond," I learned that Phillip Tobias was gay—and that it was possible that this identity, along with his Jewishness, may have contributed to his work becoming increasingly activist toward diversifying our field. This was especially heartening to read given my own perspective, and those of others in our field, that my queerness has informed my work and has the potential to transform our field for the better (Astorino 2019; Meredith and Schmitt 2019; Smith and Archer 2019).

Plavcan and Alba's (2020) recent editorial note in the *Journal of Human Evolution* regarding that article, then, was a rude reminder that our field is not quite there. In this note, the authors apologize for Dr. Ackermann's matter-of-fact claim that Tobias was gay, stating that "this individual never publicly confirmed whether or not the claimed information was true" (emphasized in original). Or at least I think this regarded his gayness; the editors never actually state explicitly what "unverified detail of the personal life of [Tobias] was revealed" and for which they are apologizing. Indeed, I only surmised this regarded Tobias: he was not even named in the

editorial note. In the pages of the *Journal of Human Evolution*, it would seem that homosexuality is still “the love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas 1894, 28). Or perhaps they meant his Jewishness?

I have no doubt that Plavcan and Alba (2020) wrote this note with good intentions. Clearly, *someone* took offense at the assertion that Tobias was gay. In some ways, this could be an appropriate response. Outing a living colleague in public against their wishes can be a serious breach of ethics and could cause untold harm. Given that many nations have strict taboos and punitive laws regarding same-sex sexual relations, we cannot blithely out our colleagues in press. At a minimum, we should confirm if they are already out in publicly available materials (public to those with whom they live and work). Even better: we should ask them personally before disclosing how they might choose to publicly identify. (Although political arguments for outing the living have been made in the interest of community accountability [Gross 1991].)

That Tobias is deceased, and from a generation able neither to be out as easily nor in as many well-documented media as our own, complicates the situation. We cannot ask his permission. We can only judge from our own experiences with him—those of us who have had them—regarding how to proceed. The Plavcan and Alba response to Ackermann suggests two very different experiences with Tobias while he was alive. Which should we favor as the truth? Was Tobias in a closet of varying permeability with some colleagues, but out with others? Were some of his colleagues better able to discern this aspect of his identity than others? Was this his personal preference, or was this necessitated by the time and place (apartheid and then postapartheid South Africa) in which he worked? All are potentially likely given his historical context, and how that context shifted over time and place may have strongly influenced how he chose to present both his masculinity and sexuality (e.g., Morrell 1998; Walker 2005; Wells and Polders 2006).

There is a tension between the past and the present when making an argument about one’s sexual orientation. Being unable to presently verify or confirm with him, in print or in person, we cannot know for certain how Tobias personally identified. An individual’s sex, gender, and sexuality can be quite personal and complicated (I speak from experience), as well as historically and culturally contingent. This calls for caution. Other fields have dealt with these complications in the search for a queer past long before our own. History (e.g., Bravmann 1997; Duberman 1988) and archaeology (e.g., Conkey and Spector 1984; Voss and Schmidt 2000) have both grappled with this issue in the long-distant past and argue for judicious caution, but also to not blind ourselves with out-of-context notions of propriety. At this moment, however, Tobias was alive in our lifetimes and in intimately known contexts. We can, and have, matched his behavior and statements to an identity. It seems that some of us, however, may have heard (or listened) differently than others.

Were it the case that Ackermann only based this assertion on whispers, perhaps I would be concerned. In subsequent online conversations about this editorial note, however, I learned that Tobias was widely understood to have been gay, at least in South African paleoanthropological contexts (his own contexts). Interestingly, even Tobias’s biographer asserted online that Tobias made many statements that strongly suggested he had sex with men. Despite this, he assured readers that he would not be writing about any of them in Tobias’s biography, as his well-understood gayness was perceived to be no more important to Tobias’s academic work than the fact that he “enjoyed eating tongue.” If it’s so unimportant, however, then why not simply include it as part of his legacy, as Ackermann seamlessly did in her own interpretation of how his identity may have influenced his work? Perhaps his biographer is right: it may not have been important to Tobias. But it’s certainly important to all the queer students and colleagues searching for some role models in the history of biological anthropology.

Is it our duty to perpetuate the prejudices of the past—and how they forced some of us to present ourselves—out of a misplaced sense of delicacy, or to shed light on what they forced underground so that we can know better the hidden diversity in our own field? Perhaps community accountability does have a role here: posthumously in the case of Tobias, urgently for those of us still living and active in biological anthropology.

I would argue strongly for the latter. But that’s easy for me to say, here and now: I’m one of the few biological anthropologists whose gayness is *verified* in print. For the rest of us, I can only implore, as Milk did: break down the myths. For their sake. For our sake.

We could use the company.

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