

November 10, 2018

Department of Physics and Astronomy
University of Kansas
1251 Wescoe Hall Drive
1082 Malott Hall
Lawrence, KS 66045

Dear Professors Rudnick and Medvedev and members of the search committee,

Enclosed for your review are the materials for my application for the position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Kansas. My research leadership, strong teaching background, and extensive experience mentoring a diverse group of students make me an excellent fit for Kansas. At Kansas I will use the skills I have developed from two years as a professor, including a demonstrated ability to secure external funding, to build a vibrant, high-impact, and active research group that takes advantage of world-class observational facilities. As a professor I will also design and teach courses that challenge students to develop and practice professional skills applicable to their future careers.

I am a world expert on gas conditions in the unique and extreme environment of the center of our Galaxy. I have a high profile in both the Galactic and extragalactic scientific communities and an excellent reputation as a scientific communicator: I have given more than two dozen invited colloquia and review talks. I am one of few astronomers with 80 hours of awarded time on the Atacama Large Millimeter Array as a PI, and I am currently producing the first parsec-scale maps of molecular gas in the center of another galaxy, a project for which I already have a successful NSF grant. At Kansas, I will lead efforts using ALMA, the VLA, and JWST to (1) trace gas properties over the entire accretion path of gas from kiloparsec scales to the Milky Way's central supermassive black hole, (2) construct the first sample of galaxy nuclei with parsec-scale observations of the molecular gas, which can be directly compared with our own Milky Way, and (3) use this sample to constrain the impact of accretion and feedback processes on gas conditions and star formation in progressively more extreme environments that can serve as analogs to high redshift systems. The research my group will do over the next 5-10 years will yield new models of the physical, chemical, dynamical, and positional structure of gas in galaxy centers that will constrain the role of inflow and feedback in shaping their evolution.

Graduate students in my research group will become experts not only in infrared, radio and millimeter astronomy but in technical skills such as coding, data analytics, and data visualization that will train them for a wide range of future careers. I am an experienced advisor, having independently supervised 7 students and mentored many more undergraduate and graduate students. Students working with me have published papers and successfully applied to PhD programs and postdoctoral research positions. I am also committed to giving students research opportunities that feed their interest in science and connect them to a global research community. Working with me, students at Kansas will gain valuable international experience visiting and working with my collaborators in Europe and Asia. I further believe that student success also depends on their experience outside of the lab, and I devote significant time to building strong connections with students in my group, hosting team dinners and retreats in addition to regular group and one-on-one meetings.

As a professor at Kansas, I will work to foster an educational atmosphere where there is lively interaction between undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. I will design my courses to give students the opportunity to model real-life research and professional practices, including participating in observations, writing and assessing scientific proposals, and debating topics like setting priorities for the next decade of astronomy research. I am particularly excited by the opportunity to teach and develop hands-on astronomy and astrophysics courses in topics like millimeter astronomy, astrochemistry, and computational astrophysics that emphasize student inquiry and project-based learning. Having taught two courses per semester as a professor at San Jose State, I have a proven ability to balance teaching with a robust research program. I am excited to bring the energy and enthusiasm I have demonstrated in my research, mentoring, and teaching to the Physics and Astronomy department at the University of Kansas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elisabeth Mills', with a stylized, flowing script.

Dr. Elisabeth A.C. Mills

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Accretion and feedback in the gas of galaxy nuclei fundamentally shape their hosts on scales from the central supermassive black hole to the bulge. The gas cycling in and out of galaxy centers can alternately promote and disrupt the growth of central black holes and the buildup of stellar populations, driving galaxy evolution. However, our own Galactic center, which has long been the only nucleus we can resolve, has a quiescent central black hole and low star formation, giving limited insight into these processes. Now, with the advances made possible with the Atacama Large Millimeter Array (ALMA), I am leading the first parsec-scale comparisons of the gas in the Galactic center and a nearby starburst galaxy, a project for which I have already secured NSF funding. **As a professor at Kansas, I will build the first sample of resolved galaxy cores to directly probe accretion and feedback processes through their impact on gas properties** while continuing to leverage the proximity of our Galactic center to conduct studies impossible in other galaxies.

My research plans for the next five to ten years are focused on three key areas:

1. Combining the information available in my extensive data sets of Galactic center gas to build a self-consistent model of the three-dimensional position and physical, chemical, dynamical properties of the interstellar medium in this region
2. Comparing our relatively quiescent Galactic center with nearby examples of more active galaxies, to determine where it can and cannot be used as a local laboratory for probing the processes that dominate extreme systems like ultraluminous and high-redshift galaxies
3. Using information from comparisons of Galactic and nearby extragalactic systems to determine how to correctly infer the physical, chemical, and dynamical conditions in resolved gas from observations of unresolved gas in distant extragalactic systems.

1. Connecting Data Sets to Model Galactic Center Gas: As the nearest example of a galaxy nucleus, the center of the Milky Way is the best source for probing the details of the physics that shapes these regions. As our Galactic center hosts a quiescent supermassive black hole and little star formation, it is also potentially an ideal environment for isolating how infall processes impact gas properties in the absence of active feedback. The extreme properties of Galactic center gas are unique in our Galaxy, with uniformly complex chemistry¹, and an order of magnitude higher temperatures²⁻⁴, densities^{5,6}, and turbulence^{7,8} than found in the disk. While many studies (including my own work) have aimed to constrain these properties individually, they are fundamentally interconnected. The next frontier in understanding the gas physics in our Galaxy's center is to integrate these studies to build a self-consistent model of the positional, physical, chemical, and dynamical properties of the gas.

Fundamental to understanding the processes that drive the physical, chemical, and dynamical conditions in this gas is knowing where it is, as these conditions are expected to vary with proximity to the central black hole, depth in the gravitational potential, and exposure to stellar radiation and cosmic rays. In building a coherent model of the Galactic center gas, the first step is to establish its 3D layout so that this can be connected with other gas properties.

Linking 3D positions and gas dynamics: Although we have line-of-sight velocity information for Galactic center gas, this does not map in a straightforward way to a line-of-sight positional coordinate. Thus, additional constraints beyond radial velocities are needed for measuring distances. My work focuses on assembling a suite of independent distance constraints

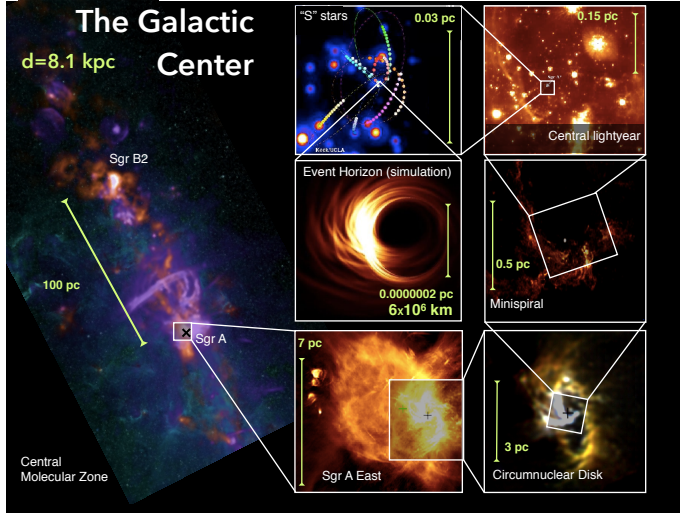


Figure 1: An illustration of the journey that infalling gas takes in the Galactic center.

My research probes the physical, chemical and dynamical properties of gas along this journey, as it flows inward from the hundred parsec scales of the central molecular zone, to the circumnuclear disk: a ring of gas orbiting within a pc of the black hole, to streams of fast-moving ionized and neutral gas even closer in.

A primary goal of my work is to link the three dimensional position of gas in different stages of this journey to its physical and chemical conditions in order to identify the processes that drive extreme gas conditions in this region.

from multiwavelength data sets including X-ray dust echoes⁹, infrared extinction mapping¹⁰, and radio-frequency measurements of the proper motions of masers^{11,12} to break degeneracies in 3D orbital models^{13,14}. Paper topics leading to PhD theses related to this work include:

- Comparing infrared star counts toward individual molecular clouds with models of the 3D stellar distribution in the nuclear bulge to place clouds on the front or back side of gas orbits in the Galactic center.
- Compiling, re-imaging, and cataloging all archival methanol maser data to establish the initial baselines for measuring the 0.05'' per decade Galactic center orbital motions from radio-frequency and ALMA data.
- Searching several of my ALMA data sets for faint molecular gas features that trace gas accretion from the 1 parsec circumnuclear disk inward toward the supermassive black hole.

The research done by my group in this area will determine where the gas is and how it is moving, constraining the rate of gas inflow toward the central parsec (Figure 1), which is a key parameter in determining the future activity of the Galactic center.

Connecting 3D position with physical conditions: Constraining the gas inflow rate also links directly to work I am leading which is connecting the physical conditions in gas clouds to their Galactocentric radius. I am finding that both gas temperature and turbulence increase with proximity to the central supermassive black hole^{3,8}, which suggests that the energy released as clouds move deeper into the Galactic center gravitational potential is driving the extreme conditions observed in this region. As heat in these clouds should quickly dissipate, their temperatures should be defined by rate at which this energy can be injected, or the gas inflow rate. Ultimately, my work is showing that the increase in temperature and turbulence driven by gas inflow must be accounted for when seeking to isolate the effects of feedback on gas properties in more active galaxy cores.

I am also the PI of a 30 hour ALMA program to make the first measurements of gas density structure for a sample of Galactic center clouds. At Kansas I will push surveys of temperature and density to the highest resolutions achievable in order to map out the full interconnected thermal structure of gas density, temperature and turbulence in Galactic center gas as a function of scale. Working with me on these projects, students will write papers:

- Investigating data segmentation and clustering algorithms in 2D and 3D to find robust ways to associate different molecular tracers to the same parcel of gas, in order to simultaneously measure its temperature, density, and turbulence.
- Designing analyses that combine and weight information from multiple different gas tracers to build a multiphase model of Galactic center gas excitation.

Together with my work on the 3D positions of the gas, this research will determine the heating and cooling rates and overall current energy budget of Galactic center gas, which is critical for constraining its potential to form stars.

Matching 3D positions and gas chemistry: The Galactic center has some of the richest chemistry known to exist in the interstellar medium, found in the Sgr B2 star forming cloud¹⁵. However, to understand whether the complex molecules formed in Sgr B2 could exemplify the processes that give rise to the building blocks of life in our own solar system, we need to be able to separate the universal chemistry of star formation from the chemistry unique to its location in the Galactic center. I recently led a study of isotope ratios in the Sgr B2 cloud, finding unusually high ¹⁵N and D abundances that are similar to those found in primitive solar system material^{16,17}. Over the next five years at Kansas, my research group will expand Galactic center chemistry studies beyond Sgr B2 to probe the full range of chemistry present in environments with temperature, density and turbulence like high-*z* galaxies at the peak of star and planet formation¹⁸. Paper topics leading to PhD theses that will be part of this work include:

- Mining existing archival data to make a radio-frequency chemical inventory of Galactic center gas outside of Sgr B2, focusing on the complex molecules that dominate at these wavelengths
- Measuring rare isotope ratios in Galactic center clouds to determine whether measurements are consistent with the assumption of a constant isotope ratio across this whole region, or show variations due to the infall of less-processed gas.

Joining together all of these pieces, My research group will construct an interconnected understanding of how gas is inflowing into the Galactic center, undergoing changes in its physical and chemical properties, and contributing to star formation and feeding the central supermassive black hole. This will yield the definitive understanding of the processes of gas inflow in galaxy nuclei. However, the quiescence of the Galactic center means we will have only limited information on processes that drive feedback. To understand the phenomena that govern the more active stages of galaxy evolution, it is then necessary to look to other nearby galaxies.

2. Putting our Galaxy Center in Context: Building a Sample of Galaxy Cores: I am currently constructing a sample of resolved galaxy cores in order to probe how molecular gas conditions change with increased activity. I am leading the first comparison of molecular gas on identical 2 pc size scales in the Galactic center and the nuclear starburst of NGC 253 (see Figure 2; data is in-hand and available for PhD projects) and I have a 30 hour ALMA PI project to expand this to an additional band to study the excitation. As NGC 253 also lacks an active black hole, these observations will isolate the contribution of the starburst to the gas conditions and directly address the question of whether the processes that set the gas conditions in our own Galactic center are the same as those which dominate in more actively star forming galaxies. Over next five years, the research group I lead will use ALMA and JWST to expand the sample to the cores of a half dozen other major nearby galaxies within 5 Mpc (accessible

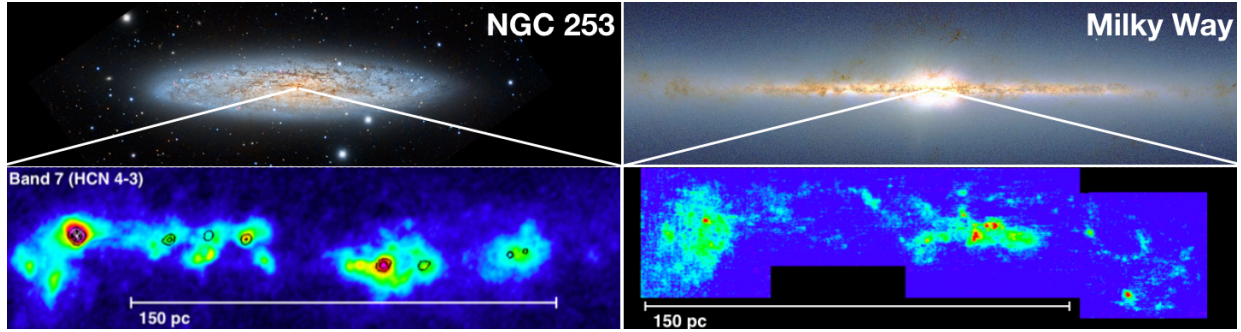


Fig. 2.—: Parsec-scale gas structure in the center of NGC 253 (ALMA) and the Milky Way (ASTE). At Kansas, I will use ALMA to lead the the first survey of resolved gas in the cores of spiral galaxies within 5 Mpc

with ALMA) and begin to isolate the effects of AGN, a bar potential, and metallicity. However, as even extreme local galaxies still do not sample the most intense AGN or star formation activity, I will expand this sample over the next ten years, using an identical observational setup comprising multi-band observations of dense gas tracers beyond CO, to include galaxies more representative of high redshift populations.

3. Inferring Gas Properties in Unresolved, Distant Galaxies: As I expand the sample of galaxy cores to more distant sources, one goal will be to identify local regions in more nearby sources (e.g., individual star forming regions, or gas very close to a low-level AGN) that are representative of global conditions in more distant and extreme sources. I will conduct detailed characterization of their chemical and physical conditions that will serve as templates for interpreting progressively less resolved galaxy cores, in order to characterize the most likely conditions of the small scale gas in these objects. However, for these templates to be accurately compared to distant sources, it will be critical to determine how low spatial resolution biases the determination of the physical and chemical conditions¹⁹. My primary goal with this work over the next ten years will be to quantify how accurately the true gas conditions revealed by my sub-parsec scale investigations are reflected in properties inferred from ‘unresolved’ averages over the entire galaxy nucleus. The studies my group will lead will constrain the magnitude of scatter or systematic bias by which the small-scale properties indicative of star formation conditions deviate from the conditions inferred on larger scales. My work will yield the most accurate interpretation of conditions in the star forming gas for galaxies in the early universe. As our own Galactic center will allow the highest resolution probes of star forming gas conditions for comparison with the nucleus-averaged properties, the surveys that I will continue to lead for this region will be critical for accurately interpreting observations of the most distant sources.

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Teaching: I have extensive teaching experience with a wide range of learners in many different environments, including teaching in a middle school physical science classroom, teaching undergraduate majors and non-majors astronomy courses as a professor at San Jose State University, and teaching college level astronomy to incarcerated students as part of the Boston University Prison Education Program. One of the most important lessons I have learned in teaching is that my background is not representative of the diversity of students today. As an educator, my goal is to recognize and reward the wide range of strengths that students bring with them into the classroom. Teaching at Kansas, my main objective will be to create an inclusive environment which respects that students backgrounds and learning styles vary from my own, and provides in response a variety of instruction and assessment styles that cater to a broad range of students strengths and needs

A primary component of building an inclusive classroom environment is giving students the support they need in order to embrace growth and challenges. I work to strike a balance between both formative assessment (work that gives feedback on the effectiveness of both my own teaching methods as well as students' learning strategies) and summative assessment (graded work). This sends the message that practice and effort are rewarded, and that students should not be afraid to attempt new and difficult tasks. As a professor of physics and astronomy at San Jose State University, I challenged undergraduate students in my course on star formation to learn material at a high level. I communicated to students that I believed in their ability to succeed, and that while the material might be challenging, their growth and performance in this class would reflect the effort they put in. I also made sure that the graded assignments and materials sent the same message. By valuing the path to an answer as much as the answer itself, students learned that being able to tell me why they thought an answer was wrong was often as important as being right, and that they should consult me, classmates, textbooks, and the internet rather than leave a problem unattempted. By intentionally reinforcing how past topics and strategies could be applied to new material, offering a wide range of ways that students could demonstrate mastery (e.g., group work, presentations, and open-book exams), and seeking feedback from students on all of these strategies, I ensured that students rose to the level of this course and succeeded.

At Kansas I look forward to engaging students in a wide range of astronomy courses from introductory courses in all topics to Galactic and Extragalactic Astronomy, Computational Physics and Astronomy, and special topics courses like Astrochemistry and Star Formation. I have experience implementing hands-on teaching strategies that promote one-on-one teacher-student interactions in class sizes from 10-50, and I have used my training in inquiry-based learning to developed a set of interactive classroom activities for introductory astronomy¹. Overall, my instructional style is flexible and adapts to each unique classroom environment. For example, teaching introductory astronomy in the correctional system, the classrooms have no audio-visual equipment, students have no computers, and their access to STEM classes is limited, leading to a wide disparity in math skills. In response to these challenges, I adapted interactive activities to use only printed materials, implemented additional in-class activities on quantitative reasoning, and prioritized time each week for discussion to give students an avenue to pursue their curiosity about astronomy topics that they encountered.

¹<http://eacmills.com/teaching.html>

When teaching courses, my goal is not only for students to gain hands-on experience, but to have a chance to develop their curiosity and self-direction. To do this, I will adopt a project-based and inquiry-oriented learning approach that is centered around student-led semester long investigations. These will incorporate a broad range of skills-building activities, complementing the primary subjects being taught, and modeling the full range of activities involved in scientific research. These include reading, writing and assessing scientific proposals, debating issues with peers, and communicating results to the public. These activities not only give students broader context for the details of the topics covered in these course, they also emphasize the diversity of skills involved in STEM disciplines. This allows students to build on their individual strengths while challenging them to develop new core competencies that will prepare them to excel not just in graduate school and academia, but in industry and other workplaces

Mentoring: In contrast to teaching, I believe the longer-term nature of mentoring means student success depends as much on interactions outside of classroom as inside of it. In mentoring students, I have worked to maintain this balance by focusing both on research skills (including reading papers, giving presentations, and choosing a career path) and holistic professional development (including discussions of work-life balance, mental health resources, and how to combat impostor syndrome). I work to facilitate student growth and independence by giving students research projects for which they can take ownership, and ultimately publish their results. As an advisor at Kansas, my students will be a priority in my schedule, and I will work to build a relationship where they are comfortable discussing their needs for success, not just as a researcher in my group, but as a student in and outside of school. Ultimately, I see my role as a mentor not to be the single point of support for my students, but to connect them with a larger professional network of training, research expertise, personal role models, and sources of encouragement that can most completely meet their needs and challenge them to grow.

Commitment to Equity and Inclusion: As a professor, I spend significant one-on-one time mentoring students across the country from underserved populations. I prioritize spending time to help students prepare and improve their applications for bridge programs, graduate school, and postdoctoral fellowships, and to share knowledge that I have accumulated to help prepare for and succeed in different career stages. In doing so, I also work to be a champion for the excellence these students already possess: I take time to celebrate students' accomplishments, and to nominate and promote students and peers for talks and other career opportunities.

In addition to this work, I continue to lead interdisciplinary initiatives to increase equity and inclusion in the field². As a Jansky fellow, I worked with colleagues in physics and engineering to run a summer research and year-round mentoring program for undergraduate STEM students from traditionally underserved populations. As a professor at San Jose State, I was a member of the Latinx-Chicanx student success taskforce, and brought together colleagues in other STEM departments across the university to organize workshops on how to succeed in STEM. I am also continuing my teaching through the Boston University Prison Education Program in Spring 2019, and will be working with colleagues to develop courses in physics and math. As a result of all of this work, I will bring with me significant experience supporting diverse learners through a wide range of career stages, a large network of interdisciplinary connections for supporting a diverse population of students, and a goal-oriented approach to ensuring their future success.

²<http://eacmills.com/equity.html>