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Astronomers Reveal First Image of the Black Hole at the Heart of our Galaxy

Webb Keane
Pandemic Exposures
Astronomers Reveal First Image of the Black Hole at the Heart of our Galaxy

On May 12, 2022, astronomers unveiled the first image of the supermassive black hole at the center of our own Milky Way galaxy. This result provides overwhelming evidence that the object is indeed a black hole and yields valuable clues about the workings of such giants, which are thought to reside at the center of most galaxies. The image was produced by a global research team called the Event Horizon Telescope (EHT) Collaboration, using observations from a worldwide network of radio telescopes.

The image is a long-anticipated look at the massive object that sits at the very center of our galaxy. Scientists had previously seen stars orbiting around something invisible, compact, and very massive at the center of the Milky Way. This strongly suggested that this object—known as Sagittarius A* (Sgr A*), pronounced “sadge-ay-star”)—is a black hole, and this image provides the first direct visual evidence of it.

Although we cannot see the black hole itself because it is completely dark, glowing gas around it reveals a telltale signature: a dark central region (called a “shadow”) surrounded by a bright ring-like structure. The new view captures light bent around the supermassive black hole, Sagittarius A*, at the heart of our Milky Way galaxy.

(Continued on page 10)

Completing the Picture

Looks can be deceiving. The light from an incandescent bulb seems steady, but it flickers 120 times per second. Because the brain only perceives an average of the information it receives, this flickering is blurred and the perception of constant illumination is a mere illusion.

While light cannot escape a black hole, the bright glow of rapidly orbiting gas has its own unique flicker. In a recent paper, published in The Astrophysical Journal Letters, Lena Murchikova, William D. Loughlin Member at the Institute for Advanced Study; Chris White of Princeton University; and Sean Ressler of University of California Santa Barbara were able to use this subtle flickering to construct the most accurate model to date of our own galaxy’s central black hole—Sagittarius A* (Sgr A*)—providing insight into properties such as its structure and motion.

“Black holes are the gatekeepers of their own secrets,” stated Murchikova. “In order to better understand these mysterious objects, we are dependent on direct observation and high-resolution modeling.”

By reading between the proverbial lines (or flickering light), the team concluded that the most likely picture of black hole feeding in the galactic center involves directly infalling gas from large distances, rather than a slow siphoning off of orbiting material over a long period of time.

“When we study flickering, we can see changes in the amount of light emitted by the black hole second by second, making thousands of measurements over the course of a single night,” explained White. “However, this does not tell us how the gas is arranged in space as a large-scale image would. By combining these two types of observations, it is possible to mitigate the limitations of each, thereby obtaining the most authentic picture.”

Read the full story “A Flicker from the Dark: Reading Between the Lines to Model Our Galaxy’s Central Black Hole” at www.ias.edu/news/flicker-from-the-dark

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3. **From the Archives**

   a. Institute and the Friends’ support of its work.
   b. The following is adapted from his remarks to the Friends:
   c. There were many other questions debated in the early years of the Institute,
   d. Throughout all of these debates, the goal was to create at the Institute a collection of thinkers capable of producing—through their talent, proximity, collaboration, disagreement, and conversation—insights and discoveries that could not otherwise have been produced.

4. **Thank you on this Founders Day for your friendship, without which our Institute could not otherwise have been produced**.

   a. As we gather here today in festivity, it is easy to forget that institutions dedicated to discovery and to the free transmission of knowledge cannot be taken for granted. They have arisen in many forms of many periods in human history, and even in the modern world, they are threatened in or about from large parts of the world, even those countries as ours are rare. They are fragile. They require the extraordinary, extraordinary support of extraordinary people like you, our Friends.

5. **Bamberg’s thought is a simple one. The inhabitants of this Institute have often thought about what we today call free speech and academic freedom, but also about cultivating what we today call “viewpoint diversity,” so that there could be a real testing of ideas, rather than ideological, partisan consensus. Flexner even proposed that the Institute should go out and hire the best Böckhiker economics could find, if ideas are tested through disagreement. I wonder what some of those today would think of countenance such a radical idea?**

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Gopal Prasad Professorship Established at IAS

David Nirenberg, IAS Director and Leon Levy Professor of History, stated, "For half a century the Prasad family has been intimately associated with the work of the IAS," said David Nirenberg, IAS Director and Leon Levy Professor of History. "It is therefore a special joy to see the Prasad name permanently associated with the Leon Levy Foundation. It is a wonderful opportunity to be a part of the legacy the Prasad family has created through their generous contributions to the Institute."

The Institute is proud to announce the creation of the Gopal Prasad Professorship, a new full-time, tenured position at the Institute for Advanced Study and the Leon Levy Foundation. The professorship, endowed with a gift from the Prasad family, ensures that future generations of scholars, from all around the globe, have the opportunity to benefit from the unique environment of research at IAS.

Prasad, an applied mathematician and computer scientist, is renowned for his work on the theory of quantum field theories, quantum spin liquids, and related areas of quantum information research.

The late Shelby White, a philanthropist from New York City, was a co-founder of the Leon Levy Foundation and Emerita and Founder of the Leon Levy Foundation, a philanthropic organization that supports the arts, culture, and sciences.

The Leon Levy Foundation provided a significant gift to the Institute, enabling the creation of the new professorship. The gift was announced at a special event held at the Institute on November 2, 2021, attended by IAS Director David Nirenberg, IAS Trustee and Leon Levy Professor of History, and former IAS Director and philosophy professor Avi Wigderson.

The Leon Levy Foundation, which was established by Shelby White in 1991, has provided support to the Institute for over 20 years. The foundation's support has enabled the Institute to host a wide range of programs and initiatives, including the annual Shelby White Awarded IAS Bamberger Medal.

Jinyoung Park and Huy Tuan Pham

Two years ago, Park—and a team including Kahn, Keith Frink, and past IAS Visiting 2020–2021 Blaugar Fellow Yitian Zhang—made a remarkable discovery. They found a new state of matter, known as quantum spin liquids (QSLs), which could exist as an independent state of matter under certain conditions. These conditions are not yet fully understood, but they occur when two quantum systems are coupled in a specific way. QSLs are of great interest to physicists because they are predicted to exhibit a wide range of exotic properties, such as long-range entanglement and quantum spin fluctuations.

The discovery of QSLs has led to a surge of activity in the field, with researchers around the world working to understand these states of matter and their potential applications. In particular, QSLs have been proposed as a way to store and process quantum information, which could enable the development of new quantum technologies.

A new state of matter, known as quantum spin liquid (QSL), was observed for the first time by IAS and Harvard University researchers. The results were published in the journal Science.

Subir Sachdev, Mazin and John Dinehztung, Distinguished Visitor at the Institute, studied the Native American Hualapai and Hopi tribes in Arizona, focusing on the importance of preserving their cultural heritage and traditions. His research in mathematics is wide-ranging and his insights have been influential in a variety of fields, including number theory, combinatorics, and mathematical physics.

The Gopal Prasad Professorship, which is currently the Raoul Bott Collegiate Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the University of Michigan, is endowed by the Prasad family to honor the memory of the IAS's founder and long-time trustee, Shelby White. The professorship will provide an annual stipend of $150,000 and a research allowance of $50,000 for the professor to conduct research and collaborate with other scholars at the Institute.


Shelby White

On May 6, 2022, the IAS Bamberger Medal was presented to Shelby White, a philanthropist and founder of the Leon Levy Foundation, at a celebration on the Institute’s campus in Princeton, NJ. Shelby has championed the Institute throughout the four decades since her late husband Leon Levy’s appointment to the Board of Trustees in 1988. She has served on the IAS Board of Trustees from 2001 to 2019.

A significant philanthropist of our time, Shelby has made investments of great depth and breadth in the Institute. Her generosity has fortified IAS in innumerable ways, establishing the Leon Levy Fund for Mathematical Physics and establishing the Leon Levy Chair in Pure and Applied Mathematics. Her generosity has made investments of great depth and breadth in the Institute, from the highest levels of governance to the most creative and collaborative environment at IAS, which richly informed his work on the Institute’s mission. It feels especially fitting for this professorship to be named after the Leon Levy Foundation, which was established by her.

The IAS Bamberger Medal, the Institute’s highest honor, is named in honor of Caroline Bamberger Full and Leon Bamberger, the sister-and-brother philanthropists who provided the founding $5 million gift to establish IAS as envisioned by the education reformer Abraham Flexner, the Institute’s founding director.

New State of Matter Observed through Entangled Particles

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To Kill or Let Die

Soviet policy of deliberate starvation under Joseph Stalin—killed nearly 4
millions of civilians. It is estimated that nearly 4 million people died as a result of
This tactic was so effective that it became a standard practice in the
Soviet Union and was later adopted by other totalitarian regimes around the
world. The policy of starvation was carried out in various ways, including
seizing food supplies, preventing access to food, and dispersing food
resources to the detriment of the population.

The Right to a Future

Today, amid the bombing of civilian targets, factories, schools, hospitals, theaters, museums, and residential
buildings, and nuclear power plants, this war puts many forms of representation on display—not just the conventional
weapons of war. The war also threatens both Europe and the world with multiple kinds of “dirty” power. Even
Russia’s use of its nuclear arsenal is a threat to civilization. The war’s impact on civilians is
enormous: it only allows talk of a “special military operation” as it continues to hide the
toll of Russian casualties from the Russian population. This is a strategic move by the
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The History of the History of Science

The history of science is a discipline that studies science as a body of knowledge by examining its foundations, assumptions, methodologies, and implications. Although works discussing the history of one or another branch of science have been published since antiquity, the discipline of history of science as we now know it developed during the 19th century. This development was stimulated by advances in many fields, including the rise of modern empirical science, the study of ancient cultures, and the increased specialization in scientific research. These advances led to a growing interest in understanding the historical context of scientific thought and the development of scientific ideas over time.
The black hole shadow is unlike any shadow encountered in everyday life. Here’s why.

What is the Black Hole Shadow?

The black hole shadow is unlike any shadow encountered in everyday life. Here’s why.

By GENEVRIE LOOY

When Karen Uhlenbeck was a MacArthur Fellow, horison 1983–88, she went on a series of remarkable adventures visiting other MacArthur fellows and learning about their projects. “This was actually one of the high points of my life,” Uhlenbeck said to me, laughing. She recalls while watching in Hawaii with Roger Payne, a trip to the Amazon to see Philip DeVries’s work with butterflies, studying lemurs in Madagascar with Philip DeVries’s work with butterflies, studying lemurs in Madagascar and then in Harvard University, where he received his master’s degree in 1937 (and where he eventually worked on his dissertation in the discipline of Mathematics). He spent a few years teaching middle school math in a private school in the Bronx before he was compelled by the 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina sit-in to spend his summer that year in Atlanta, working at the Southern Christian Leader Research Project (SCLC) headquarters, which was also home to the newly-formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He returned to the Bronx to fulfill his teaching commitment, but in 1962, he again joined SNCC—this time, in McComb, Mississippi—where he remained for the next four years working to organize a cafeteria effort around voter registration.

It was this experience—organizing a movement from the ground up—that helped shape the essence of the efforts of the Algebra Project. SNCC’s focus on voter registration initially emerged from a contrast that this issue was crucial and urgent. Because of this consensus, they were successful able to organize their efforts and attract resources and volunteers from around the country. Furthermore, this agreement empowered the target population to make demands for itself, an essential aspect, Moses believed, to creating sustainable change. Another significant impact this experience had on Moses was in showing him the crucial connection between young people and adults. When the younger generation got involved in SNCC's work, the community’s adults—who may have been more reluctant to get involved—were brought along. Such intergenerational relationships were essential to building and sustaining the movement in Mississippi, according to Moses. These values of consensus and community similarity appear in Moses’s Algebra Project.

The soil of the work that would become the Algebra Project was planted when, in 1962, he learned that his daughter’s school—she was then a first-grade student at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School in Cambridge, Massachusetts—did not offer algebra for eighth graders. While she was prepared to take algebra, she would have to wait until high school to start that course. Moses was surprised, as the school was typical for the time. In his next school was a move-up step for his daughter and her classmates to be able to take advanced-level coursework in a science course in high school. In the end, Moses took on teaching algebra to his daughter, Manor, and of her classmates. Fortunately, that same year, he was granted a MacArthur fellowship in light of civil rights work, allowing him the time to take on this work (and continue the process as it grew through the years). Although he was working on his doctorate, Moses was starting to see this as an essential work. As Moses taught that first group of students in 1962, he looked around the school, noticing the math courses tended to be skewed across racial and class lines, and began to think about who takes math and what kinds of math they take. Moses considered it an old problem that traditional math courses are as tools to single out potential mathematicians.
Rosa DNA is a historian of science, a member of the A’uw (Xavante) community of Pimentel, Brazil, Assistant Professor of Federated History at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. She pursues research at the intersection of medicine, Latin American history, Native studies, and feminist science/technology studies. Her work focuses on the politics and effects of research relationships. Her current book project, “Studying Indigenous Brazil: Medical Economies of Research in A’uw-Xavante Territories,” combines historical, ethnographic, and community-based methods to explore the histories and affairs in Indigenous communities. The QA/Q has been edited for length and clarity.

How do you describe your work to friends and family?

I study iterative processes of research in Indigenous family histories, Native studies, and feminist science. Research in A’uw technology studies. Building a digital archive together so community influenced scientific disciplines in the process. We’re making political use of science, and how they have the past sixty years. They have hosted all kinds of Central Brazil that have been hosting researchers for the last forty years. Xavante Nation is one of the most studied indigenous groups in the world, and one of the few that have maintained their language and culture. It’s hard to imagine a better place to do this work. One evening in a crisis of confidence, I went to Pimentel and met the community members, and that the benefits of the work could be there. I wasn’t sure whether the nascent community would be there. I wasn’t sure whether the nascent community would want to answer and why?

Why LAS?

It’s hard to imagine a better place to do this work. For me, thinking in a social context, I have a couple of questions, mostly related to things I studied during my Ph.D., I want to answer. There are all these people who are doing amazing things. What’s the most important thing to historical documentation be important for community continuity to motivate my work.

Who or what has had an influence on your academic career?

I am most interested in how histories and histories of science can contribute to the present. Some of the questions that animate my work are: How can historians work with and be accountable to communities that have suffered harm from scholarship in the past? How can understanding human subjects’ experiences of research help us envision anti-colonial knowledge-making across the disciplines? These questions are fundamental and interesting to me, independent of application or perceived prestige. I’m not sure this is the best approach, but it’s definitely the most fulfilling one for me. I have a couple of questions, mostly related to things I studied during my Ph.D., I want to answer. This is a tough question to answer. I like doing research with social scientists, mathematicians, and historians will be priceless.

What question(s) within your field do you most want to answer and why?

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Who or what has had an influence on your academic career and what is one of your most memorable moments as an academic?

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What other activities or pastimes do you enjoy?

I spend a lot of time playing with or teaching my daughter. I used to play professional football, and I still like playing sports and exercising, teaching my daughter. I used to play professional football, and I still like playing sports and exercising, teaching my daughter. I used to play professional football, and I still like playing sports and exercising, teaching my daughter.

Why IAS?

For me specifically, I think the prospect of working with Peter Samuk was not something I was willing to pass up. He’s a brilliant mathematician, we have a lot of shared interests, and I’m looking forward to having lots of interesting mathematical conversations with him.

In general, I think IAS is a great choice for any academic, especially in these very strange times. It’s already clear to me how great of an environment that being at home has given me with my daughter. How might the reopening of campus (and society at large) influence you and your work?

I don’t have a great answer to this question, but I find myself thinking a lot about my personal role in this. I try to do my best to make sure that when I’m on campus, I am engaging with meaningful and interesting collaboration even when it’s online. I’ve also been very happy to be able to contact students from underrepresented groups, which I guess isn’t so surprising. What I’ve noticed is that the biggest issues students can face isn’t a lack of preparation or ability, but a lack of confidence or sense of belonging. I think if each of us can do more things while I’m here and also working on some projects that I wouldn’t have otherwise thought about.

What or when has had an influence on you in your academic career?

I think my experience with math have been unique in some way. My first experience with math major because I loved my math classes so much. When Moses passed away in 2021, Uhlenbeck said, “I’m looking forward to learning about new things I wouldn’t have otherwise thought about. But the people around me (students/mentees/colleagues) feel welcome and valued”, act on those things, and listen to feedback about ways we can do something to pass up. He’s a brilliant mathematician, we have a lot of shared interests, and I’m looking forward to having lots of interesting mathematical conversations with him.

In general, I think IAS is a great choice for any academic, especially in these very strange times. It’s already clear to me how great of an environment...
Fernando Brancoli is a social scientist studying far-right Brazilian politics. Currently, his research is focused on Bolsonarismo, a term used to describe the non-hierarchical coalitions around President Jair Bolsonaro, as both a domestic phenomenon and one with international connections. From collaboration with the Trump administration, to gestures toward the Holy Land and Israel, Brancoli tracks the way internal discourses become informed by external discourses, reinterpreted and reformulated, in Brazilian far-right organizations and subjectivities.

The Summer Program in Social Science, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and organized by James D. Wolfensohn Professor Didier Fassin, invites early-career scholars who are at an advanced stage of their research to join a two-year cycle of scholars from across the Americas, the Middle East, and Latin America. Beginning with a two-week session in Princeton and followed by a week at a collaborating institution, the program aims to bring together different intellectual traditions, perspectives, and scientific disciplines to strengthen international networks among social scientists in the global South.

Brancoli, a member of the 2021–23 cohort, spoke to us about his research and his experience in the Summer Program from his home in Rio de Janeiro.

IL: Why switch from journalism to social science?
FB: I was missing, I think, a broader and deeper discussion. I mean, journalism, by nature, is a really quick and fast discussion. Journalists are supposed to be telling different stories every day, and I felt I was missing these, sort of, broad and important narratives.

IL: What unique perspectives do you think you bring to a Brazilian scholar?
FB: I think there is a huge discussion in Brazil right now, and among global South scholars, that we can actually produce theory. We can produce tools to understand the world, rather than just applying or reusing the methodological and epistemological discussions that people are doing in the global North. Like, in Brazil right now there's huge discussion regarding anthropophagy, for decades, the concept of anthropophagy has been used in Brazil to characterize the epistemological process of combining various foreign ideas and native thoughts. It's coming back in the sense that we can engage different methodologies, different points of view from across the globe, and sort of mix and digest it, and create something new.

IL: How has being at the Institute benefited your work?
FB: I think the whole structure of the Institute helps. We're having lunch and dinner together. We're having coffee together, as well. And then you have the Members joining us from time to time, coming over and commenting on our work. I mean, it's like a dream for academics, right? People are going there to do their research, but also to engage in this specific type of collaborative thought. I'm quite sure that we were staying at different hotels, we wouldn't be able to have this sort of engagement. It's this broad scenario that tries to connect people and gives you all the tools to do this.

IL: What's your favorite thing about where you're from?
FB: I would say this sort of kaleidoscope of different perspectives and ethnicities and religious and discursive and food. I think we are at our best when we are making everything together. I think that's the beauty of Brazil and also what is quite powerful about the country.