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Thermal performance of GaInSb quantum well lasers for silicon photonics applications

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ABSTRACT

A key component for the realization of silicon-photonics are integrated lasers operating in the important communications band near 1.55 μm . One approach is through the use of GaSb-based alloys which may be grown directly on silicon. In this study, silicon-compatible strained $\text{Ga}_{0.8}\text{In}_{0.2}\text{Sb}/\text{Al}_{0.68}\text{In}_{0.32}\text{Sb}$ composite quantum well (CQW) lasers grown on GaSb substrates emitting at 1.55 μm have been developed and investigated in terms of their thermal performance. Variable temperature and high-pressure techniques were used to investigate the influence of device design on performance. These measurements show that the temperature dependence of the devices is dominated by carrier leakage from the QW region to the X_b minima of the $\text{Al}_{0.35}\text{Ga}_{0.65}\text{As}_{0.03}\text{Sb}_{0.97}$ barrier layers accounting for up to 43% of the threshold current at room temperature. Improvement in device performance may be possible through refinements in the CQW design, while carrier confinement may be improved by optimization of the barrier layer composition. This investigation provides valuable design insights for the monolithic integration of GaSb-based lasers on silicon.

The realization of optoelectronic integrated circuits (OEICs) requires an efficient, silicon-compatible electrically pumped laser operating above room temperature (RT). The indirect nature of silicon makes it unsuitable as an active region. While heterogeneous integration may currently be the most advanced approach in terms of device performance¹, the longer term goal is direct epitaxial growth of III-V lasers on silicon¹. However, the lattice constant and thermal expansion coefficient mismatch and the polar/ non-polar interface between silicon and traditional III-V laser materials causes large defect densities, leading to inefficient and unreliable lasers. Progress has been made in overcoming these challenges through the use of GaAs based 1.3 μm quantum dot lasers on silicon^{2,3} and Ga(NAsP)/GaP/Si quantum well (QW) lasers at 800-900 nm⁴. However, an alternative material system and approach is required for long-haul telecoms applications operating around 1.5 μm .

Sb-containing alloys are of interest for growth on silicon since dislocations tend to propagate parallel to the Si/III-V-Sb interface rather than into the active layers, allowing growth of high-quality active regions. GaInSb/GaSb composite quantum well (CQW) lasers have been grown by molecular beam epitaxy on 4°-off (001) silicon substrates emitting at 1.55 μm at RT in pulsed mode⁵; near 1.55 μm in continuous wave (c.w.) on GaSb near RT⁶; and more recently at 1.59 μm c.w. at RT on 6° miscut silicon⁷. However, further development is needed to address high threshold current densities (J_{th}) and temperature sensitivity⁸.

To commercialize on-silicon devices, it is important to understand the efficiency limiting mechanisms of the equivalent active regions grown on GaSb. In this paper we report on the thermal properties of GaInSb CQW devices on GaSb substrates⁶ and use a range of experimental techniques to identify the principal processes limiting device performance¹⁶.

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The test devices (A, B, C) illustrated in figure 1, consist of three compressively strained $\text{Ga}_{0.8}\text{In}_{0.2}\text{Sb}$ QWs. The $\text{Al}_{0.35}\text{Ga}_{0.65}\text{As}_{0.03}\text{Sb}_{0.97}$ barriers and $\text{Al}_{0.9}\text{Ga}_{0.1}\text{As}_{0.07}\text{Sb}_{0.93}$ cladding layers are lattice-matched to the GaSb substrate.

Material	Thickness (nm)
p-GaSb(100)	300
Graded p-AlGaAsSb	100
p $\text{Al}_{0.9}\text{Ga}_{0.1}\text{As}_{0.07}\text{Sb}_{0.93}$	1000
$\text{Al}_{0.35}\text{Ga}_{0.65}\text{As}_{0.03}\text{Sb}_{0.97}$	200
$\text{Ga}_{0.8}\text{In}_{0.2}\text{Sb}$	3.6 (A), 4.8 (B), 6 (C)
$\text{Al}_{0.35}\text{Ga}_{0.65}\text{As}_{0.03}\text{Sb}_{0.97}$	20
$\text{Ga}_{0.8}\text{In}_{0.2}\text{Sb}$	3.6 (A), 4.8 (B), 6 (C)
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$\text{Al}_{0.35}\text{Ga}_{0.65}\text{As}_{0.03}\text{Sb}_{0.97}$	200
n $\text{Al}_{0.9}\text{Ga}_{0.1}\text{As}_{0.07}\text{Sb}_{0.93}$	1000
Graded n-AlGaAsSb	100
n-GaSb(100)	substrate

FIG. 1. Test device structures.

Devices B and C are CQWs formed by the insertion of one (B) and two (C) 0.45 nm $\text{Al}_{0.68}\text{In}_{0.32}\text{Sb}$ barriers within each $\text{Ga}_{0.8}\text{In}_{0.2}\text{Sb}$ QW. The insertion of AlInSb monolayers into the wider wells introduces additional confinement, counteracting the reduction in bandgap caused by the additional width. Further details of the fabrication of these devices is given in reference⁶.

Pulsed electrical injection (500 ns, 10 kHz) was used to minimize current heating effects. Device characteristics were measured as a function of temperature from 40-300 K using a closed-cycle cryostat system. Figure 2(a) shows the facet output intensity (I) variation with current density (J) and temperature (T) for representative device B. Figure 2(b) shows the extracted J_{th} variation with temperature for all three devices.

For these lattice-matched devices, defect-related recombination is assumed to be negligible in the QW region and at low temperatures, where J_{th} is low, other forms of non-radiative recombination are also assumed negligible. For an ideal QW laser at low temperatures the radiative component of threshold current density, $J_{rad} \propto T^9$ and for our devices J_{rad} can be seen to dominate threshold below ~ 150 K.

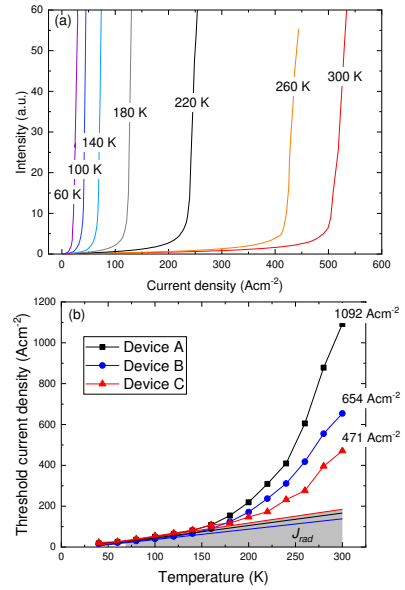


FIG. 2. (a) Temperature dependent LI (device B); (b) threshold current densities and radiative components (all devices).

The J_{rad} components at RT were approximated by linear extrapolation of the low temperature J_{th} to 300 K shown as the shaded area in figure 2(b) and in Table I.

TABLE I. Threshold current densities and radiative components at 300 K.

	Device A	Device B	Device C
J_{th} (Acm^{-2})	1092	654	471
J_{rad} (Acm^{-2})	170 ± 6	147 ± 10	189 ± 5
J_{rad}/J_{th} (%)	15 ± 1	23 ± 2	40 ± 1

For $T > 150$ K, J_{th} increases super-linearly, suggesting the onset of non-radiative processes such as Auger recombination or carrier leakage consistent with evidence from other laser types at this wavelength¹⁰.

In a simple model J_{th} can be expressed as¹⁶:

$$J_{th} = eL_z(An + Bn^2 + Cn^3) + J_{leak} \quad (1)$$

Where e is the electronic charge, L_z is the active layer thickness, n is the carrier density (assuming equal electron and hole carrier densities) and A , B and C are the recombination coefficients for defect, radiative and Auger recombination respectively. The J_{leak} term accounts for carrier leakage from the QWs.

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Auger recombination and carrier leakage are strongly temperature dependent which may explain the strong increase in J_{th} with temperature¹¹. The reduction in J_{th} at RT from device structures A to B to C may be attributed to the increased gain volume, which reduces the threshold carrier density, n_{th} , by lowering the band filling and increasing the photon generation rate for a given injection current. Increased optical confinement would also contribute to the reduction in n_{th} by increasing modal gain and the stimulated emission rate.

Approaching room temperature J_{th} increases exponentially and, over a limited temperature range, this increase may be described by the characteristic temperature T_0 ¹²:

$$T_0 = \left(\frac{d \ln(J_{th})}{dT} \right)^{-1} = \left(\frac{1}{J_{th}} \frac{dJ_{th}}{dT} \right)^{-1} \quad (2)$$

A higher T_0 is desirable as it corresponds to greater thermal stability of J_{th} . Expressions for the characteristic temperature due to radiative, Auger recombination and leakage effects can be derived as¹²:

$$T_0(I_{rad}) = \frac{T}{1+2x} \quad (3)$$

$$T_0(I_{Aug}) = \frac{T}{3 + \left(\frac{E_a}{kT} \right) + 3x} \quad (4)$$

$$T_0(I_{leak}) = \frac{T}{\left(\frac{E_a}{kT} \right)} \quad (5)$$

Where x is a “non-ideality” factor, e.g. due to optical losses, and E_a is the respective activation energy for the Auger or leakage process.

The theoretical variation of $T_0(T)$ for J_{th} can be written as a weighted average of the individual T_0 values:

$$\frac{1}{T_0} = \frac{1}{T_0(rad)}R + \frac{1}{T_0(nonrad)}(1-R) \quad (6)$$

where $R(T)$ is defined as J_{rad}/J_{th} and $T_0(nonrad)$ corresponds to either the Auger or leakage process. $T_0(T)$ was measured using a five-point average and compared with a numerical model to investigate the non-radiative contribution to J_{th} .

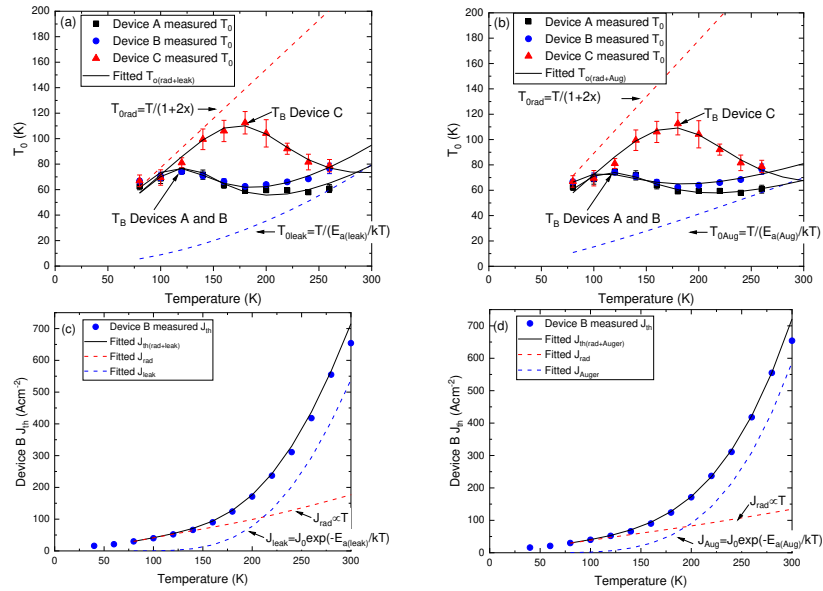


FIG. 3. Experimental and modelled characteristic temperature and threshold current density (a) T_0 (radiative and leakage) (b) T_0 (radiative and Auger) (c) J_{th} (radiative and leakage) (d) J_{th} (radiative and Auger).

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Figure 3(a) shows the measured and modelled $T_0(T)$ for all three devices for radiative recombination and carrier leakage together with the radiative and leakage limits for device B as an example. Figure 3(b) shows that a similarly good fit may be achieved assuming radiative and Auger recombination. At low temperatures T_0 tends towards the radiative limits while above a break-point temperature, T_B ¹⁶, it tends towards the leakage or Auger limits. The difference in $T_0(T)$ between the three structures is consistent with the trends in J_{th} and highlights the improvement in performance with increasing composite well thickness where a lower n_{th} leads to a reduction in non-radiative recombination. Figures 3(c) and 3(d) show the example of the measured J_{th} for device B and the result of fitting the radiative and leakage (a) or radiative and Auger (b) components from the T_0 model. A similar quality of fit is found for devices A and C. The T_0 data may therefore be explained by considering either leakage or Auger recombination although it is not possible to distinguish which is dominant from this analysis alone.

Using a similar approach we investigated the temperature sensitivity of the differential quantum efficiency (slope) above threshold, η_d where:

$$\eta_d \propto \frac{dL}{dI} \quad (7)$$

The characteristic temperature T_1 is defined as $\eta_d(T) = \eta_0 \exp(-T/T_1)$ where η_0 is a constant¹³, so:

$$T_1 = - \left(\frac{d \ln(\eta_d)}{dT} \right)^{-1} = - \left(\frac{1}{\eta_d} \frac{d\eta_d}{dT} \right)^{-1} \quad (8)$$

Equation (8) was applied using a three-point average to plot the experimental values of T_1 .

The differential quantum efficiency η_d may be expressed as:

$$\eta_d = \eta_i \frac{\alpha_m}{\alpha_i + \alpha_m} \quad (9)$$

Here η_i is the internal quantum efficiency, α_i is the internal loss and α_m the mirror loss expressed as:

$$\alpha_m = \frac{1}{L_{cav}} \ln \frac{1}{R_f} \quad (10)$$

where L_{cav} is the cavity length and R_f the cleaved facet reflectivity. Assuming the change

in α_m with temperature is negligible we deduce that:

$$T_1 = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{(\alpha_i + \alpha_m)} \frac{d\alpha_i}{dT} - \frac{1}{\eta_i} \frac{d\eta_i}{dT}} \quad (11)$$

Terms on the left-hand side of the denominator relate to cavity losses and on the right-hand side to injection losses (e.g. carrier leakage). This decomposition allows investigation of the relative contributions to T_1 . We used a least squares numerical fit model to vary da_i/dT and $d\eta_i/dT$ to fit to the measured $\eta_d(T)$ using equation (11).

Figure 4(a) shows the relative change in slope efficiency η_d for all three device structures. Figure 4(b) shows the measured and modelled average T_1 values. The limits associated with varying only α_i or η_i with temperature are also shown.

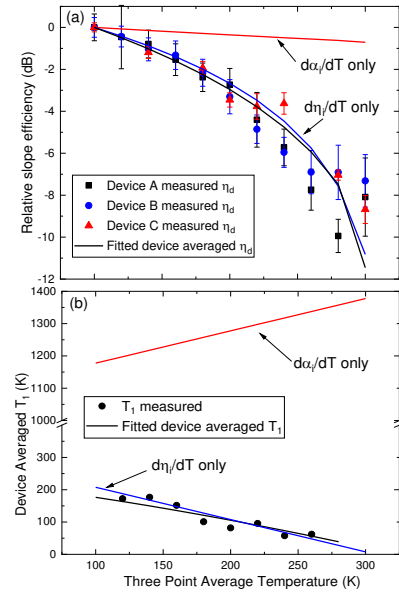


FIG. 4. Experimental and modelled slope efficiency (a) and characteristic temperature T_1 (b).

From this fit it is clear that $d\eta_i/dT$ dominates with da_i/dT having negligible effect. This confirms that the temperature sensitivity of T_1 is due to injection rather than optical losses and supports the T_0 analysis which identified carrier leakage as a possible contributory factor. It also indicates that Inter Valence Band Absorption

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(IVBA) and Free Carrier Absorption (FCA) are not significant because they are associated with the α_i rather than the η_i contribution to η_d . Auger recombination is not expected to influence the T_I analysis since n is (ideally) pinned above threshold. An important outcome of the T_I analysis is that the efficiency data can only be explained by the presence of carrier leakage.

Both carrier leakage and Auger recombination are sensitive to band structure. Hydrostatic pressure can be used to reversibly change the band structure of a semiconductor, hence it was used to assess the dependence of the device performance on the band structure. Pressures up to 400 MPa were applied using a Unipress helium compressor system, details of which may be found in¹¹.

The measured variation of J_{th} with pressure is shown in figure 5(a).

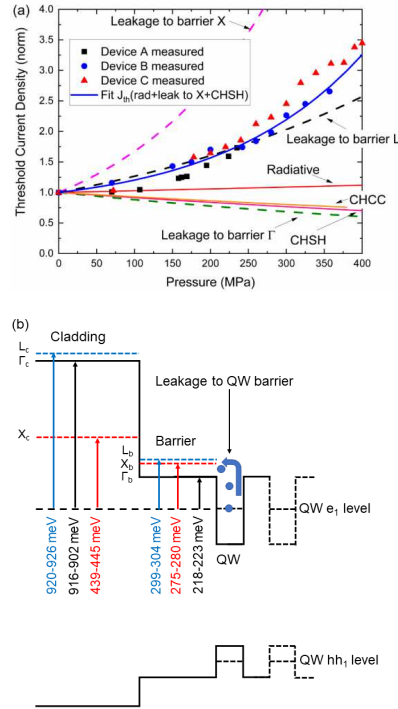


FIG. 5. (a) Threshold current density variation with pressure - Experimental measurements (solid symbols) and theoretical dependence of the individual current paths and best fit with pressure (device B) (b) schematic band alignment.

A numerical model was created to describe how Auger recombination and carrier leakage vary with pressure to investigate their quality of fit to the experimental data.

In an ideal QW laser, where optical losses are negligible, J_{rad} scales with bandgap according to $J_{rad} \propto E_g^2$.

The pressure dependence of the leakage and Auger components take the form:

$$J_{nonrad} = J_0 \exp \left[- \left(\frac{dE_a}{dP} \right) \frac{P}{k_b T} \right] \quad (12)$$

Where $J_0 = 1$ for normalized data and dE_a/dP is the net change in the respective activation energy with pressure.

For leakage, dE_a/dP corresponds to the net change in band alignment between the quasi-Fermi level in the conduction band, taken to be equal to the QW electron ground state (e_1), and the energy of the states into which the carriers escape. We assume that e_1 changes as dE_{laser}/dP and the valence band alignment is approximately pressure independent¹⁴. dE_{laser}/dP was measured to be ~ 11 meV/kbar⁻¹ for all three devices.

CHSH Auger recombination (where the energy of a Conduction band electron recombining with a hole in the Heavy hole band is given to a third hole in the Heavy hole band which is excited into the Spin split-off band) is sensitive to the difference between the band gap (E_g) and the spin-orbit (SO) split-off-energy (Δ_{SO}). For our devices where $E_g > \Delta_{SO}$, the CHSH activation energy is given by:

$$E_a(CHSH) = \frac{m_{so}}{2m_h + m_c - m_{so}} (E_g - \Delta_{SO}) \quad (13)$$

where m_c and m_h are the electron and heavy hole band, in-plane, effective masses and m_{so} is the SO split-off band effective mass.

The CHCC Auger activation energy is:

$$E_a(CHCC) = \frac{m_c}{m_c + m_h} E_g \quad (14)$$

CHCC refers to electron-hole recombination between the Conduction and Heavy hole bands accompanied by excitation of a Conduction band electron further into the Conduction band.

In (13) and (14) E_g changes according to dE_{laser}/dP . From $k.p$ theory, m_c and m_{so} increase approximately proportionally to band gap, and hence pressure, while m_h is relatively independent of pressure¹⁵. QW effective masses were calculated from a linear interpolation of the binary components from Vurgaftman *et al*¹⁶.

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Other Auger processes have been ignored since they have previously been shown to be relatively weak^{10,17}. Due to the closeness of the e_f and A_{50} energies, CHSH is expected to dominate the Auger current at wavelengths $< 2 \mu\text{m}$ ¹⁸.

An increasing J_{th} with pressure is generally a strong indicator of carrier leakage from the QW to the indirect X or L valleys. In contrast, J_{th} decreases with pressure for CHSH/CHCC Auger processes, or for leakage from the QW to the barrier Γ_b band edge (when the barrier Γ_b band edge pressure coefficient is smaller than the QW, as here).

The QW e_f to barrier Γ_b , X_b and L_b minima energy offsets were calculated at RT and ambient pressure for the three structures by combining the binary energy gaps, bowing parameters and valence band offsets from Vurgaftman *et al*¹⁶, accounting for strain in the QW.

For the three structures, the range of values are: $e_f-\Gamma_b = 218-223$ meV; $e_f-X_b = 275-280$ meV; and $e_f-L_b = 299-304$ meV (e_f -cladding separations were all >439 meV), figure 5(b). While these energy offsets should be sufficient to confine the majority of carriers, the Fermi-Dirac distribution of carriers extends into these energies where there is a high density of states, hence increasing the recombination rate. It was also found that the energy offsets and configuration of the barrier minima are very sensitive to the bowing parameters which vary considerably in the literature^{16,19}.

As evident from figure 5(a), the increase in J_{th} with pressure is stronger than that expected for leakage to the L_b -valley states. However, it is consistent with leakage to the X_b -valley dominating the increase in J_{th} . A good fit to the experimental results was achieved for all devices using a combination of radiative recombination, leakage to the barrier X_b minima (forming up to 43% of J_{th}), and a contribution of CHSH/CHCC Auger recombination or leakage to the barrier Γ_b or L_b minima. Shockley-Read-Hall (SRH) is likely to be a strong factor in the subsequent recombination of carriers in the barrier material.

The results of this study demonstrate the potential of GaSb-based QW lasers for silicon photonics applications in the telecoms wavelength range and opportunities for ongoing improvement.

We showed that the strong temperature sensitivity of J_{th} could be explained by either

leakage or Auger recombination. However, the temperature sensitivity of η_d was found to be dominated by carrier injection, confirming that leakage must be present. Furthermore, from pressure-dependent measurements, carrier leakage from the QW active region to the barrier X_b valley states was found to be a key limiting factor in the performance of these devices. This could be reduced by increasing the activation energy of the leakage paths by a small increase in the lattice matched barrier Al and As fractions and without compromising optical confinement provided by the cladding. Further improvement in reducing J_{th} and thermal sensitivity might also be achieved by increasing the number of QWs although the relatively small improvements associated with increased gain volume of device C over B compared with B over A suggests diminishing scope for improvement. Optimization would also benefit from a detailed investigation of bowing parameters and band alignments in this system.

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Data Availability The data associated with this work are available by request at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4353309>.

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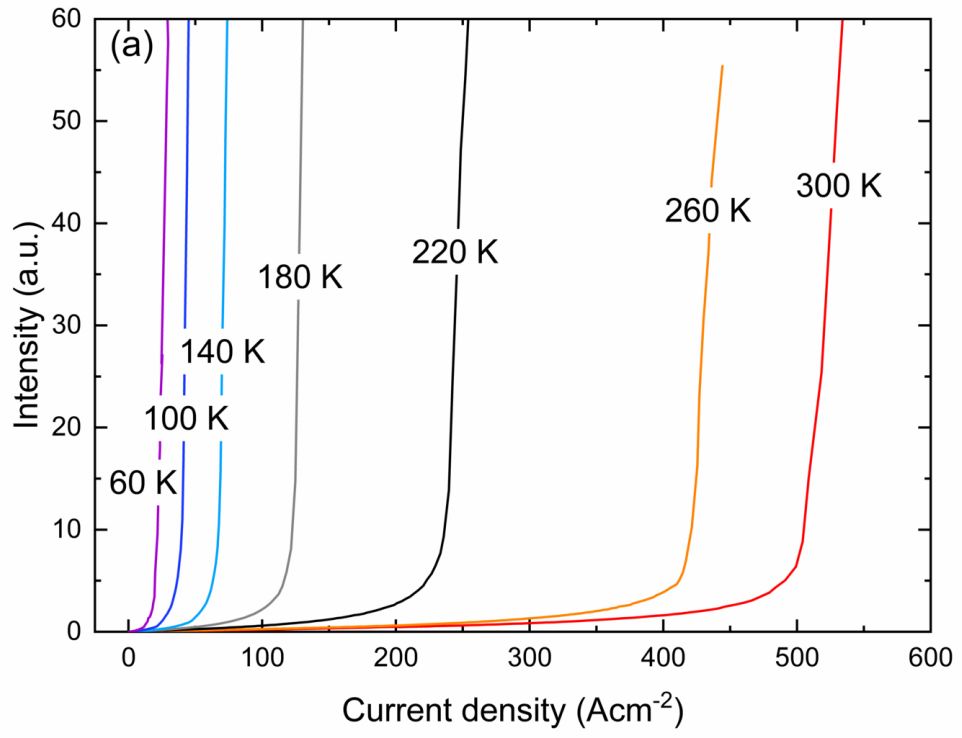
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Graded n-AlGaAsSb	100
n-GaSb(100)	substrate

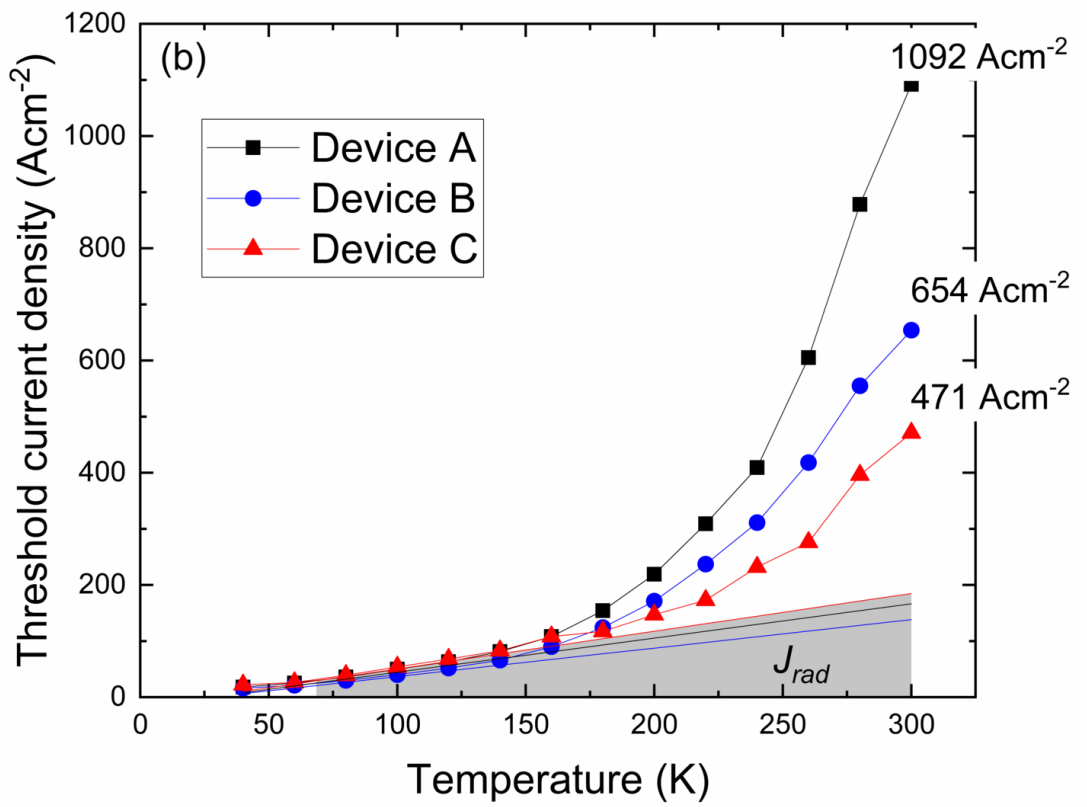
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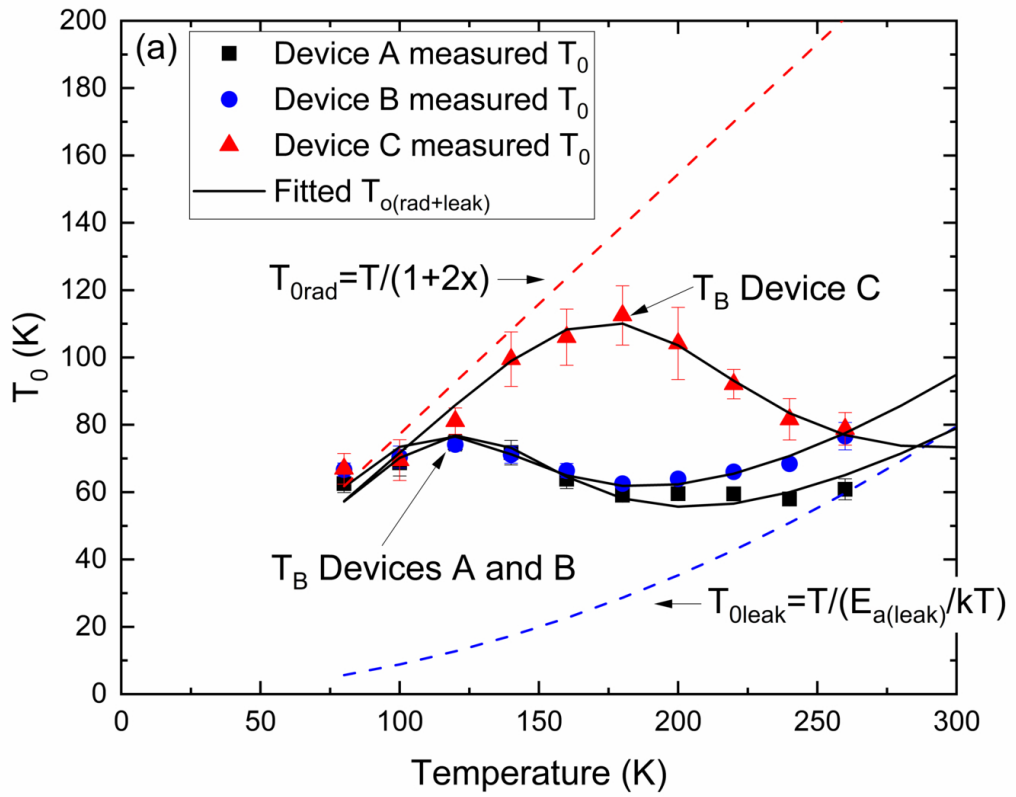
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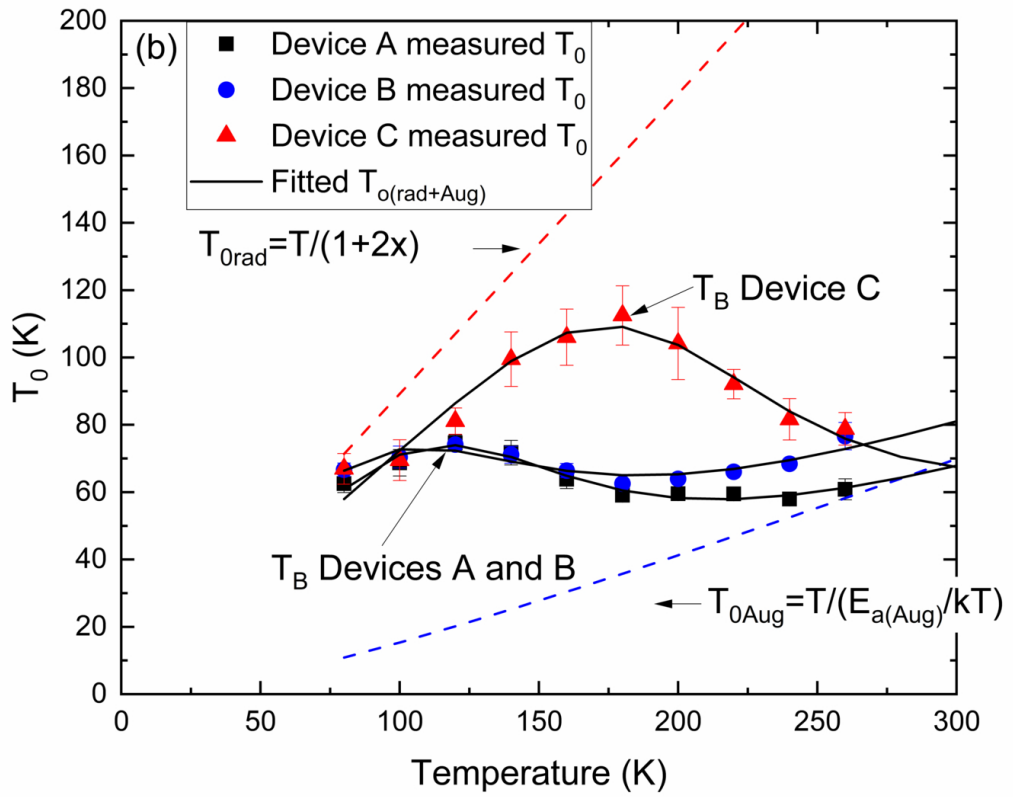
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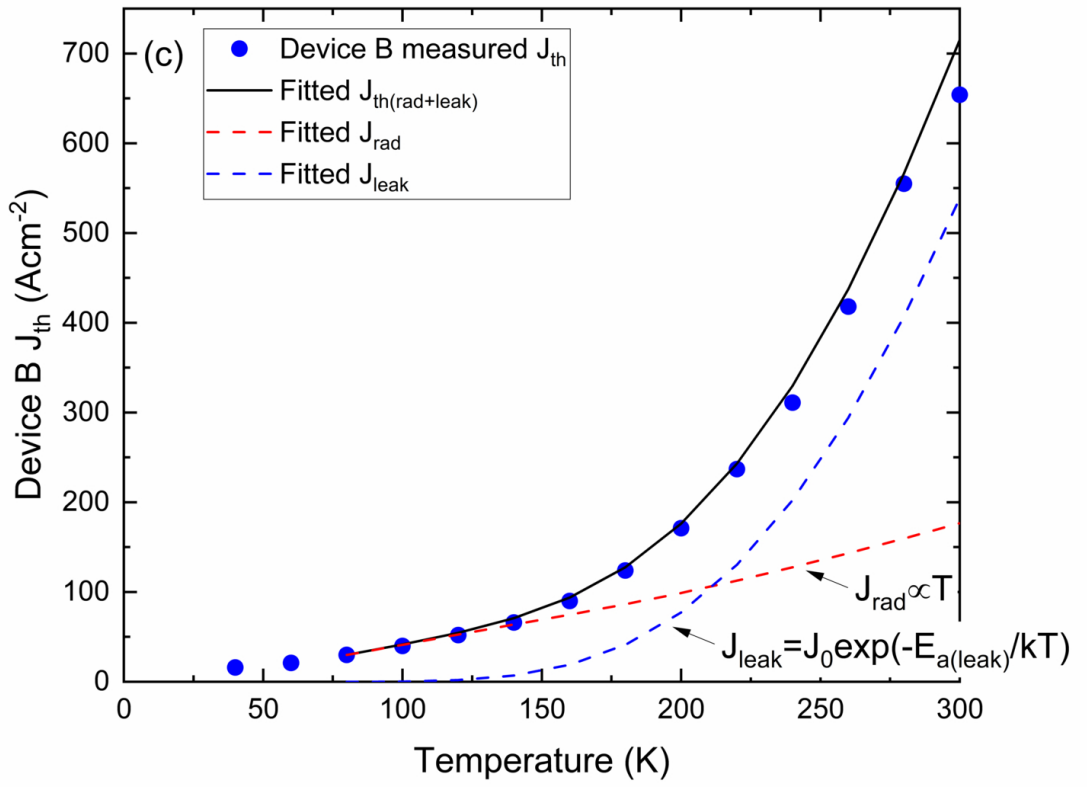
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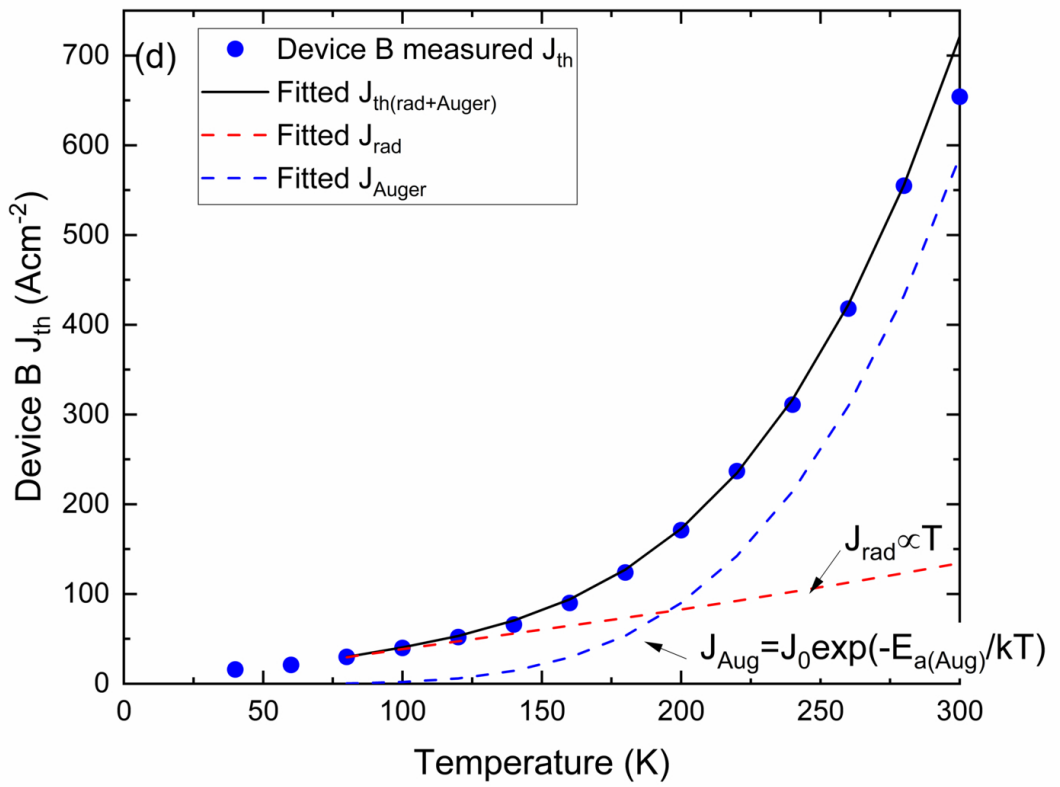
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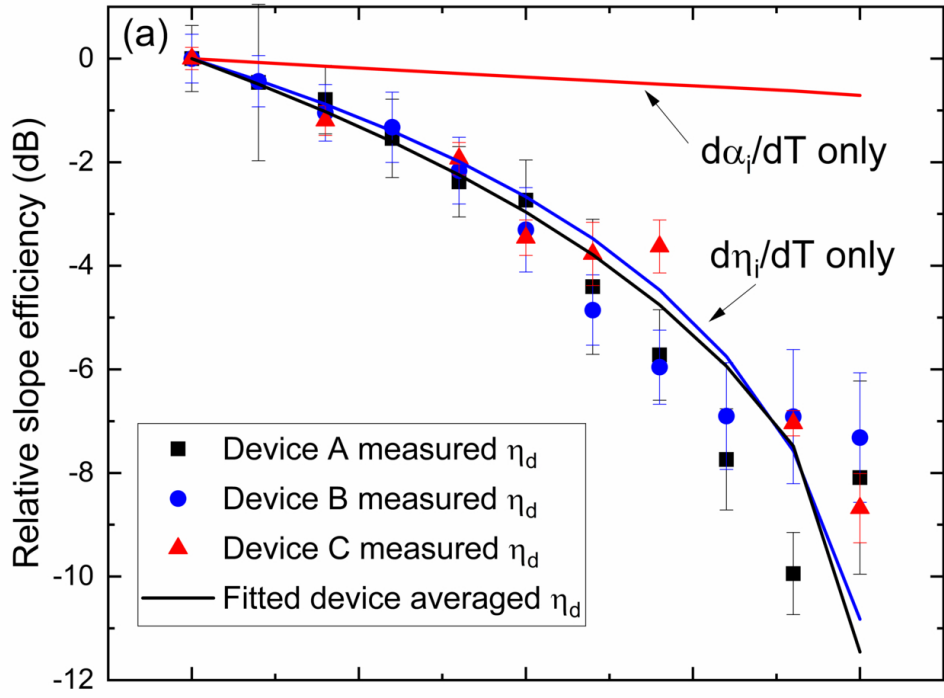
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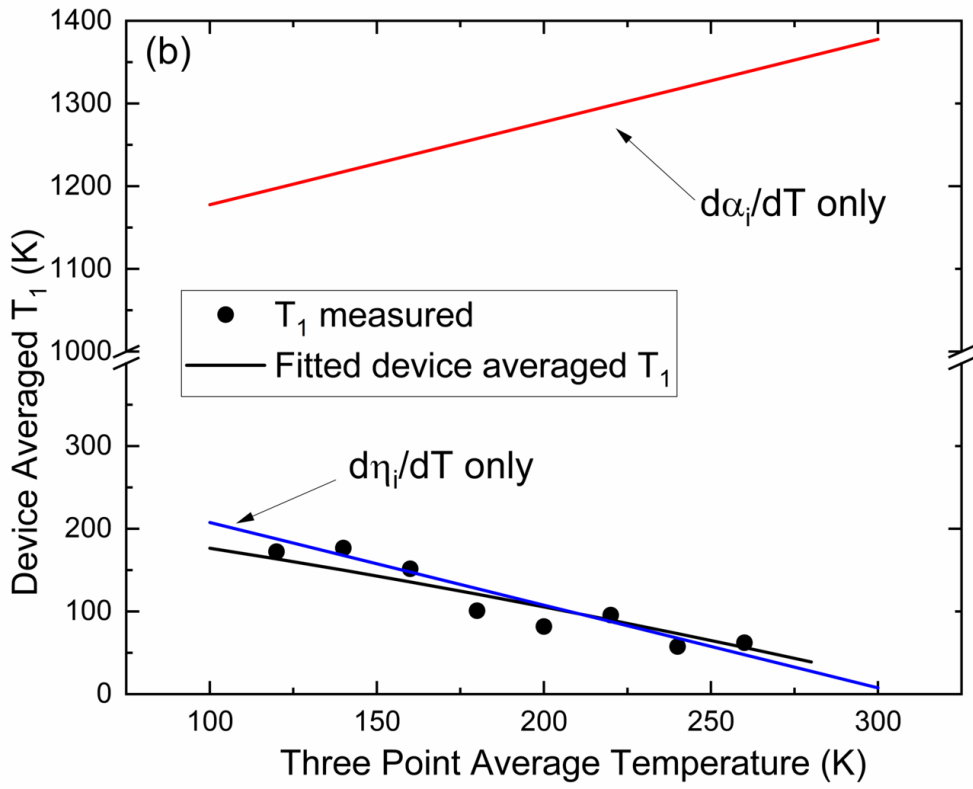
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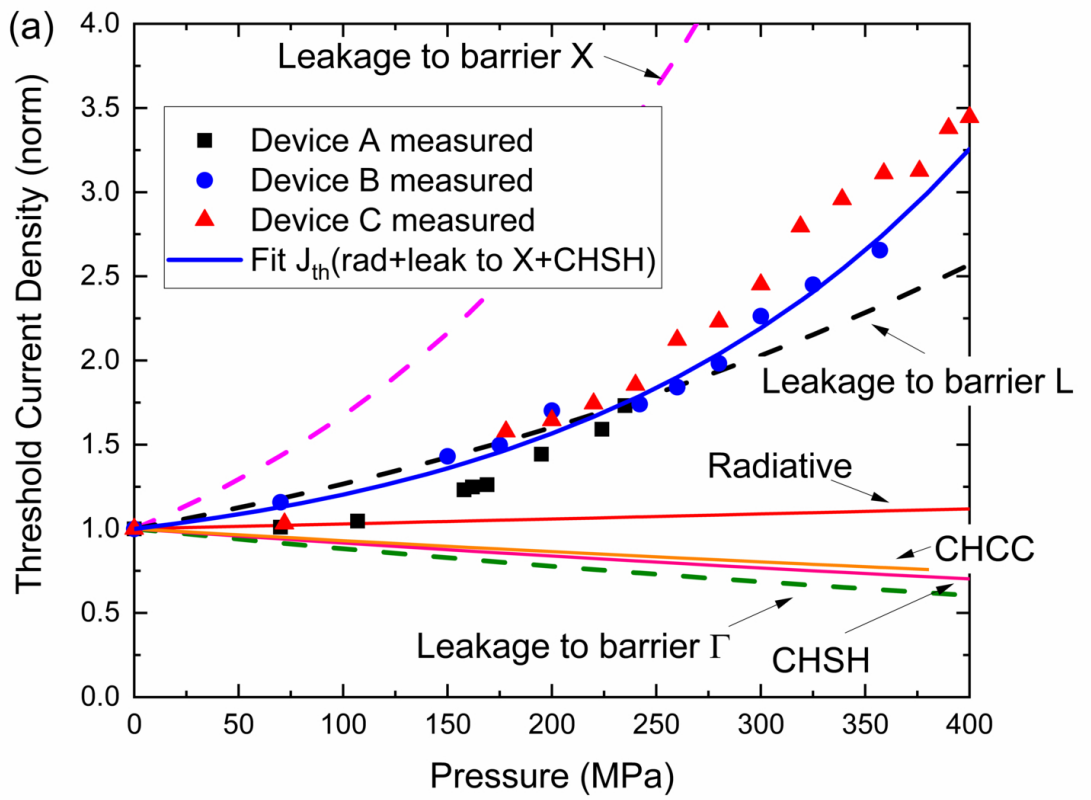
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