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# Optimization of large amorphous silicon and silica structures for molecular dynamics simulations of energetic impacts

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# Optimization of large amorphous silicon and silica structures for molecular dynamics simulations of energetic impacts

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## Abstract

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A practical method to create optimized amorphous silicon and silica structures for molecular dynamics simulations is developed and tested. The method is based on the Wooten, Winer, and Weaire algorithm and combination of small optimized blocks to larger structures. The method makes possible to perform simulations of either very large cluster hypervelocity impacts on amorphous targets or small displacements induced by low energy ion impacts in silicon.

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*Keywords:*

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Molecular-dynamics simulation, Silicon, Silica, Amorphous network

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## 1. Introduction

Quality of amorphous structures used in molecular dynamics (MD) simulations is a critical factor to reliable results in many applications. For example, nanopattern formation on silicon surfaces under ion beam irradiation is a coherent effect of small displacements of atoms induced by individual impacts [1]. To detect these displacements, the amorphous structure should be free of internal stresses and its density should correspond to the density of the real material. On the other hand, billion atom simulations of cluster impacts require targets whose density and mechanical properties correspond real materials [2]. The aim is to create minimally strained continuous random networks of these materials.

The Wooten, Winer, and Weaire (WWW) [3] algorithm is considered one of the best optimization methods to create high-quality amorphous structures for simulations and better than generation of structures with MD [4, 5, 6], although some criticism has been presented [5]. However, it is not possible to fully optimize structures that are large enough for many MD applications like impact simulations. Structures of only a few hundred thousand atoms can be optimized [5].

Based on the WWW algorithm, We have developed a practical method to create amorphous silicon and silica structures that give satisfactory results in impact simulations. First, we apply the WWW algorithm to optimize several nanometer wide amorphous structures. Then we use these small structures as building blocks of larger structures. Finally, the structure is further annealed and relaxed using the particular interatomic potential applied in the impact simulations. The quality of modelled structures are then compared to

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9 experimental data. However, there are differences in published experimental  
10 reference data because the real structures of amorphous materials depend on  
11 the method used to produce them. Therefore, it is necessary to first decide  
12 what kind of modelled amorphous structure is wanted. In this work, the qual-  
13 ity criteria for the modelled structures are random location of atoms, rather  
14 high average density, and absence of large voids. These particular criteria  
15 are chosen to get structures which can be used to detect small displacements  
16 of atoms induced by ion bombardment.  
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## 26 2. Methods

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28 The WWW implementation used in this study is described in Ref. [6]. It  
29 is implemented for parallel operation and it is portable to common parallel  
30 computing systems. In this study, it was run on a Cray XT4/XT5 system  
31 where the optimization of a 10 nm wide a-Si block takes about three days  
32 using 16 CPUs. During the WWW optimization, a Keating potential was  
33 used for both a-Si and a-SiO<sub>2</sub> [7, 6]. The energy minimization is done locally  
34 in order to get  $O(N)$  scaling [6].  
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42 The MD simulation arrangements are described in Refs. [8, 9, 10]. The  
43 environment-dependent interatomic potential (EDIP) [11] and the Stillinger-  
44 Weber (SW) potential [12] were used for a-Si. For silica, the Watanabe  
45 potential was used in the simulations [13, 14, 15].  
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50 Rectangular blocks of a-Si and a-SiO<sub>2</sub> were optimized in two phases start-  
51 ing from random atomic configurations. First the block was processed using  
52 the WWW method until the total potential energy changes become negligi-  
53 ble, which does not mean that the system has reached the global potential  
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energy minimum. For the big blocks, it was necessary to slightly modify the optimization parameters during the last phases of the optimization to remove the system from too high local energy minimum. For example, some blocks were temporarily allowed to expand which gives more freedom to atoms to move to lower energy positions. In the second phase, the blocks were annealed in MD to 1 K using periodic boundary conditions and a more advanced interaction model, like the EDIP or SW potentials. The ambient temperature 1 K was used because the structures will be used to verify a theoretical rippling model in the case where thermal effects are not present [1].

Because periodic boundary conditions were used, identical copies of a block can be put side by side to form a larger structure. These combined structures were annealed to 1 K with MD to relax possible stresses. The result is an optimized amorphous structure which has a medium-range periodicity due to the block structure. Finally, one face of the structure is opened for the ion bombardment and the system is annealed again with MD.

### 3. Results

With the WWW method, it is usually not possible to optimize arbitrary large amorphous structures. Increasing the number of CPUs does not compensate the effect that the optimization of larger structures practically stops near a local energy minimum. The reason to this is the following: The barriers in the energy landscape around the local minima becomes larger in average when the block size increases. Sooner or later, the probability that a practically possible series of WWW optimization steps would raise the system over the barrier becomes very small. In tiny systems, like a  $3 \times 3 \times 3$

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9 nm a-Si block, this happens almost at the global minimum, resulting in a  
10 very well optimized structure. When the block size increases, the energy  
11 minimum reached is considerably higher than the global minimum. At the  
12 moment, the practical limit for the block side is around 10 nm according  
13 to test simulations made in this study with a few hundred thousand atoms.  
14 If the quality of the four-fold coordination of Si atoms is critical from the  
15 applications point of view, the limit is even lower.  
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22 In the  $3 \times 3 \times 3$  nm EDIP a-Si block 99.4 % of atoms have coordination  
23 number 4. Fig. 1 shows that the structure is well-optimized compared to  
24 experimental pair correlation, bond length distribution and bond-angle dis-  
25 tribution. However, the bond lengths become realistic only after the EDIP  
26 annealing. The SW structure based on the same WWW optimized block is  
27 almost as good. 96 % of atoms have coordination number 4.  
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34 The  $10 \times 10 \times 10$  nm a-Si block represents the upper limit of the struc-  
35 tures that are possible to be optimized. A WWW optimized block was an-  
36 nealed with both the EDIP and the SW potentials. The block contains about  
37 220,000 atoms and now only 62 % (EDIP) and 66 % (SW) atoms have co-  
38 ordination number 4. The densities are 2.49 (EDIP) and 2.41 g/cm<sup>3</sup> (SW).  
39 A more detailed analysis shows that a considerable portion of atoms in the  
40 EDIP block have five neighbours (Fig. 2), whereas in the SW block many  
41 atoms have less than four neighbours within the interaction distance. The  
42 EDIP silicon is very dense but in the SW silicon there are more voids where  
43 the atoms have too few neighbors. In both cases the Si-Si bonds are too long  
44 which indicates stress in the structure. It is clear that the EDIP structure  
45 is better when effects of the ion impacts are simulated because there is no  
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9 danger that the voids collapse upon impact which would make it impossible  
10 to detect the small displacement field induced by impacts. Our test simula-  
11 tions confirm this. In conclusion, the potentials give very different structures,  
12 although the comparison to the experimental results shows (Fig. 3) that the  
13 both structures are equally good in average. If the structure is initially not  
14 very near the global energy minimum the MD annealing affects it depending  
15 on the potential.  
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22 A large combined EDIP a-Si structure was tested in 500 eV Ar impact  
23 simulations. A  $20 \times 20 \times 10$  combined structure was made of four  $10 \times 10 \times 10$   
24 blocks and then annealed. The analysis of displacements confirms that the  
25 structure is very stable and does not contain areas which could easily deform  
26 upon impact and create artificial effects in the atom displacement field. Fig. 4  
27 shows the cross-section of the displacement field when no impact occurs. The  
28 field does not show any periodicity although there are four identical blocks  
29 present. The displacements seem to be due to a global relaxation, which  
30 becomes possible when identical blocks are placed side by side and the surface  
31 is opened. In spite of the partial optimization, the structure makes possible  
32 to detect very small displacements in low-energy impact simulations.  
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43 Figs. 5 and 6 show the comparison of optimized and MD annealed a-SiO<sub>2</sub>  
44 structures to experimental results. The structure was made of  $5 \times 5 \times 2$  nm  
45 blocks. This particular silica structure is used in large-scale cluster impact  
46 simulations where the uniform density of the material is critical [2]. The  
47 density is  $2.15 \text{ g/cm}^3$ , which is comparable to the experimental density  $2.2$   
48  $\text{g/cm}^3$ . The average O-Si-O angle is  $108.6^\circ$  indicating that the tetrahedral  
49 structure typical to silica is achieved in the optimization. Note that the  
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9 density and the Si-O-Si angle distribution of the real silica vary depending  
10 on the type of the material, as the experimental results in Fig. 6 show. The  
11 variation among silica structures is even larger than among a-Si structures.  
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#### 15 16 **4. Discussion**

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19 The method of building large structures of small optimized blocks pro-  
20 vides an opportunity to simulate high energy ion or cluster impacts on amor-  
21 phous materials. This is not possible with structures annealed only with MD  
22 because these structures are not usually dense enough and collapse upon im-  
23 pact. However, the periodicity of the structures may affect the results of the  
24 simulations. To minimize this effect, the dimensions of the building blocks  
25 should be clearly different than the size of the dynamic phenomenon which  
26 is simulated. For example, the crater formation and shock wave propagation  
27 are not affected in cluster bombardment simulation, where the block size is  
28 considerably smaller than the cavity induced by the cluster impact. On the  
29 other hand, the blocks should be much larger than the collision cascade area  
30 of a single ion impact, otherwise systematic patterns may appear in the re-  
31 sults. For example, it was necessary to use 10 nm building block instead of  
32 the 3 nm in simulations of 500 eV Ar impact on a-Si.  
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45 A combined structure is not just a sum of its constituents. When a small  
46 block that is annealed using periodic boundaries is put side by side with iden-  
47 tical blocks, its environment does not change and the structure is very static.  
48 However, when a face of a combined structure is opened to form a surface  
49 for ion bombardment, the structure may change because the opening intro-  
50 duces more freedom to atoms at the surface to slightly change their positions.  
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Eventually, this affects the whole structure. For example, a structure made of  $3 \times 3 \times 3$  nm a-Si blocks that was well optimized (Fig. 1) went through a small but global artificial displacement of most atoms during the impact simulation. These effects are negligible in high-energy cluster impact simulations, but harmful when very small atomic displacements should be detected. Instead, the structures made of the partially optimized  $10 \times 10 \times 10$  nm a-Si blocks proved to be reasonably good in ion bombardment simulations in spite of the incomplete optimization (Fig. 3).

## 5. Conclusions

We have shown that the WWW method and combination of small well-optimized a-Si and a-SiO<sub>2</sub> blocks can be used in practice to create amorphous targets for MD simulations of both large clusters and low-energy ions. The density and characteristics of these amorphous structures correspond very well to the properties of real structures. The majority of the Si atoms are four-fold coordinated. The amorphous networks are free of internal stresses which makes it possible to detect weak displacement fields induced by 100 eV Ar atom impacts, for example. However, the structures must be carefully annealed and analyzed to avoid artificial effects.

## Acknowledgments

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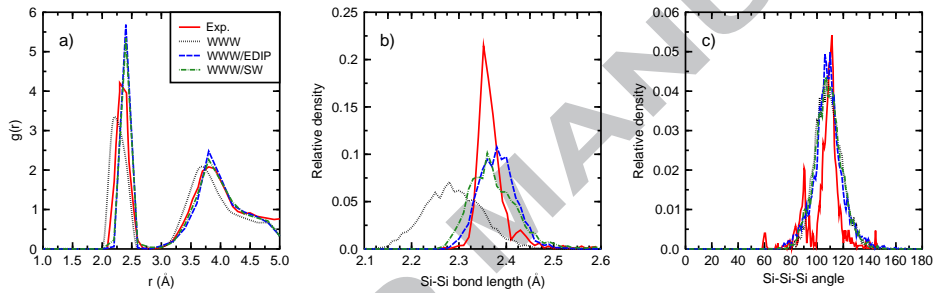


Figure 1: (Color online) Pair correlation (a), Si-Si bond length distribution (b), and Si-Si-Si angle distribution (c) of the  $3 \times 3 \times 3$  block the EDIP and SW annealing compared to the corresponding experimental results. The intermediate result after the WWW optimization is also shown. The experimental pair correlation is from Ref. [16]. The bond length and angle distributions are from Ref. [17].

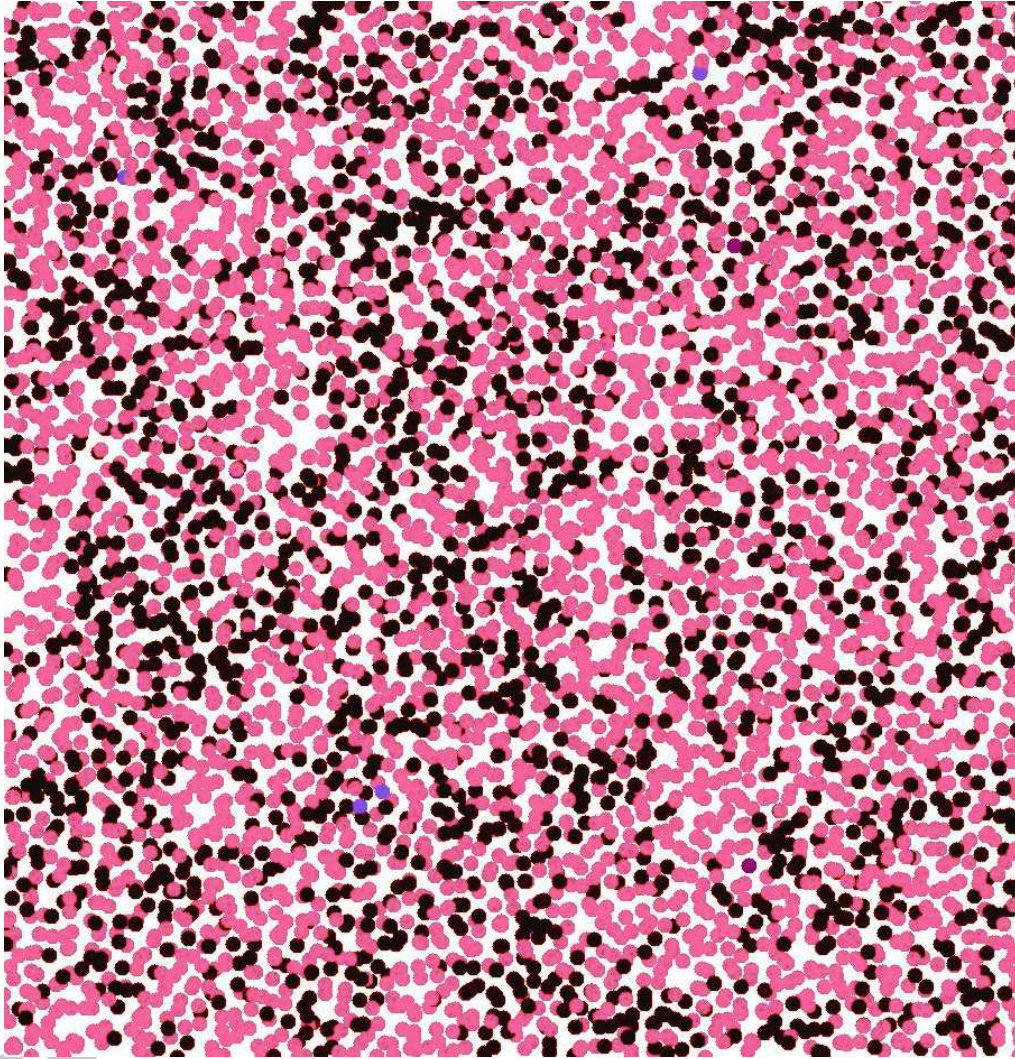


Figure 2: (Color online). A cross-section of the optimized  $10 \times 10 \times 10$  a-Si structure (EDIP). Atoms that have five neighbors are marked with a darker color. These coordination defects are randomly distributed over the volume. The structure has no large voids.

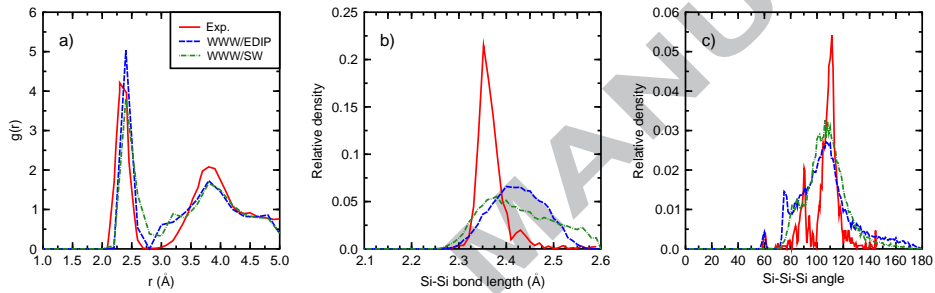


Figure 3: (Color online) Pair correlation (a), Si-Si bond length distribution (b), and Si-Si-Si angle distribution of the  $10 \times 10 \times 10$  block after the EDIP and SW annealing compared to the corresponding experimental results. The experimental pair correlation is from Ref. [16]. The bond length and angle distributions are from Ref. [17]. Note that comparisons of a-Si structure parameters are always approximate because the structure of a-Si depends on the method used to produce it.

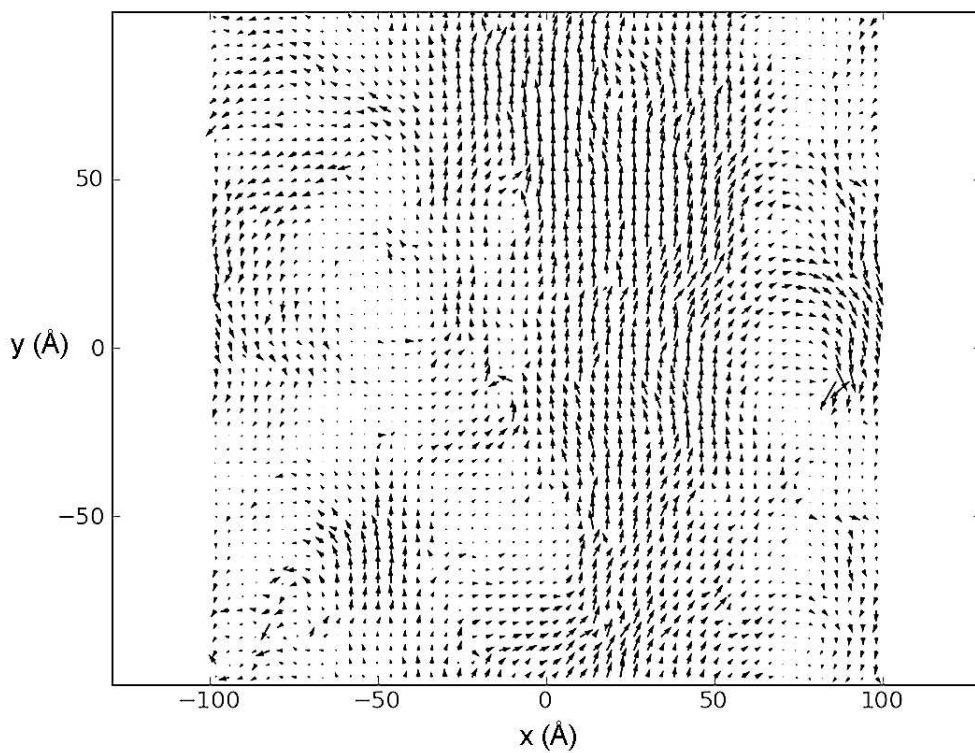


Figure 4: (Color online) Cross section of the atom displacement field at the surface of the combined a-Si block. The displacements are calculated after a 25 ps MD simulation by comparing the final positions to the initial positions of the atoms. Most of the atomic displacements shown as small arrows are less than 0.5 Å.



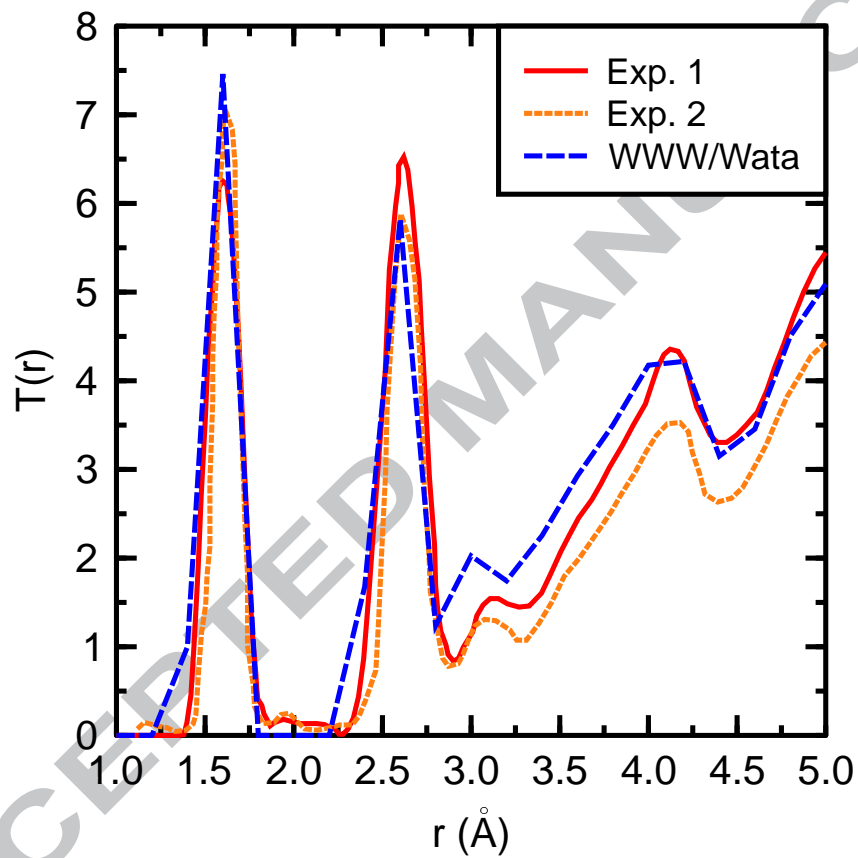


Figure 5: (Color online) Pair correlation of the  $\text{SiO}_2$  block after relaxation with the Watanabe potential compared to experimental results: Exp. 1 [6, 18] and Exp. 2 [6, 19].

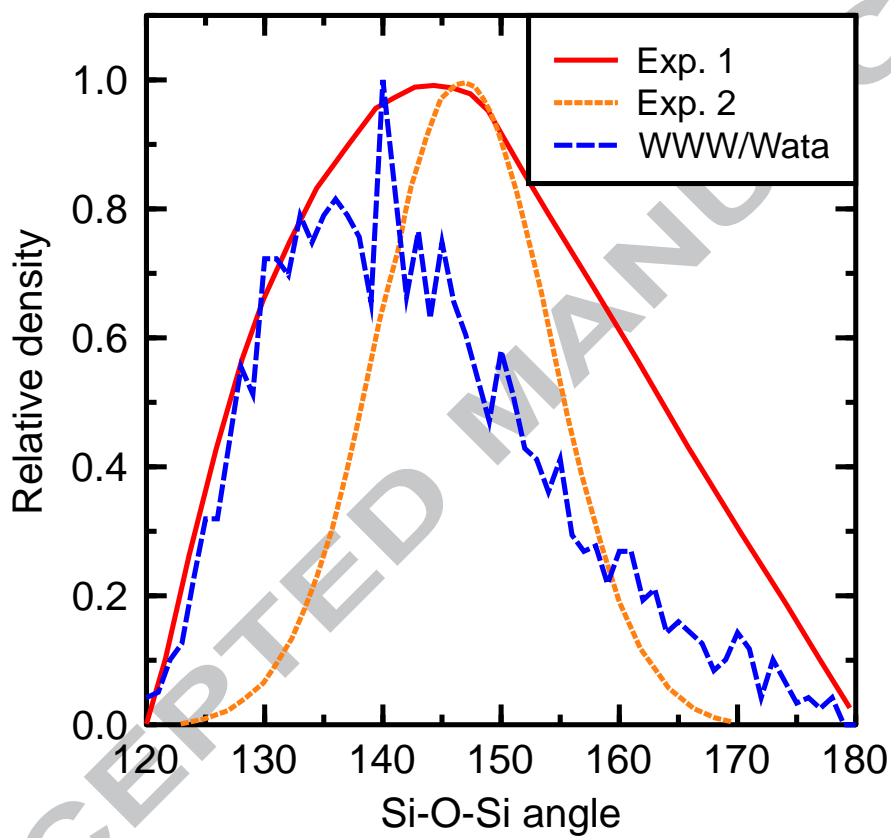


Figure 6: (Color online) Si-O-Si angle distribution of the  $\text{SiO}_2$  block after relaxation with the Watanabe potential compared to experimental results: Exp. 1 [6, 18] and Exp. 2 [6, 19].