

# Hotspot relaxation dynamics in a current-carrying superconductor

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We experimentally studied the dynamics of optically excited hotspots in current-carrying WSi superconducting nanowires as a function of bias current, bath temperature, and excitation wavelength. We observed that the hotspot relaxation time depends on bias current, temperature, and wavelength. We explained this effect with a model based on quasiparticle recombination, which provides insight into the quasiparticle dynamics of superconductors.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When a photon is absorbed in a superconductor, it creates a nonequilibrium region referred to as a *hotspot* [1]. The optical excitation of hotspots underpins the operation of most superconducting single-photon detectors, such as microwave kinetic inductance detectors (MKIDs) [2,3], superconducting tunnel junctions [4], and superconducting nanowire single-photon detectors (SNSPDs) [5,6]. The microscopic description of hotspot dynamics is a complicated long-standing problem in nonequilibrium superconductivity [1]. If hotspot dynamics were better understood and controlled, many of the current limitations of these detectors could be overcome, potentially enabling disruptive technological advances.

Here we report a combined experimental and theoretical study of hotspots excited by single photons in a current-carrying WSi superconducting nanowire. We measured the hotspot relaxation dynamics in the nanowires as a function of bias current, bath temperature, and excitation wavelength. We observed that: (1) hotspot relaxation depends on the current carried by the nanowires and (2) the current dependence of the relaxation time changes with bath temperature and excitation wavelength. The agreement between theory and experiment provides insight into the quasiparticle dynamics of superconductors and the photodetection mechanism of superconducting single-photon detectors.

Hotspot formation is initiated when one photon is absorbed in a thin superconducting film, creating a nonequilibrium distribution of quasiparticles (QPs). The excited QPs down-convert from higher-energy states by exchanging energy with the electron and phonon systems. During the decay, further Cooper pairs are broken, increasing the number of QPs [1,7]. Previously, the relaxation of optically excited superconductors was studied with optical and terahertz pump-probe techniques [8–10]. These techniques offer subpicosecond time resolution but are not sensitive enough to study the evolution of a single hotspot and are difficult to perform below  $\sim 5$  K. In this paper, we used a different technique that combines the single-hotspot sensitivity of electrical readout with the high time resolution of ultrafast optical pump-probe spectroscopy [11,12].

## II. ONE- AND TWO-PHOTON DETECTION REGIMES

If an SNSPD produces a response pulse (or *click*) when a single photon creates a single hotspot, the detector operates in the *single-photon detection regime* as shown in Fig. 1(a). When the bias current is lowered to a point that a click can be efficiently triggered only if two photons generate two overlapping hotspots [5,11,13], the SNSPD operates in the *two-photon detection regime* as shown in Fig. 1(b). The current ranges in which the detector operates in single- or two-photon detection regimes depend on operating temperature and excitation wavelength.

To isolate the bias range for two-photon detection at a certain temperature and wavelength, we measured the single- and two-photon system detection efficiencies at a series of bias currents using the detector tomography method described in Ref. [14]. To determine the temperature and wavelength dependence of the single- and two-photon detection bias ranges, we measured the current dependence of the single-photon detection efficiency at different temperatures and wavelengths.

The detector studied was a fiber-coupled WSi SNSPD [15,16] based on  $\sim 5$ -nm-thick 130-nm-wide nanowires spaced on a 200-nm pitch, meandering over an 11- $\mu$ m-diameter circular active area. The SNSPD was operated in an adiabatic

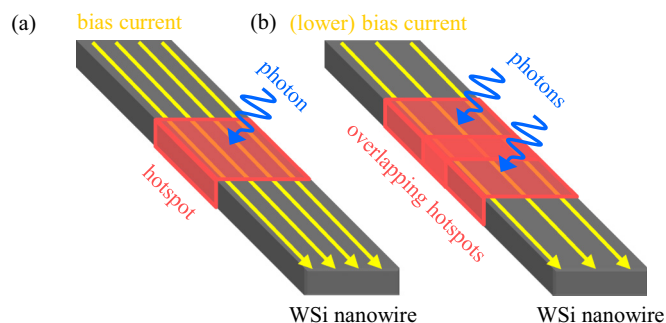


FIG. 1. (a) Representation of the single-photon detection regime. The current-biased superconducting nanowire produces a response pulse when a single photon creates a single hotspot (in red). (b) Representation of the two-photon detection regime. The nanowire, biased at a lower current, produces a response pulse when two photons generate two overlapping hotspots.

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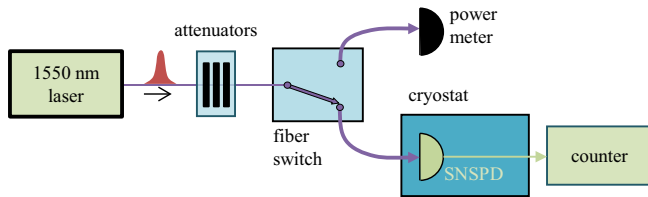


FIG. 2. Experimental apparatus for the tomography measurements. The 1550-nm laser was a fiber-based mode-locked laser with an  $\sim 5$ -ps pulse duration and a  $f_{\text{rep}} = 36$ -MHz repetition rate. Violet lines represent optical fibers.

demagnetization refrigerator in the temperature range of  $T_B = 0.25$ – $2$  K.

### A. Detector tomography

The source of optical excitation was a fiber-based mode-locked laser with a 1550-nm wavelength,  $\sim 5$ -ps pulse duration, and 36-MHz repetition rate ( $f_{\text{rep}}$ ). As shown in Fig. 2, we coupled the source to three fiber attenuators in series and then to a calibrated fiber switch. The switch had two output ports: one to a calibrated power meter and the other to the SNSPD detection system. To determine the mean number of photons per pulse incident on the SNSPD ( $\mu$ ), we calibrated the attenuators with the same procedure adopted in Ref. [16]. To calibrate an attenuator, we: (1) directed the switch output to the power meter, (2) measured the power with all three attenuators set to zero attenuation, and (3) measured the power with the attenuator under test set to the desired attenuation and the other two attenuators set to zero attenuation. This procedure was repeated for each attenuator for a range of nominal attenuations from zero to  $\sim 40$  dB.

Once the attenuators were calibrated, we turned on all three attenuators, directed the switch output to the SNSPD, and measured the probability of detection per optical pulse, which we called click probability  $P_{\text{click}} = \text{PCR}/f_{\text{rep}}$ . The

photoresponse count rate (PCR) was estimated as the difference between the count rate (CR) measured from the SNSPD when the source was coupled to the device and the background count rate, measured with the source blocked. Figure 3(a) shows the  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $\mu$  curves measured for five values of  $I_B$  (colored squares).

In the limit where only one- and two-photon processes lead to a measurable count rate,  $P_{\text{click}}$  can be written as [14]

$$P_{\text{click}}(\mu) = 1 - e^{-\mu} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{\mu^n}{n!} (1 - \eta_1)^n (1 - \eta_2)^{n(n-1)/2}, \quad (1)$$

where  $\eta_1$  and  $\eta_2$  are the single- and two-photon system detection efficiencies. We defined  $\eta_1$  as the probability that a photon coupled into the fiber connected to the SNSPD triggered a response pulse. Similarly, we defined  $\eta_2$  as the probability that two photons coupled into the fiber connected to the SNSPD triggered a response pulse. To be consistent with the background-subtracted data, Eq. (1) ignores the effect of dark counts. In the single-photon detection regime,  $\eta_1 \gg \eta_2$ , and Eq. (1) simplifies to  $P_{\text{click}}(\mu) = 1 - \exp(-\eta_1 \mu)$ . If  $\eta_1 \mu \ll 1$ , we obtain the familiar approximation:  $P_{\text{click}}(\mu) \sim \eta_1 \mu$ . By contrast, if the detector operates in the two-photon detection regime (where  $\eta_2 \gg \eta_1$ ) and if  $\eta_2 \mu^2 \ll 1$ , then Eq. (1) can be approximated by  $P_{\text{click}}(\mu) \sim \eta_2 \mu^2/2$ .

The solid gray curves in Fig. 3(a) are fits to the data using Eq. (1) with  $\eta_1$  and  $\eta_2$  as fitting parameters [14]. At the highest bias current ( $I_B = 7.86 \mu\text{A}$ , blue squares), the device operated in the single-photon detection regime with  $\eta_1 \sim 80\%$  and  $\eta_2$  is too small to be determined accurately. Because the single-photon detection efficiency of our device was higher than that of the device used in Ref. [14], it was not necessary to use the scaling procedure described in Ref. [14]. The data used for fitting were limited to those where  $\mu \leq 20$  and  $2.8 \times 10^{-6} \leq P_{\text{click}} \leq 0.1$ . The sum in Eq. (1) was truncated at a photon number of  $N = 60$ . Figure 3(b) shows the bias dependence of the values of  $\eta_1$  and  $\eta_2$  that fit the experimental results.

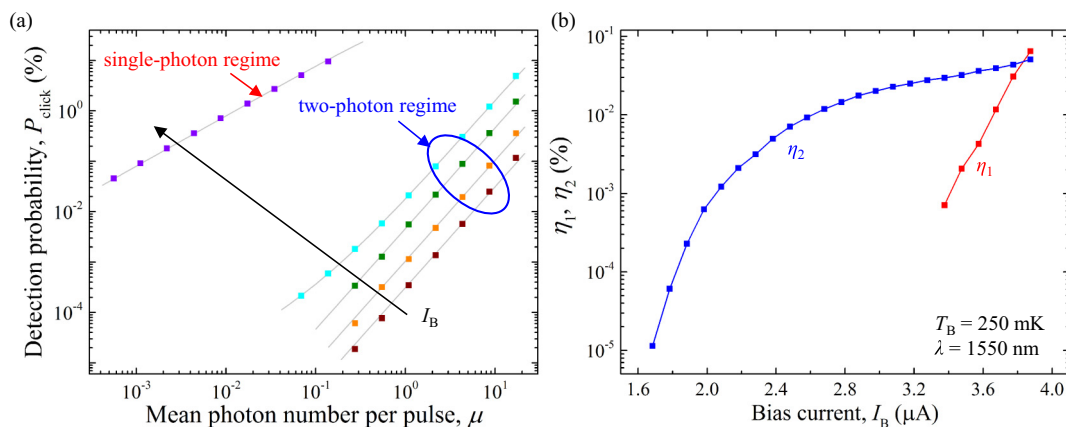


FIG. 3. (a) Detector click probability ( $P_{\text{click}}$ ) vs mean photon number per pulse ( $\mu$ ) for several fixed values of the bias current  $I_B = 7.86 \mu\text{A}$  (violet),  $3.48 \mu\text{A}$  (cyan),  $2.58 \mu\text{A}$  (green),  $2.18 \mu\text{A}$  (orange), and  $1.98 \mu\text{A}$  (dark red). The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $I_B$ . The solid gray curves are fits of the data to Eq. (1). At  $7.86 \mu\text{A}$  (violet curve), the SNSPD operates in the single-photon-detection regime. At the other four bias currents shown, the SNSPD operates in the two-photon-detection regime (although a weak one-photon component is visible at  $3.48 \mu\text{A}$ ). (b) Fit values for single- and two-photon system detection efficiencies for a series of bias currents. The detector response is dominated by two-photon detection for bias currents  $1.9 \mu\text{A} \leq I_B \leq 3.5 \mu\text{A}$  because  $\eta_2 \gg \eta_1$ . These measurements were performed at  $\lambda = 1550$  nm and  $T_B = 0.25$  K.

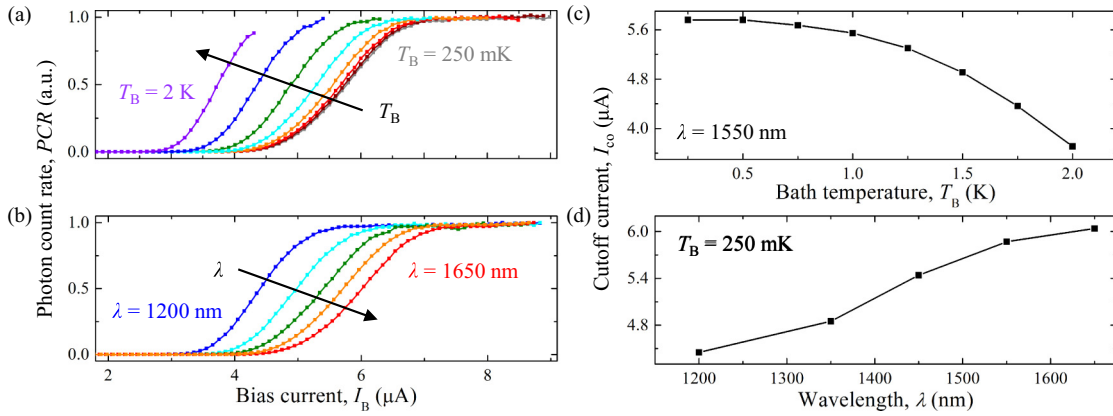


FIG. 4. (a) Normalized  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  at bath temperatures  $T = 0.25$  (gray),  $0.5$  (dark red),  $0.75$  (red),  $1$  (orange),  $1.25$  (green),  $1.5$  (cyan),  $1.75$  (blue), and  $2$  K (violet). The excitation wavelength was  $\lambda = 1550$  nm. The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $T_B$ . The  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curves at the different bath temperatures were normalized by the maximum  $PCR$  at  $T = 0.25$  K. (b) Normalized  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  at wavelengths  $\lambda = 1200$  nm (blue),  $1350$  nm (cyan),  $1450$  nm (green),  $1550$  nm (orange), and  $1650$  nm (red). The bath temperature was  $T_B = 0.25$  K. The  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curves at each wavelength were normalized by the maximum  $PCR$  at that wavelength. The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $\lambda$ . (c)  $I_{co}$  vs  $T_B$  curve extracted from panel (a). (d)  $I_{co}$  vs  $\lambda$  curve extracted from panel (b).

For  $1.9 \mu A \leq I_B \leq 3.5 \mu A$ , the SNSPD operated in the two-photon-detection regime with  $\eta_1 \ll \eta_2$ .

### B. Cutoff current

To quantify how the bias ranges of the single- and two-photon detection regimes changed with bath temperature and excitation wavelength, we measured the temperature and wavelength dependence of the  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curves. To excite the detector with wavelengths other than  $1550$  nm, the pulsed laser source was sent through a highly nonlinear fiber to generate a supercontinuum spanning a wavelength range of  $1200$ – $1650$  nm. We selected a given excitation wavelength with one of several bandpass filters placed between the supercontinuum source and the detector.

Figure 4(a) shows  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curves at several bath temperatures from  $T_B = 0.25$  to  $2$  K. When the temperature was increased, we observed a decrease in the current at which the  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curve showed an inflection point (which we defined as the cutoff current  $I_{co}$  [17]). Figure 4(b) shows  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curves at several wavelengths ( $1200$ – $1650$  nm). Consistent with the observations reported in Ref. [18], when the wavelength increased, the cutoff current increased.

Figures 4(c) and 4(d) show the temperature and wavelength dependence of  $I_{co}$  that we extracted from Figs. 4(a) and 4(b) with the procedure reported in the Supplemental Material of Ref. [17]. Based on Ref. [19], the cutoff current was expected to scale in the same way as the current at which the detector transitioned from the two-photon detection regime to the single-photon detection regime. Therefore, we used  $I_{co}$  to quantify how the bias ranges of the two-photon detection regime changed with bath temperature and excitation wavelength.

### III. HOTSPOT RELAXATION MEASUREMENTS

To measure the hotspot relaxation time, we biased the SNSPD in the two-photon detection regime and excited it with a pair of optical pulses from the supercontinuum source separated by a variable time delay ( $t_D$ ) as shown in Fig. 5. We produced the optical pulse pair by coupling the laser to a Mach-Zehnder interferometer with a variable delay in one of the arms [11]. We measured  $P_{click}$  as a function of  $t_D$  at a series of bias currents, bath temperatures, and excitation wavelengths.

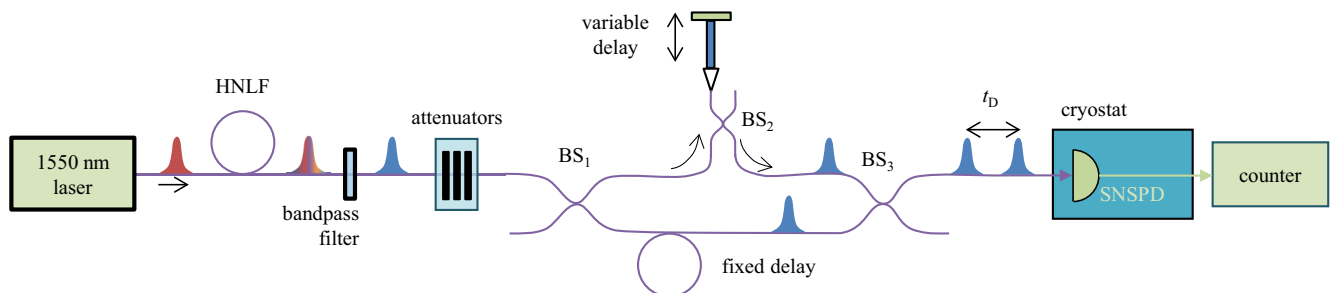


FIG. 5. Experimental apparatus for the hotspot relaxation time measurements. We used a highly nonlinear fiber (HNLF) to generate supercontinuum spanning wavelengths from  $1200$  to  $1650$  nm. The supercontinuum was filtered with bandpass filters with  $\sim 12$ -nm bandwidths. Three fiber beam splitters (BSs) and a variable delay form the Mach-Zehnder interferometer, which outputs two pulses separated by a variable time delay ( $t_D$ ).

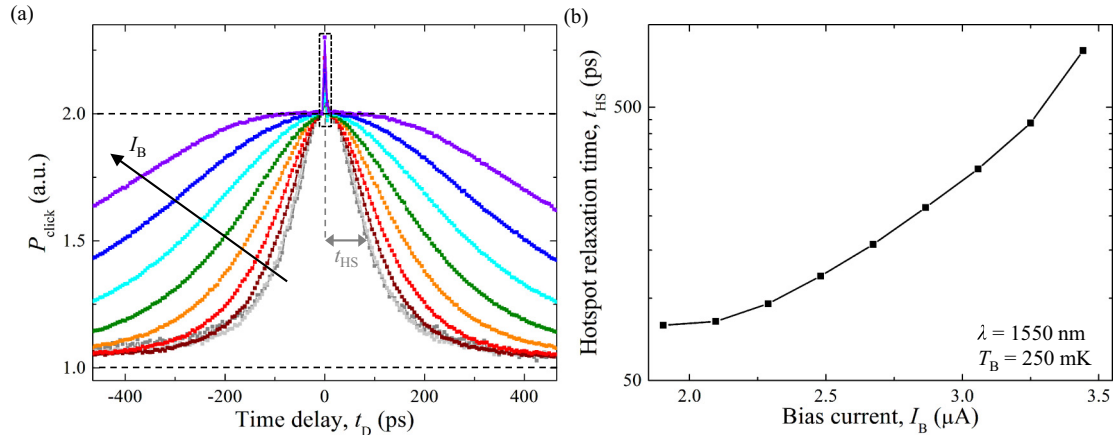


FIG. 6. (a) Normalized  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves measured with the detector operating in the two-photon detection regime at  $I_B = 1.9 \mu\text{A}$  (dark gray),  $2.1 \mu\text{A}$  (light gray, overlapped to dark gray),  $2.3 \mu\text{A}$  (dark red),  $2.5 \mu\text{A}$  (red),  $2.7 \mu\text{A}$  (orange),  $2.9 \mu\text{A}$  (green),  $3.1 \mu\text{A}$  (cyan),  $3.3 \mu\text{A}$  (blue), and  $3.5 \mu\text{A}$  (violet).  $t_D$  was varied in steps of 5 ps. The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $I_B$ . The dark gray arrow indicates the half width at half maximum (HWHM) of the  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curve measured at  $I_B = 1.9 \mu\text{A}$ . The supercontinuum source was attenuated so that  $P_{\text{click}} < 10\%$  in each individual pulse. (b)  $t_{\text{HS}}$  vs  $I_B$  curve extracted from fits to the data in panel (a). The standard deviation of all the fitted  $t_{\text{HS}}$  values was less than 1%. These measurements were performed at  $\lambda = 1550 \text{ nm}$ , and  $T_B = 0.25 \text{ K}$ . The switching current of the device, which is defined as the maximum current the device can be biased at without switching to the normal, nonsuperconducting state, was  $I_{\text{SW}} = 8.8 \mu\text{A}$ . Note that the ordinate axis is on a logarithmic scale.

### A. Bias dependence of the hotspot relaxation time

Figure 6(a) shows  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves measured at several bias currents. The  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves had a Lorentzian shape except in the range of  $-5 \text{ ps} \leq t_D \leq 5 \text{ ps}$ , where the  $P_{\text{click}}$  exhibited oscillations due to the optical interference of overlapping pulse pairs; the data in this region are enclosed by a dashed square in Fig. 6(a). Based on the measurements reported in Ref. [12], we did not expect the shape of the  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves to depend on the bias current. However, surprisingly the  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves measured with our device became broader as the bias current increased. No significant bias dependence was observed in Ref. [12], probably because the detector in Ref. [12] did not operate in the two-photon detection regime in the current range considered but rather in a mixed regime between single- and two-photon detection regimes.

We fit the experimental  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves with Lorentzians, ignoring data in the range of the optical interference, and normalized each of the curves so that the maximum value of the corresponding Lorentzian fit curve was 2. As a result, the normalized  $P_{\text{click}}$  decayed from a value of  $\sim 2$  to a value of  $\sim 1$  when the time delay was increased. The shape of the  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves can be correlated with the hotspot relaxation dynamics using an intuitive argument. Since the SNSPD operated in the two-photon detection regime, if an optical pulse created only one hotspot, the detector did not click, and the hotspot cooled after some characteristic time. If the optical pulses were separated by time delays longer than the hotspot relaxation time, the detector fired only if a single optical pulse created two overlapping hotspots in the nanowires [see Fig. 1(b)]. However, for time delays shorter than the hotspot relaxation time, two overlapping hotspots could also be created by two subsequent pulses, leading to an increase in  $P_{\text{click}}$ . To be consistent with prior work in the literature [11,12], we defined the hotspot relaxation time ( $t_{\text{HS}}$ ) as the time delay at which this increase in  $P_{\text{click}}$  has decayed to half of its peak value.

The shape of the  $P_{\text{click}}$  vs  $t_D$  curves can be explained more quantitatively in the case of the detector operating in the two-photon detection regime with  $\eta_2 \mu^2 \ll 1$ , so Eq. (1) can be approximated by  $P_{\text{click}}(\mu) \sim \eta_2 \mu^2 / 2$  (see Sec. II A). If the time delay between pulses is longer than the hotspot relaxation time ( $t_D \gg t_{\text{HS}}$ ), then  $P_{\text{click}}$  is approximately equal to the sum of the probabilities from each pulse acting independently:  $P_{\text{click}}(t_D \gg t_{\text{HS}}) \approx \eta_2 \mu^2$ . At short delays, where  $t_D \ll t_{\text{HS}}$  but the two optical pulses do not overlap temporally, these pulses act as a single pulse with twice the mean photon number, doubling the click probability:  $P_{\text{click}}(t_D \ll t_{\text{HS}}) \approx \eta_2 (2\mu)^2 / 2 = 2\eta_2 \mu^2$ . As a result, we expect  $P_{\text{click}}(t_D \ll t_{\text{HS}}) / P_{\text{click}}(t_D \gg t_{\text{HS}}) \approx 2$ , which is in agreement with the data shown in Fig. 6(a).

We quantified  $t_{\text{HS}}$  as the HWHM of the fitting curves. Figure 6(b) shows the  $t_{\text{HS}}$  vs  $I_B$  curve extracted from the data shown in Fig. 6(a). When  $I_B$  was increased from  $I_B = 1.9$  to  $I_B = 3.5 \mu\text{A}$ ,  $t_{\text{HS}}$  increased by one order of magnitude from  $t_{\text{HS}} \sim 80$  to  $t_{\text{HS}} \sim 800 \text{ ps}$ .

### B. Temperature and wavelength dependence of the hotspot relaxation time

To gain insight into the mechanism that caused  $t_{\text{HS}}$  to increase when  $I_B$  was increased, we investigated how the bias dependence of  $t_{\text{HS}}$  changed when changing  $T_B$  and  $\lambda$ . As shown in Fig. 7(a),  $t_{\text{HS}}$  increased when  $T_B$  was increased at a fixed wavelength (squares). As shown in Fig. 7(b),  $t_{\text{HS}}$  decreased when  $\lambda$  was increased at a fixed temperature (squares). The shape of the  $t_{\text{HS}}$  vs  $I_B$  curves measured at different temperatures and wavelengths shows a correlation with the temperature and wavelength dependence of the cutoff current shown in Figs. 4(c) and 4(d). As shown in Fig. 7(c), although the  $t_{\text{HS}}$  vs  $I_B$  curves measured at different temperatures and wavelengths differ significantly, the  $t_{\text{HS}}$  vs  $I_B / I_{\text{co}}$  curves (squares) closely



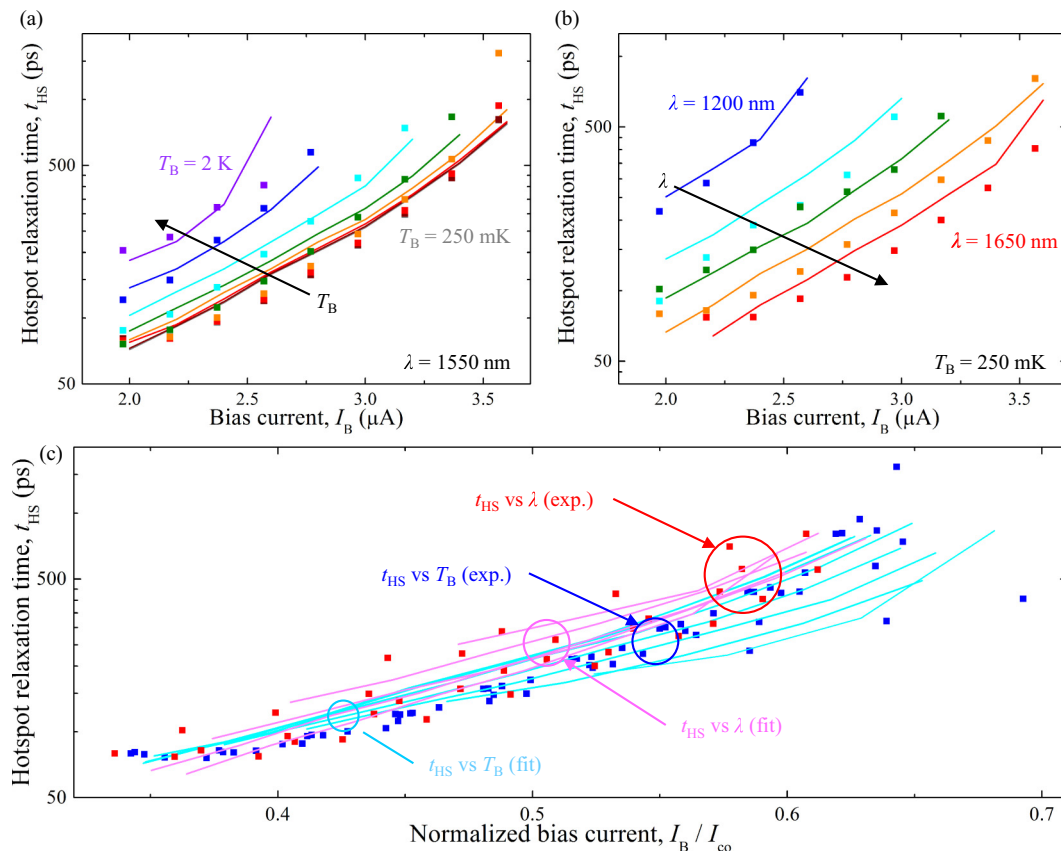


FIG. 7. (a) Experimental  $t_{HS}$  vs  $I_B$  curves measured at different bath temperatures (squares) and fitting curves (lines). The bath temperatures were  $T_B = 0.25$  K (gray), 0.5 K (dark red, overlapping with gray), 0.75 K (red), 1 K (orange), 1.25 K (green), 1.5 K (cyan), 1.75 K (blue), and 2 K (violet). The excitation wavelength was  $\lambda = 1550$  nm. The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $T_B$ . (b) Experimental  $t_{HS}$  vs  $I_B$  curves measured at different wavelengths (squares) and fitting curves (lines). The excitation wavelengths were  $\lambda = 1200$  nm (blue), 1350 nm (cyan), 1450 nm (green), 1550 nm (orange), and 1650 nm (red). The bath temperature was  $T_B = 250$  mK. The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $\lambda$ . (c) Blue squares (cyan lines): experimental (simulated)  $t_{HS}$  vs normalized bias current measured at different temperatures ( $T_B = 0.25$ –2 K) and fixed wavelength ( $\lambda = 1550$  nm) as shown in panel (a). Red squares (magenta lines): experimental (simulated)  $t_{HS}$  vs normalized bias current measured at different wavelengths ( $\lambda = 1200$ –1650 nm) and fixed bath temperature ( $T_B = 250$  mK) as shown in panel (b). The bias currents of the curves measured at each temperature and wavelength were normalized by the corresponding cutoff currents from Fig. 4. Note that the ordinate axis of all the graphs is on a logarithmic scale.

follow the same trend, indicating a correlation between hotspot dynamics and single-photon sensitivity.

## IV. DISCUSSION

### A. Theoretical model

We have developed a theoretical model for the bias dependence of  $t_{HS}$  in which QP recombination is the dominant hotspot relaxation mechanism and QP diffusion is ignored. Since neglecting QP diffusion is in contrast with the traditional theory of hotspot dynamics [1,20–22], our model provides insight into the physics of nonequilibrium superconductivity in disordered films. Our model solves the kinetic equation for a current-carrying superconductor, assuming a dirty superconductor model and including strong disorder-enhanced electron-electron scattering. Here, we give a brief outline of the model and its predictions. The full description of our approach is given in a separate theory paper [19], which includes details of: (1) the method for calculating the relaxation of a nonequilibrium state in a current-carrying superconductor

with changing temperature, order parameter, and spectrum of elementary excitations, and (2) the procedure we used to fit the experimental data. Our model quantitatively reproduces the experimentally observed decrease in  $t_{HS}$  when decreasing the bias current, decreasing the bath temperature, and increasing the excitation wavelength. Furthermore, our model provides an estimate for the  $t_{HS}$  of NbN close the experimental values [11,12,23] (see Sec. IV C).

A few picoseconds after the absorption of a photon, a nonequilibrium distribution of QPs is created through electron-phonon and electron-electron scattering [1]. Our model neglects this initial evolution of the distributions of QPs and phonons because it is expected to occur on much shorter time scales than the experimental values of  $t_{HS}$ . We thus assumed that the absorption of a photon (at time zero) instantly produces a hotspot in which the QP temperature ( $T_{QP}$ ) is higher than the bath temperature ( $T_B$ ). We modeled the hotspot as extending across the entire width and thickness of the nanowires as shown in Fig. 1. This picture of the hotspot is consistent with the conclusions of Ref. [24]. We also assumed

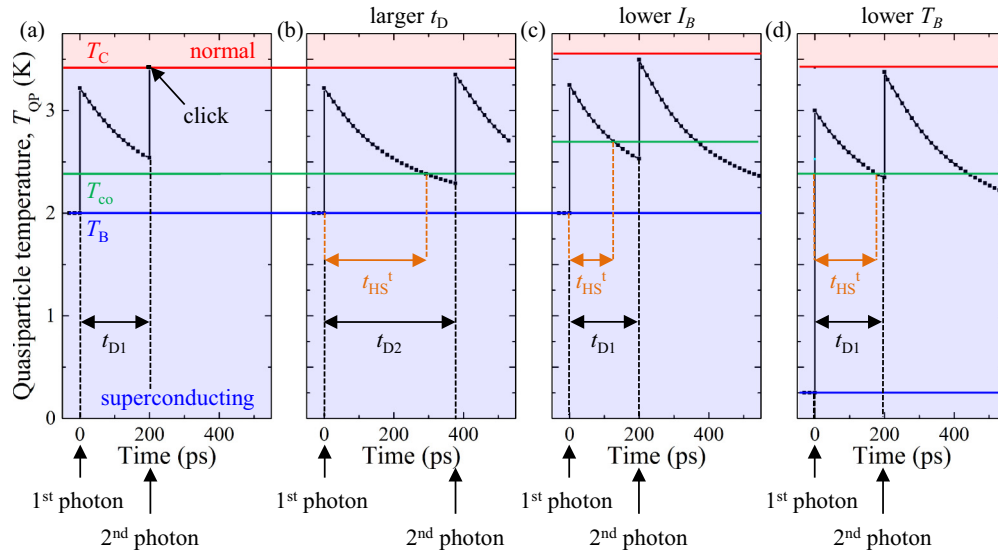


FIG. 8. (a) Simulated time evolution of  $T_{QP}$  (black squares) after absorption of two subsequent photons at 0 s and  $t_{D1} = 200$  ps. The parameters of the simulation are:  $T_B = 2$  K,  $T_C = 3.4$  K,  $I_B = 2.4 \mu\text{A}$ , and  $\lambda = 1500$  nm. The blue line represents the bath temperature  $T_B$ , the red line represents the critical temperature  $T_C$ , and the green line represents a cutoff temperature of  $T_{co} = 2.4$  K. The range of temperatures for which the hotspot is superconducting is colored in blue; the range for which the hotspot is normal (resistive) is colored in red. The simulations were performed assuming a critical temperature at zero bias current of 4.5 K. (b) Simulated time evolution of  $T_{QP}$  for the same parameters as in panel (a), except for a longer delay time  $t_{D2} = 375$  ps. The theoretical hotspot relaxation time is  $t_{HS}^t = 310$  ps. (c) Simulated time evolution of  $T_{QP}$  for the same parameters as in panel (a), except for a lower bias current  $I_B = 2 \mu\text{A}$ . The theoretical hotspot relaxation time decreases to  $t_{HS}^t = 125$  ps. (d) Simulated time evolution of  $T_{QP}$  for the same parameters as in panel (a), except for a lower bath temperature  $T_B = 0.25$  K. The theoretical hotspot relaxation time decreases to  $t_{HS}^t = 110$  ps. The orange arrows highlight the theoretical hotspot relaxation time ( $t_{HS}^t$ ).

that the hotspot maintains a fixed length ( $l_{HS} \sim 100$  nm, see Appendix A) throughout the relaxation process. Although QP diffusion may play a significant role in establishing the hotspot size shortly after photon absorption [20–22], the experimental values of  $t_{HS}$  are consistent with the assumption that QP diffusion does not play a major role in thermalizing the QP system during further cooling of the hotspot. Neglecting QP diffusion is against expectations based on a linear diffusion model (which assumes that the thermal conductivity of the QPs is independent of temperature) and the experimentally measured value of the diffusion coefficient of WSi in the normal state ( $D = 0.75 \text{ cm}^2/\text{s}$ , see Appendix B). However, two factors are likely to play a significant role in limiting the effect of QP diffusion during thermalization: (1) QP diffusion can be described more accurately by a nonlinear model, which assumes that the thermal conductivity of the QPs depends on temperature in the hotspot and predicts substantially slower diffusion than the linear model; and (2) strong disorder in the nanowire results in large local fluctuations of the order parameter [25], which may enhance Andreev reflections in the thermalized distribution of QPs and restrict the expansion of the hotspot.

We have used our model to simulate the time evolution of  $T_{QP}$  after the absorption of two subsequent photons under a variety of conditions (changing  $t_D$ ,  $I_B$ , and  $T_B$ ). As shown in Fig. 8(a), after absorption of the first photon,  $T_{QP}$  instantly increases from  $T_B$  to the excitation temperature ( $T_{ex}$ ) and then starts relaxing back toward  $T_B$ . When the second photon is absorbed (after a delay time of  $t_{D1}$ ),  $T_{QP}$  exceeds the critical temperature ( $T_C$ ) at this bias current, and the hotspot switches to the normal state, resulting in an output pulse. Figure 8(b)

shows the time evolution of  $T_{QP}$  for the same conditions as in Fig. 8(a), except for a longer delay time ( $t_{D2} > t_{D1}$ ). In this case, absorption of the second photon does not cause  $T_{QP}$  to exceed  $T_C$ , and no click is produced. We defined a cutoff temperature ( $T_{co}$ ) as the lowest QP temperature at which absorption of the second photon causes a click ( $T_{QP} = T_C$ ). We defined the theoretical hotspot relaxation time ( $t_{HS}^t$ ) as the time required for  $T_{QP}$  to reach  $T_{co}$ .

Our model neglects any inhomogeneities in the device properties and fluctuations in the detection and relaxation processes. Our model also assumes that even minimal spatial overlap between two hotspots [see Fig. 1(b)] can produce a click if  $t_D \leq t_{HS}^t$  and no click if  $t_D > t_{HS}^t$ . Therefore, the  $P_{click}$  vs  $t_D$  curves predicted by the model have sharp rectangular profiles, in contrast to the Lorentzian profiles observed in the experimental data shown in Fig. 6(a). A similarly idealized model of single-photon detection [20] predicts  $PCR$  vs  $I_B$  curves with steplike shapes, in contrast to the sigmoidal shapes observed experimentally, as shown in Figs. 4(a) and 4(b). We expect that more sophisticated models that account for inhomogeneities and fluctuations will better match experimental results.

### B. Comparison to WSi data

The theoretical model we developed provides an interpretation of the experimental results shown in Figs. 6 and 7. Based on our model, we can attribute the bias dependence of hotspot relaxation shown in Fig. 6 to the increase in  $T_{co}$  when  $I_B$  is decreased. As shown in Fig. 4(a), the switching current of the detector increased when  $T_B$  was decreased,

which implies that the critical temperature of the nanowire increased when  $I_B$  was decreased (see also Fig. 3(a) in Ref. [19]). As shown in Fig. 8(c), at lower bias current the critical temperature increased, leading to a significant increase in  $T_{co}$ . The excitation temperature and the relaxation transient of  $T_{QP}$  are not significantly affected by the change in bias current. Therefore, if  $I_B$  is decreased,  $T_{QP}$  relaxes from  $T_{ex}$  to  $T_{co}$  in a shorter time, in agreement with the results in Fig. 6.

The dependence of  $t_{HS}$  on  $T_B$  shown in Fig. 7(a) can be attributed to the temperature dependence of the relaxation rate of  $T_{QP}$ . As shown in Fig. 8(d), although  $T_B$  does not affect  $T_{co}$ ,  $T_B$  affects  $T_{ex}$  and the relaxation transient of  $T_{QP}$ . Our model predicts that: (1) at lower bath temperature,  $T_{ex}$  is lower, and (2) the relaxation rate of  $T_{QP}$  is higher when  $T_{QP}$  is further away from  $T_B$  (the electron relaxation rate in normal metals shows similar behavior [26]). Consequently,  $t_{HS}^1$  decreases when the bath temperature is decreased, in agreement with the experimental results in Fig. 7(a).

We can attribute the dependence on  $\lambda$  shown in Fig. 7(b) to the dependence of the excitation and cutoff temperatures on the photon energy. According to our model, with longer-wavelength photons: (1) the increase in  $T_{QP}$  after absorption of a photon ( $T_{ex}-T_B$ ) is smaller; and (2)  $T_{co}$  is higher because the temperature difference  $T_C-T_{co}$  is proportional to the photon energy. At longer excitation wavelengths,  $T_{ex}$  is lower and  $T_{co}$  is higher, so  $T_{QP}$  decreases from  $T_{ex}$  to  $T_{co}$  more quickly, in agreement with the experimental results shown in Fig. 7(b).

The solid curves in Fig. 7 show fits to the experimental data (squares) calculated with our model. We fit all the experimental data in Fig. 7(a) using four fitting parameters: (1) the phonon bottleneck parameter  $\gamma = \tau_{esc}/\tau_{ph-e}$ , where  $\tau_{esc}$  is the phonon escape time to the substrate and  $\tau_{ph-e}$  is the phonon-electron scattering time; (2) the characteristic quasiparticle time of WSi,  $\tau_0$  (as defined in Ref. [27]); (3) the energy deposition factor  $\delta = \chi/\varepsilon_c$ , where  $\chi = E_{ex}/E_\lambda$  is the photon yield, which we defined as the ratio of the energy deposited in the hotspot after the absorption of the photon ( $E_{ex}$ ) to the photon energy ( $E_\lambda$ ), and  $\varepsilon_c$  is the energy of the condensate in the hotspot volume; and (4) a temperature offset ( $\Delta T_B$ ), which we defined as the difference between the simulated and the experimental bath temperatures. The values of the fitting parameters are as follows:  $\gamma = 0.3$ ,  $\tau_0 = 994$  ps,  $\delta = 325$  meV $^{-1}$ , and  $\Delta T_B = 0.5$  K. The fitting value of  $\gamma$  indicates that nonequilibrium phonons could be reabsorbed by the condensate and the QPs before escaping into the substrate, slowing down the recombination. The fitting value of  $\tau_0$  is commensurate with the characteristic quasiparticle time of materials with order parameters similar to WSi [27]. The fitting value of  $\delta$  indicates that only a small fraction ( $\chi = 0.26$ ) of the photon energy was deposited into the electronic system, which is likely due to: (1) the energy partition between QPs and non-pair-breaking phonons and (2) the loss of athermal phonons [28]. The temperature offset of 0.5 K indicates that the detector may not have been at the base temperature of the refrigerator, possibly due to the laser heating the detector. The fits deviated from the experimental data at larger bias currents because at high bias currents the cutoff temperature  $T_{co}$  was only marginally higher than  $T_B$  and the description of nonequilibrium phonon distribution developed

in our model [19] may not have been accurate in those conditions.

We fit all of the experimental data in Fig. 7(b) using only three fitting parameters:  $\gamma = 0.3$ ,  $\tau_0 = 878$  ps, and  $\delta = 325$  meV $^{-1}$ . These values are consistent with those used to fit the data in Fig. 7(a).

Our model can also accurately predict the temperature and wavelength dependence of  $I_{co}$ . Using the values of the fitting parameters obtained from the fits shown in Figs. 7(a) and 7(b), we could reproduce the shape of the experimental  $I_{co}$  vs  $T_B$  and  $I_{co}$  vs  $\lambda$  curves in Figs. 4(c) and 4(d) (see Fig. 11 in Ref. [19]). Figure 7(c) shows the experimental and simulated  $t_{HS}$  vs  $I_B/I_{co}$  curves at different temperatures and wavelengths. The four families of curves closely follow the same trend. Since  $I_{co}$  is expected to scale in the same way as the current at which the SNSPD switches from the two-photon to the single-photon detection regime [19], the trend shown in Fig. 7(c) suggests that the increase in hotspot relaxation time when the bias current approaches  $I_{co}$  correlates to an increase in the single-photon sensitivity of the nanowires. The correlation between the hotspot dynamics and SNSPD sensitivity is discussed in detail in Ref. [19].

### C. Comparison to NbN data

We also used our model to reproduce the data reported in Refs. [11,12] for NbN nanowires. We obtained  $t_{HS}^1 = 20$  ps for  $I_B/I_{SW} = 0.5$ , in agreement with the experimental values [11,12] by assuming: (1) NbN on sapphire as in Ref. [12] because of the known material parameters; (2) excitation wavelength  $\lambda = 1064$  nm as in Ref. [12]; (3)  $\gamma = 0.6$  (following Ref. [23], which reports on NbN films of similar thicknesses on sapphire substrates); (4)  $\delta = 130$  meV $^{-1}$ ; and (5)  $\tau_0 = 104$  ps. Since the energy gap of NbN is a factor of  $\sim 2.5$  larger than that of WSi, assuming  $\delta = 130$  meV $^{-1}$  and the same hotspot volume in WSi and NbN nanowires, we estimated  $\chi_{NbN}/\chi_{WSi} \sim 1.9$ . The larger photon yield of NbN with respect to WSi is consistent with the higher phonon bottleneck parameter of NbN ( $\gamma_{NbN} = 0.6$  [23],  $\gamma_{WSi} = 0.3$ ), resulting in lower loss of athermal phonons. The assumption that  $\tau_0 \sim 100$  ps is based on the scaling of the characteristic quasiparticle time with the critical temperature [27]:  $\tau_0^{-1} \sim T_C^3$ . Provided that the electron-phonon constants and Debye frequencies in NbN and WSi are close, for NbN:  $\tau_{0,NbN} \approx (T_{C,WSi}/T_{C,NbN})^3 \cdot \tau_{0,WSi} \approx 0.1 \cdot \tau_{0,WSi}$ . Table I summarizes the parameters of our model and the values we used to fit the data in Figs. 7(a) and 7(b) and in Refs. [11,12].

Hotspot relaxation in current-carrying NbN nanowires has been measured at a single [11] or a few bias currents (0.48–0.55  $I_{SW}$ ) [12], probably because the detectors used in Refs. [11,12] operated in the two-photon detection regime for only a narrow bias range. By contrast, our WSi SNSPD operated in the two-photon regime over a large bias range (0.2–0.4  $I_{SW}$ ), which allowed us to study the bias dependence of  $t_{HS}$ . Our estimate of  $t_{HS}$  in NbN indicates that our model may be of use in simulating NbN devices, but a full detailed comparison of hotspot dynamics in NbN and WSi will have to await further bias-dependent experimental data.

TABLE I. Summary of the parameters for the hotspot relaxation model [29].

| Symbol        | Description                       | WSi [Fig. 7(a)]       | WSi [Fig. 7(b)]       | NbN (Refs. [11,12])   |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| $\gamma$      | Phonon bottleneck parameter       | 0.3                   | 0.3                   | 0.6                   |
| $\tau_0^{**}$ | Characteristic quasiparticle time | 994 ps                | 878 ps                | 104 ps                |
| $\delta$      | Energy deposition factor          | 325 meV <sup>-1</sup> | 325 meV <sup>-1</sup> | 130 meV <sup>-1</sup> |
| $\Delta T_B$  | Temperature offset                | 0.5 K                 | 0*                    | 0*                    |

\*Not used as a fitting parameter.

\*\*Calculated assuming that the depairing current was equal to  $I_{SW}$ .

#### D. Normal-metal limit

To offer further insight into the QP relaxation process described by our model [19], we may draw a parallel with the thermalization of a nonequilibrium distribution of electrons in a normal metal. Such a comparison is a great oversimplification that misses many important details. Nonetheless, it allows a qualitative understanding of the origin of some of the effects we observed experimentally (see Sec. III).

In the normal-metal limit, we neglected diffusion, coherence factors in collision integrals, and the time derivative of the order parameter. In this limit, the expression for energy relaxation derived in Ref. [26] can be written as

$$C \frac{\partial T}{\partial t} = -K(T^5 - T_B^5), \quad (2)$$

where  $C$  is the electronic heat capacity and  $K$  is the thermal conductance. In the limit  $T \gg T_B$  and assuming  $C$  to be proportional to  $T$ , Eq. (2) can be written as

$$\frac{\partial \bar{T}}{\partial \bar{t}} = \bar{T}^4. \quad (3)$$

Equation (3) can be interpreted as a simplified form of Eq. (21) in Ref. [19]. The top bars in this expression denote that temperature is in units of  $T_C$  and time is in units of the characteristic electron-phonon relaxation time. The solution of Eq. (3) is  $\bar{T}(t) = \bar{T}_{ex}(\bar{T}_{ex}^3 \bar{t} + 1)^{-1/3}$ , and the predicted hotspot relaxation time is as follows:

$$\bar{t}_{HS}^1 = [\bar{T}_{co}^{-3}(I_B, \lambda) - \bar{T}_{ex}^{-3}(I_B, T_B)]. \quad (4)$$

The dependence of  $\bar{t}_{HS}^1$  on  $\bar{T}_{co}(I_B, \lambda)$  in Eq. (4) is consistent with the significant decrease in  $t_{HS}^1$  with decreasing bias current shown in Figs. 6 and 8(c). The dependence of  $\bar{t}_{HS}^1$  on  $T_B$  through  $\bar{T}_{ex}$  is consistent with the decrease in  $t_{HS}^1$  with decreasing bath temperature shown in Figs. 7(a) and 8(d).

#### V. SUMMARY

We observed that the hotspot relaxation time of a superconducting nanowire can be increased by increasing the bias current, the temperature, or the photon energy. We developed a model that explains and quantitatively reproduces all of the experimental data. The effect we discovered provides insight into nonequilibrium superconductivity and has important implications for superconducting detectors. For example, our results suggest that the quasiparticle relaxation time of MKIDs based on disordered materials [3,30] may be increased by dc biasing the MKID inductor, which would increase the MKID sensitivity. Furthermore, the shortest hotspot relaxation time measured in our WSi SNSPD is a factor of  $\sim 4$  longer than that measured with NbN (15–30 ps [1,11,12,23]), indicating a

significant difference in material properties that was not well understood and not previously predicted. The longer  $t_{HS}$  of WSi may limit the maximum count rate of WSi SNSPDs to a lower value than NbN SNSPDs due to latching [31,32] or afterpulsing [33].

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#### APPENDIX A: HOTSPOT SIZE ESTIMATE

The single-photon system detection efficiency can be decomposed as

$$\eta_1 = \eta_{\text{couple}} \eta_{\text{absorb}} \eta_{\text{QE1}}, \quad (A1)$$

where  $\eta_{\text{couple}}$  is the coupling efficiency,  $\eta_{\text{absorb}}$  is the absorption efficiency, and  $\eta_{\text{QE1}}$  is the single-photon internal quantum efficiency.  $\eta_{\text{couple}}$  is the probability that a photon in the guided mode of the fiber impinges on the active area of the detector.  $\eta_{\text{absorb}}$  is the probability that a photon incident on the active area is absorbed in the detector.  $\eta_{\text{QE1}}$  is the probability that one photon absorbed in the detector triggers a response pulse.

Similarly, the two-photon efficiency can be decomposed as

$$\eta_2 = \eta_{\text{couple}}^2 \eta_{\text{absorb}}^2 \eta_{\text{overlap}} \eta_{\text{QE2}}. \quad (A2)$$

If two photons are in the fiber, the product  $\eta_{\text{couple}}^2 \eta_{\text{absorb}}^2$  represents the probability that both photons are coupled to and absorbed in the active area of the detector, creating two hotspots.  $\eta_{\text{overlap}}$  is the probability that these two hotspots overlap each other, and  $\eta_{\text{QE2}}$  is the probability that these two overlapping hotspots lead to an output voltage pulse.

We assumed that: (1) at sufficiently high bias currents, the single- and two-photon detection efficiencies plateau to values that we label  $\eta_1^{\text{plateau}}$  and  $\eta_2^{\text{plateau}}$ ; (2)  $\eta_1^{\text{plateau}} \approx \eta_2^{\text{plateau}} \approx 1$  (at present, the most precise lower bound for  $\eta_1^{\text{plateau}}$  is  $\sim 93\%$  [16]); and (3) the hotspot size is independent of bias current. Based on our assumptions, the overlap probability can be estimated as

$$\eta_{\text{overlap}} \approx \frac{\eta_2^{\text{plateau}}}{(\eta_1^{\text{plateau}})^2}. \quad (A3)$$

This probability can be related to the size of each hotspot relative to the active area of the detector. Treating the detector as a series of independent wires, we calculated



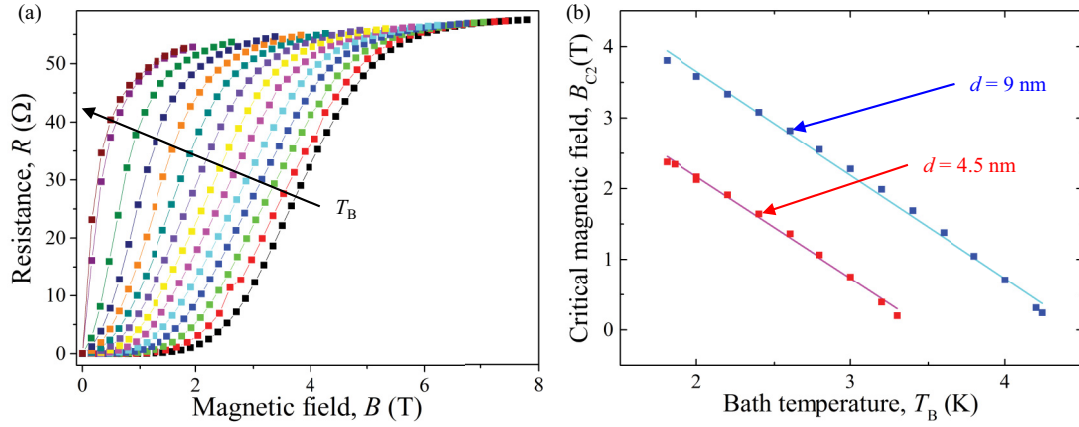


FIG. 9. (a)  $R$  vs  $B$  curves for 9-nm WSi films at different temperatures  $T_B = 4.5$ – $1.8$  K. The black arrow indicates the direction of increasing  $T_B$ . (b) Squares: measured temperature dependence of the critical magnetic field for  $d = 4.5$  nm (red) and 9 nm (blue). Solid lines: linear fits to the data. The slopes are  $-1.44$  T K and  $-1.46$  T K for the 4.5- and 9-nm-thick films.

the probability that any two hotspots overlap, under the assumption that each hotspot is rectangular with a width of 130 nm (the nanowire width) and length  $l_{HS}$ . From a series of measurements similar to those in Fig. 3, we estimated that  $\eta_{\text{overlap}} \approx 5.4 \times 10^{-4}$  and  $l_{HS} \approx 100$  nm for an excitation wavelength of  $\lambda = 1550$  nm.

#### APPENDIX B: DIFFUSIVITY OF WSi

The temperature dependence of the upper critical magnetic field ( $B_{C2}$ ) provides information on material properties of thin films. The electron diffusion coefficient ( $D$ ) is obtained from the slope of the  $B_{C2}$  vs  $T_B$  curve. In the limit of a dirty superconductor, the electron diffusivity  $D$  can be expressed as follows [34]:

$$D = \frac{1.097[\text{cm}^2 \text{sec}^{-1} \text{TK}^{-1}]}{\left[-\frac{dB_{C2}(T_B)}{dT}\right]_{T_B=T_c}}. \quad (\text{B1})$$

We measured the temperature dependence of the upper critical magnetic field of two WSi films of different thicknesses  $d = 4.5$  and 9 nm. We measured the resistance ( $R$ ) of the films as a function of the magnetic field ( $B$ ) applied perpendicular to the surface of the films at different temperatures. Figure 9(a) shows the  $R$  vs  $B$  curves measured at different temperatures. We defined  $B_{C2}$  as the field at which the resistance of the films became half of the normal state value. Figure 9(b) shows the  $B_{C2}$  vs  $T_B$  curves for the 9- and 4.5-nm-thick films.

The calculated values for WSi electronic diffusion coefficient based on Eq. (B1) are 0.76 and 0.75  $\text{cm}^2/\text{s}$  for 4.5- and 9-nm-thick films. We assumed that the susceptibility of WSi was similar to that of tungsten ( $6.8 \times 10^{-5}$ ). A linear extrapolation of the measured  $B_{C2}(T)$  down to  $T = 0$  K can be related to the Ginzburg-Landau coherence length [ $\xi_{GL}(0)$ ], at  $T = 0$  K from the following equation [34]:

$$B_{C2}(T) = \frac{\Phi_0}{2\pi\xi(T)^2}, \quad (\text{B2})$$

where  $\Phi_0 = h/2e$  is the magnetic-flux quantum and  $e$  is the electron charge. Using Eq. (B2), we extracted coherence length values of 8.09 and 7.08 nm for the 4.5- and 9-nm-thick WSi films. However, in the limit of a dirty superconductor, a linear extrapolation of the measured  $B_{C2}(T)$  down to  $T = 0$  K overestimates the real upper critical field at zero temperature [34] and consequently underestimates the superconducting coherence length. A more realistic value of  $B_{C2}(0)$  is given by [35]

$$B_{C2}(0) = 0.69T_c \left[ \frac{dB_{C2}(T)}{dT} \right]_{T=T_c}. \quad (\text{B3})$$

Using this value of  $B_{C2}(0)$  in Eq. (B3) we calculated a coherence length of 9.72 and 8.51 nm for the 4.5- and 9 nm-thick WSi films.

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