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Controlling hysteresis in superconducting constrictions with a resistive shunt

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Abstract. We demonstrate control of the thermal hysteresis in superconducting constrictions by adding a resistive shunt. In order to prevent thermal relaxation oscillations, the shunt resistor is placed in close vicinity of the constriction, making the inductive current-switching time smaller than the thermal equilibration time. We investigate the current-voltage characteristics of the same constriction with and without the shunt-resistor. The widening of the hysteresis-free temperature range is explained on the basis of a simple model.

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1. Introduction

A superconducting weak-link (WL), such as a constriction, between two bulk superconductors is of interest for its Josephson junction-like properties and subsequent application to micron size superconducting quantum interference devices (μ -SQUIDs) [1, 2]. The latter can be used in probing magnetism at small scales [3, 4, 5, 6]. Hysteresis present in current-voltage characteristics (IVCs) is a limiting factor in WL-based SQUIDs. In a hysteretic IVC when the current is ramped up from zero, the device typically switches to a non-zero voltage state at the critical current I_c . The subsequent current ramp-down gives a switching to zero-voltage state at a smaller current, called re-trapping current I_r . Hysteresis in IVCs is seen at low temperatures and disappears above a crossover temperature T_h as I_c and I_r meet [7, 8, 9]. In a conventional tunnel-barrier type Josephson-junction, hysteresis arises from large junction capacitance and can be eliminated by adding a shunt-resistor in parallel to the junction [10, 1]. The effect of the shunt resistor on nano-wire based WL devices was modeled recently using resistively and capacitively shunted junction (RCSJ) model with an effective capacitive time [11]. The hysteresis in similar devices is well understood using the thermal model [12]. The hysteresis in WLs is due to local Joule-heating [13, 14], which gives rise to a self-sustained resistive hot-spot in the WL region, even below I_c .

Eliminating thermal hysteresis in WLs has been the subject of intense research in the past years. In most cases [4, 15], combination of the electron beam lithography (EBL) and reactive ion etching (RIE) has been used. Here, the I-V characteristic has been found to be hysteretic till very close to the critical temperature. As an alternative to this method, few groups have explored the focused ion beam (FIB) [6, 16]. Some of their devices showed non-hysteretic behavior down to roughly 5 K, but with reduced critical field. A normal metal shunt directly on top of the constriction [15, 17, 18] has also been tried, but it affects both the superconductivity and thermal properties in a way that depends on the interface transparency. A parallel shunt resistor far away from the WL [19] gives rise to relaxation oscillations due to the large inductive time for switching of the current between the WL and the shunt. The performance of such SQUIDs with a distant shunt-resistor is eventually similar to that of the hysteretic ones [19, 3]. A systematic study of the ability of a parallel shunt in preventing both the thermal runaway and hysteresis is thus highly desirable.

The role of a shunt-resistor can be understood using a simple quasi-static thermal model discussed by Tinkham et al. [12]. In this model, the heat generated in the resistive hot-spot in a long constriction is conducted (only) through electronic conduction to the large electrodes at the end. The thermal conductivity K of the normal metal and superconductor are assumed to be identical and temperature-independent. The re-trapping current is then found to be $I_r(T_b) = I_r(0)\sqrt{1 - T_b/T_c}$ with $I_r(0) = 4\sqrt{KAT_c/LR_n}$. Here R_n is the normal resistance of the constriction of length L and cross-sectional area A , T_b is the bath temperature and T_c is the superconductor critical temperature. From Ginzburg-Landau theory [2] the critical current follows

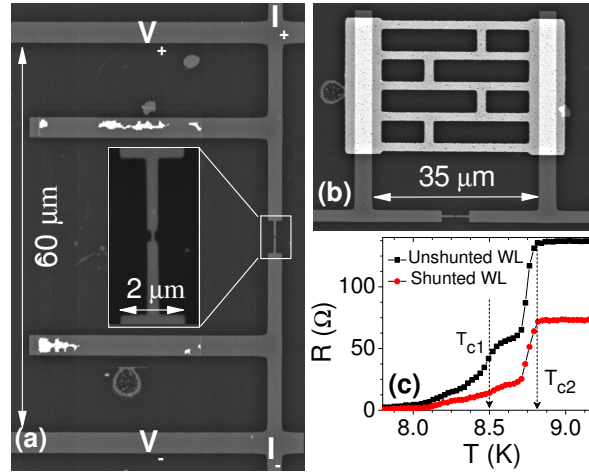


Figure 1. (a) SEM image of the WL device after etching the gold shunt. The inset in (a) shows the zoomed-in SEM image of the WL with patterned width 70 nm and length 150 nm. (b) SEM image of the same device rotated by 90°, before etching the hatch pattern shunt resistance made of gold microwires. (c) Resistance vs temperature (at 0.01 mA bias current) for the shunted and unshunted WLs, showing different transitions at T_{c1} and T_{c2} respectively corresponding to the narrow and the wide leads.

$I_c(T_b) = I_c(0)(1 - T_b/T_c)$ in the regime $T_b > T_c/2$. Thus I_c and I_r cross at a crossover temperature $T_h = T_c[1 - [I_r(0)/I_c(0)]^2]$ [20]. In the presence of a shunt resistor R_s , the bias current is shared between the shunt and the WL, when the latter is resistive. Thus, in $I_r(0)$ expression, $1/R_n$ is replaced by $(1/R_n) + (1/R_s)$. As a result $I_r(0)$ changes to a higher value given by

$$I_{rs}(0) = I_r(0)\sqrt{1 + R_n/R_s}. \quad (1)$$

In contrast, I_c remains unaffected. Hence the crossover temperature decreases and the hysteresis-free temperature range $[T_h, T_c]$ widens thanks to the shunt. For eliminating hysteresis above temperature T , R_s with value less than $R_{sc} = R_n/[\{I_c(T)/I_r(T)\}^2 - 1]$ will be required. The assumed immediate sharing of the bias current between WL and R_s implies a small inductive current-switching time as compared to the thermal equilibration time. The minimum shunt resistor value, R_{sc} , from our simple model can also describe the behavior of shunted nano-wire devices studied by Brenner et al. [11].

In this Letter, we compare the current-voltage characteristics of carefully designed WL devices with (and without) a shunt resistor kept in close vicinity of the WL, thus making the inductive current-switching time smaller than the thermal equilibration time. We observe an increase in the re-trapping current and a widening of the hysteresis-free temperature range thanks to the shunt, which we discuss using the above model.

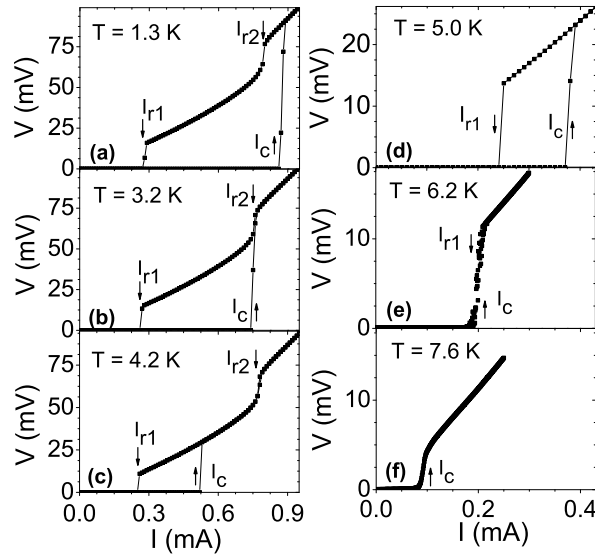


Figure 2. (a) I-V characteristics for the unshunted weak link at a set of different temperatures.

2. Experimental details

Devices were fabricated on Si substrates in two subsequent lithography and e-beam deposition steps as follows: 1) laser lithography of hatch patterned shunt resistor [21] and alignment marks on a photo-resist, 2) deposition and lift-off of a Ti (3 nm)/Au (20 nm) layer, 3) oxygen reactive-ion-etching (RIE) to remove residual resist, 4) deposition of a 31 nm thick Nb-film, 5) aligned electron beam lithography of a PMMA resist of the WL pattern, 6) deposition and lift-off of a 20 nm thick Al-film, 7) etch of Nb with SF₆-RIE, 8) chemical removal of Al. After fully characterizing the shunted device, the Au shunt was etched using a KI-I₂ solution which does not attack Niobium. Electrical transport studies down to 1.3 K were pursued using a closed cycle He-refrigerator [22] with a homemade sample holder that incorporates copper powder filters. The data were recorded using data acquisition cards and homemade analog electronics. Two nominally identical devices demonstrated similar results.

3. Results and Discussions

Fig. 1 shows the electron micrograph and resistance vs temperature of the reported device. The WL [see inset of Fig. 1(a)] as designed has a 150 nm length and a 70 nm width. Narrow leads (width 0.3 μm, length 2.4 μm) with normal resistance $2R_1$, connect symmetrically to the two ends of the WL of normal resistance R_{WL} . Wide leads of width 2 μm connect the narrow leads to the shunt and the voltage probes. Fig. 1(c) shows the measured resistance R versus temperature T before [see Fig. 1(b)] and after [see Fig. 1(a)] etching the Au shunt. For the two cases, R drops from a saturation value

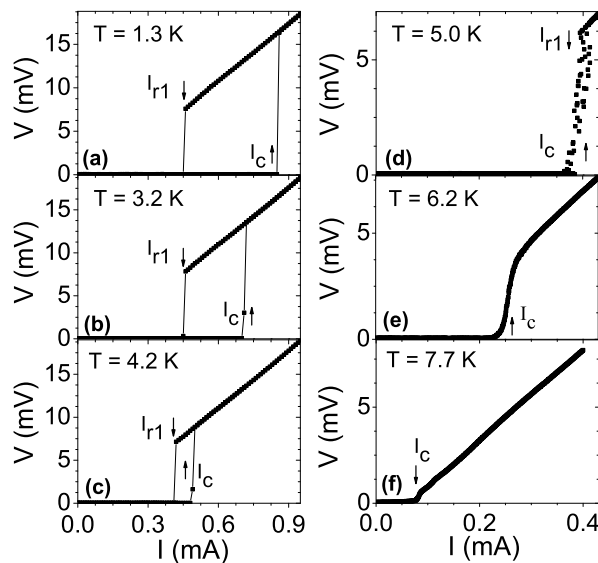


Figure 3. (a) I-V characteristics for the same weak link device with a parallel shunt, at the same set of different temperatures as in Fig. 2.

of 135 or 72 Ω (at 10 K) with two transitions at $T_{c1} = 8.5$ K and $T_{c2} = 8.8$ K. These two critical temperatures are attributed respectively to the narrow-leads and the wide leads. Let us stress that the critical temperatures $T_{c1,2}$ are not affected by the removal of the Au shunt, which confirms that the shunt etching did not damage the niobium pattern. From the resistance drop at T_{c2} for the unshunted device, we find a square resistance $R_{\square} = 3.5 \Omega$ giving a resistivity value of $10.8 \mu\Omega\cdot\text{cm}$ for the Nb film. From the narrow lead resistance and dimensions, we estimate $R_{WL} = 9 \Omega$ and $2R_1 = 56 \Omega$. By comparing the resistances of the two devices just below T_{c2} , we find $R_s = 35.6 \Omega$, which is consistent with separate measurements of Au wires' resistances.

While designing the device, we have kept the shunt-resistor close to the WL to minimize the associated loop-inductance L_{sh} . The inductance of a square loop with sides a and width $b \ll a$, is given by $\frac{2}{\pi}\mu_0 a \ln[\frac{2a}{b}]$ [23]. Using this relation with $a = 20 \mu\text{m}$ and $b = 3 \mu\text{m}$, we estimate the inductance of the loop containing gold shunt hatch pattern and the Nb leads as $L_{sh} = 40$ pH. This gives a inductive-current-switching-time $\tau_L = L_{sh}/(R_s + R_{WL}) \simeq 1$ ps. The heat is transferred to the substrate over a length-scale given by thermal healing length $l_{th} (= \sqrt{Kt/\alpha} = 1.6\mu\text{m})$ [8, 24]. Here t is the film thickness and α is the interface heat loss coefficient. Thus the thermal cooling time is $\tau_T = l_{th}^2/\pi^2 D = ct/\pi^2\alpha$ with $D (=K/c = 1 \text{ cm}^2/\text{s})$ as the diffusion constant and c as the volumetric heat capacity. We thus estimate the thermal time $\tau_T = 2.5$ ns, which is much larger than τ_L . When the WL switches from the superconducting to the resistive state, the current redistribution between the shunt and the WL is thus much faster than the thermal runaway in the device.

Figure 2 shows IVCs of the unshunted device at various temperatures. At low temperatures, sharp voltage jumps and drops are observed at the critical current I_c and

at two re-trapping currents I_{r1} and I_{r2} . The latter two arise from thermal instabilities respectively in the WL plus the narrow leads (I_{r1}) and in the wide leads (I_{r2}) [8]. At 1.3 K, I_c is higher than both I_{r1} and I_{r2} [see Fig. 2(a)]. The IVC slope above I_{r2} is 142 Ω , slightly larger than the normal state value of 135 Ω because of over-heating. At higher temperatures when I_{r2} is smaller and heating less, the slope is 135 Ω . The IVC slope above I_{r1} is 73 Ω , which is close to the combined resistance $R_{WL} + 2R_1$, i.e. 65 Ω . The slightly larger value is due to the spread of the hot-spot into the wide leads. With increasing temperature, I_c crosses I_{r2} near 3.2 K [see Fig. 2(b)] and it merges with I_{r1} near $T_h = 6.25$ K [see Fig. 2(e)]. At higher temperature, the IVC is non-hysteretic and the resistance for $I > I_c$ is 65 Ω , indicating that the WL as well as the narrow leads are resistive.

Figure 3 shows IVCs of the same device but prior to the shunt removal. We observe voltage jumps and drops at I_c and I_{r1} while the second retrapping current I_{r2} is visible only in IVCs with a larger bias current excursion [24]. In the resistive region, the slope is always 22 Ω which corresponds to the parallel combination of the normal resistance of the WL plus the narrow-leads with the shunt, i.e. $(R_s^{-1} + (2R_1 + R_{WL})^{-1})^{-1}$. The critical current I_c magnitude at low temperatures is the same, within the error bars, as that of the unshunted device, confirming that the shunt removal did not damage the WL. Remarkably, the re-trapping current I_{r1} has a higher value as compared to that of the unshunted device. As a result of I_{r1} enhancement, I_c and I_{r1} meet at a lower crossover temperature $T_{hs} = 5$ K in the shunted device, see Fig. 3(d).

We summarize the temperature dependence of I_c , I_{r1} and I_{r2} for both devices in Fig. 4. In every case, the retrapping current I_{r2} nearly follows a square root dependence with the bath temperature [8] extrapolating to zero at T_{c2} . This is consistent with I_{r2} being related to the thermal instability of the wide leads. Between about 3 K and the crossover temperature T_h or T_{hs} , the critical current I_c of both devices decreases linearly with temperature. The extrapolated critical temperature T_c close to 7.2 K is that of the WL itself. In both the devices, the critical current I_c decays markedly slower above T_h or T_{hs} , owing to the proximity effect [8].

The retrapping current I_{r1} follows a similar temperature dependence in the two devices but with a higher magnitude, by a factor of about 1.64, in the shunted device. This factor is similar to that found from Eq. 1, i.e. 1.67, by using $R_s = 35.6$ Ω and $R_n = 2R_1 + R_{WL} = 65$ Ω . A more appropriate model, incorporating the interface heat loss, for our device configuration provides a similar agreement, where the ratio is found to be close to 1.60 [24]. For our devices, both the models give similar agreement [24], as the conduction dominates over interface heat loss because the narrow leads' length is comparable to l_{th} [8]. The two models have significant disagreement when the constriction is much longer than l_{th} [24]. Thanks to the shunt and the related I_{r1} enhancement, the hysteresis-free temperature range has increased from [6.25 K, 8.6 K] to [5 K, 8.6 K], see Fig. 4. For instance, the WL without shunt is hysteretic at 5 K, see Fig. 2(d), while the one with shunt is non-hysteretic, see Fig. 3(d).

The merging of I_c and I_{r1} above T_h is different from our earlier results on unshunted

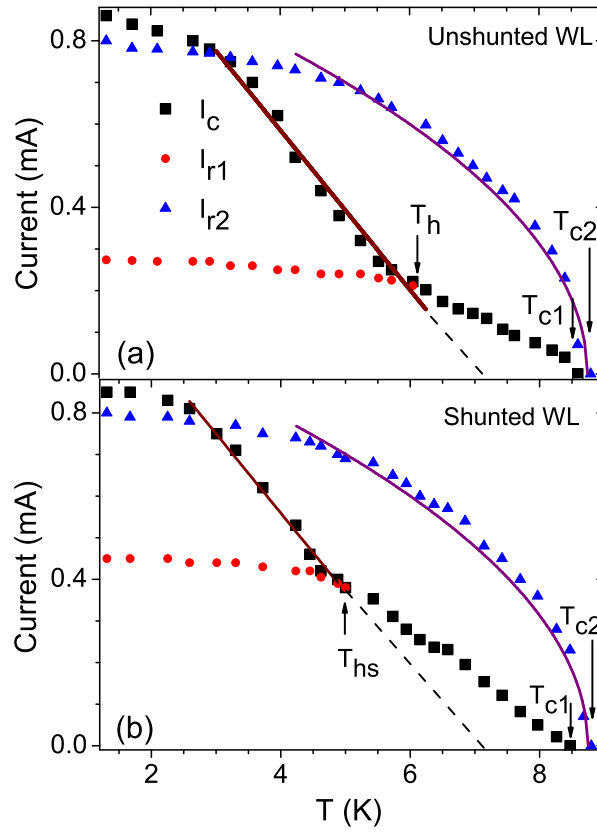


Figure 4. Temperature evolution of I_c , I_{r1} and I_{r2} for (a) an unshunted weak link (WL) and (b) the same WL with a parallel shunt resistor, showing the reduction of crossover temperature in shunted case. The symbols are the data points. The continuous lines are the fits given by (in mA and K) $I_c(T_b) = 0.18(7.2 - T_b)$ and $I_{r2}(T_b) = 0.32(T_{c2} - T_b)^{1/2}$ for both the devices.

μ -SQUIDS [8] where a crossing of the two was seen at T_h . Due to the presence of the SQUID loop, the heat evacuation in the μ -SQUIDS is more efficient. For single WL devices with similar I_c values, the less efficient heat evacuation favors merging over crossing. In fact, just below T_c , where I_c is small, heat evacuation eventually dominates, and we do see distinct signatures of both I_c and I_{r1} in IVCs. We also see large fluctuations in voltage close to T_h and for currents near I_c in both the devices, see Fig. 2(e) and 3(d). From the time-series data we find a bistable telegraphic-like voltage signal in this regime. Thus time averaged voltages in the IVCs show significant fluctuations. Close to the boundary of the bistable regime, more sensitivity to noise is indeed expected.

Finally, let us discuss how we could further increase the re-trapping current and hence expand the hysteresis-free temperature range. Using a lower R_s value will increase I_{r1} further and widen the hysteresis-free temperature range for a given WL device. Nevertheless, this will also reduce the overall normal resistance and result in a lower voltage signal to be measured. The same can also be achieved by using a smaller I_c

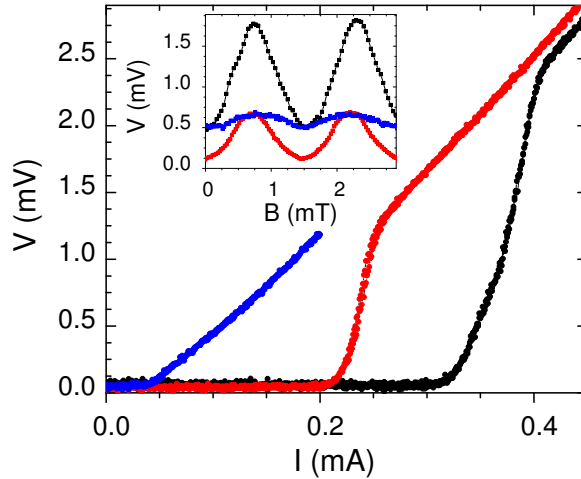


Figure 5. IVCs of a shunted μ -SQUID at 1.3K, 4.5 K, and 6.7 K showing non-hysteretic characteristics. The inset shows the SQUID oscillations at similar temperatures close to the critical current. The voltage oscillation at 6.7K has been enhanced by a factor of 5 for better clarity in large scales.

WL with same R_s value. We have verified this claim in another shunted WL device, with same R_s value and smaller I_c , showing a T_{hs} below 4.2 K. We have also studied a shunted μ -SQUID device, with same R_s value but smaller I_c . The SQUID loop pattern is identical to our earlier work [8] but with the reduced width ($< 50nm$) of the weak link. Figure 5 shows the IVCs of the shunted μ -SQUID at different temperatures, which is found to be non-hysteretic down to 1.3K. In this case I_c reduced significantly after shunt removal, as presumably, it got partially damaged. However, based on the I_c and I_{r1} magnitudes and their temperature dependence, we expect a T_h of around 3K in the unshunted device, while with the shunt we find a T_{hs} below 1.3K. We also see clear SQUID oscillations, see the inset in Fig. 5, establishing the role of the shunt in widening the non-hysteretic temperature range for both the WLs and μ -SQUIDs. In any case, the shunt-resistor has to be kept close enough to the WL, so as to avoid relaxation oscillations, but not too close to cause heat or electron sharing between WL and the shunt, which can affect the WL superconductivity.

4. Conclusions

In summary, we have demonstrated a significant improvement of the hysteretic behavior of superconducting WLs and μ -SQUIDs devices, using a parallel resistive shunt in close vicinity to the WL. As a result of the shunt, the hysteresis-free temperature range is wider. Our results can help to further develop WL-based non-hysteretic devices such as SQUIDs.

Acknowledgements

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