Equilibration of quantum Hall edge states by an Ohmic contact

Artur O. Slobodeniuk,1, 2 Ivan P. Levkivskyi,3, 2 and Eugene V. Sukhorukov

1Département de Physique Théorique, Université de Genève, CH-1211 Genève 4, Switzerland
2Bogolyubov Institute for Theoretical Physics, 14-b Metrolohichna Street, Kiev 03680, Ukraine
3Department of Physics, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

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Ohmic contacts are crucial elements of electron optics that have not received a clear theoretical description yet. We propose a model of an Ohmic contact as a piece of metal of the finite capacitance $C$ attached to a quantum Hall edge. It is shown that charged quantum Hall edge states may have weak coupling to neutral excitations in an Ohmic contact. Consequently, despite being a reservoir of neutral excitations, an Ohmic contact is not able to efficiently equilibrate edge states if its temperature is smaller than $\hbar\Omega_c$, where $\Omega_c$ is the inverse RC time of the contact. This energy scale for a floating contact may become as large as the single-electron charging energy $e^2/C$.

The study of quantum Hall (QH) edge states has a great importance both for theoretical understanding of a strongly correlated matter and for the development of novel quantum devices for electron optics. These chiral 1D states are quantum analogs of the skipping orbits which appear at the edge of a two dimensional electron gas (2DEG) in a strong magnetic field. The fact that the QH edge states behave in many ways similarly to optical beams has triggered several quantum optics-type experiments with electrons [1, 3]. One of the most important elements used to manipulate the edge states in such experiments are the Ohmic contacts. They serve as incoherent sources and detectors of the “electron beams” in experiments on controllable dephasing [2, 3] and controllable energy equilibration of the edge states [4].

Ohmic contacts are created by placing a piece of metal on top of a highly doped region in a semiconductor containing 2DEG. Strong tunneling between the edge states and the states in this doped region provides a low resistance contact with external circuits. Ohmic contacts are very complicated electron systems from the theoretical point of view, and they are still the least understood elements of electron optics in spite of their widespread usage. A simplification arises in the regime of integer QH effect where edge states are commonly described using the free fermion picture [3]. Based on this picture, an idealized concept of a so-called “voltage probe” [6] has been proposed to describe floating Ohmic contacts in this regime. Voltage probe is a reservoir of electrons, which absorbs all incoming electron excitations and emits new electron states with the equilibrium Fermi distribution and the electrochemical potential that takes into account the current conservation law. However, it has been shown recently [7, 11], in the context of the experiments [2, 4], that even at integer filling factors the free-fermion description of the edge states is not always correct, and that the effective theory [12] considering the edge states as collective boson excitations is a more appropriate approach. This observation calls to reconsider the applicability of the concept of a voltage probe.

It may appear that this concept finds a theoretical justification even at the effective theory level. Indeed, it has been argued that strong tunnel coupling at a floating Ohmic contact leads to equilibration [10] and an effective elongation [14] of the QH edge channel. Therefore it seems to be natural to consider the edge channel being effectively cut into two separate parts (see Fig. 1) carrying orthogonal fermions, i.e., with zero overlap. However, edge states carry the electric charge, which an Ohmic contact may have a limited ability to accommodate. To be more specific, considering an Ohmic contact as a three-dimensional piece of metal of the size $L$, the level spacing of neutral excitations scales as $1/L^3$. It is typically small enough to consider an Ohmic contact to be a reservoir of such excitations. On the other hand, the characteristic frequency of the charge response of an Ohmic contact scales as $1/C$, where its capacitance $C$
Floating contact and boson scattering theory.—We model an Ohmic contact connecting incoming and outgoing QH edge states at filling factor $\nu = 1$ as shown in Fig. 2 and explained in the figure caption. The low-energy physics of the QH edge states [12] is described by a set of scalar boson fields $\phi_\sigma(x,t)$, where $\sigma = \pm$. The charge density operator and the current operator for incoming, $\sigma = -$, and outgoing, $\sigma = +$, states have the form $\rho_\sigma = (e/2\pi) \partial_t \phi_\sigma$, and $j_\sigma = -(e/2\pi) \partial_x \phi_\sigma$. These boson fields satisfy the following canonical commutation relations:

$$[\partial_x \phi_\sigma(x,t), \phi_{\sigma'}(y,t)] = 2\pi i \sigma \delta_{\sigma \sigma'} \delta(x-y).$$ (1)

The system can be described by the Hamiltonian containing two parts. The first part generates the dynamics of the incoming and outgoing edge channels [16], while the second term describes the charging energy of the Ohmic contact of a finite size:

$$\mathcal{H} = \frac{hv_F}{4\pi} \sum_\sigma \int_{-\infty}^\infty dx (\partial_x \phi_\sigma)^2 + \frac{Q^2}{2C},$$ (2a)

$$Q = \int_{-\infty}^0 dx e^{x/v_F} [\rho_+(x) + \rho_-(x)].$$ (2b)

Here $Q$ is an operator of the total charge accumulated at the Ohmic contact, and $\epsilon$ is a small regularization parameter, roughly given by the decay rate of neutral excitations inside the contact [17].

Using commutation relations (1) and the Hamiltonian [2], we obtain the equations of motion for the incoming and outgoing state:

$$\sigma \partial_t \phi_\sigma(x,t) + v_F \partial_x \phi_\sigma(x,t) = -\frac{e}{\hbar c} Q(t) e^{x/v_F} \theta(-x).$$ (3)

These equations have to be accompanied with the boundary conditions

$$\partial_t \phi_+(-\infty,t) = -(2\pi/e) j_c(t),$$

$$\partial_t \phi_-(0,t) = (2\pi/e) j_{in}(t),$$

where $j_{in}$ is the current flowing into the Ohmic contact, while $j_c$ describes equilibrium fluctuations of the neutral mode with the reservoir temperature $T_c$, originating from the Ohmic contact. Solving the equations (3) with the boundary conditions [4], one can relate the outgoing current $j_{out}(t) = -(e/2\pi) \partial_t \phi_+(0,t)$ to the incoming current $j_{in}$, as illustrated in Fig. 2.

In order to solve Eqs. (3), we apply the Fourier transform $\phi_\sigma(x,\omega) = \int dt e^{i\omega t} \phi_\sigma(x,t)$ and rewrite them as ordinary first order differential equations. The general solution for $x \leq 0$ then reads

$$\phi_\sigma(x,\omega) = \phi_\sigma(\omega) e^{i\sigma \omega x/v_F} + \frac{\sigma}{R_q C} \sum_{\sigma'} \phi_{\sigma'}(\omega) e^{i\sigma' \omega x/v_F},$$ (4)

where $\phi_\sigma(\omega)$ are constants of integration, and $R_q = 2\pi \hbar e^2$ is the resistance quantum. Using the boundary conditions [4], we find the fields $\phi_+(x,t)$, and then, the outgoing current

$$j_{out}(\omega) = \frac{i\omega R_q C}{i\omega R_q C - 1} j_c(\omega) - \frac{1}{i\omega R_q C - 1} j_{in}(\omega),$$ (5)

where we have omitted a trivial phase factor in $j_c(\omega)$ and set $\epsilon = 0$ [19]. In the context of the boson scattering theory [7, 20], the boundary conditions [4] can be viewed as the incident waves, while $j_{out}$ is the outgoing wave. Then the coefficients in front of the currents in Eq. (6) are the boson scattering amplitudes [21].

Langevin equations.—The equations of motion for the currents and the charge may be written in a yet different form:

$$\frac{dQ(t)}{dt} = j_{in}(t) - j_{out}(t),$$ (7a)

$$j_{out}(t) = Q(t)/R_q C + j_c(t),$$ (7b)

where the first equation expresses the conservation of charge. The second one is the Langevin equation, which has the following simple physical meaning. The outgoing current acquires two contributions: $Q(t)/R_q C$ is the current induced by the time dependent potential $Q(t)/C$, and the second one, $j_c$, is the Langevin current source. It is easy to check that by solving these equations, one arrives at the result (6).

The advantage of this formulation is that the equations (7) can be easily generalized to account for the effects
of dissipation in an Ohmic contact connected to electric circuit. This amounts to adding a current $j'_q$ and an impedance $Z$ to the equivalent electric circuit, as shown in Fig. 3. It is convenient to present corresponding equations of motion in the frequency domain:

\[
\begin{align*}
\dot{j}_\text{out}(\omega) &= j_\text{out}(\omega) + j'_\text{out}(\omega) - j_\text{in}(\omega), \\
2\pi\delta(\omega + \omega')S(\omega) &= 2\pi\delta(\omega + \omega')S(\omega).
\end{align*}
\]

After straightforward calculations, we present the current $j_\text{out}(\omega)$ in the following form

\[
\begin{align*}
j_\text{out}(\omega) &= \sum_{p=\text{in},c} T_p(\omega)j_p(\omega), \\
T_Z &= -\langle T_\text{in} \rangle = \frac{1}{\epsilon_0} \left[ \frac{\omega R_q C}{\pi T_c} - 1 \right]^{-1}.
\end{align*}
\]

We note, that the used here Langevin equation approach is appropriate in the case of linear quantum circuits that may be described entirely in terms of collective plasmon modes. This approach is fully consistent with the Caldeira-Leggett model.

**Spectral functions and effective temperature.** One can characterize the statistics of the current fluctuations $\langle \delta j_\text{out}(\omega) \delta j_\text{out}(\omega') \rangle = 2\pi\delta(\omega + \omega')S(\omega)$. The solution (9) allows us to express it in terms of the noise spectral densities of the currents $j_\text{in}(\omega)$, $j_c(\omega)$, and $j_Z(\omega)$:

\[
S(\omega) = \sum_p |T_p(\omega)|^2 S_p(\omega).
\]

Here $S_p(\omega)$ are defined similarly, $\langle \delta j_p(\omega) \delta j_p(\omega') \rangle = 2\pi\delta(\omega + \omega')S_p(\omega)$, and the average is evaluated with the equilibrium state in the corresponding channel, which implies

\[
S_p(\omega) = \frac{2\gamma \hbar \omega G_p}{1 - e^{-\hbar \omega/T_c}},
\]

with $G_\text{in} = G_c = 1/2R_q$, and $G_Z = \text{Re}[1/Z(\omega)]$. It is easy to check that the following identity holds:

\[
\sum_p |T_p(\omega)|^2 G_p(\omega) = 1/2R_q.
\]

**FIG. 3:** Equivalent circuit representation of the Langevin equations (8). The charge conservation in the system is described by Eq. (8a), while Eqs. (8b) and (8c) for the outgoing currents are the Langevin equations with the current sources $j_c$ and $j_Z$, respectively.

**FIG. 4:** The effective temperature $T_\text{out}$ of the QH edge state at $\nu = 1$ originating at a floating Ohmic contact is plotted as a function of the temperature $T_\text{in}$ of the incoming edge state for different values of the temperature of the Ohmic contact $T_c$. Note, that at $T_\text{in} = 0$ the effective temperature of the outgoing channel saturates at a constant value, which is smaller than the contact’s temperature $T_c$. At large values of $T_\text{in}$, it behaves as $T_\text{out} \propto \sqrt{T_\text{in}}$.

Therefore, the statistics of the current originating at the Ohmic contact is equilibrium if all the temperatures $T_p$ are equal, and it is non-equilibrium otherwise.

Sufficiently far from the Ohmic contact the outgoing state reaches the equilibrium. Therefore, since the heat flux $J_\text{out}$ carried by the edge state is conserved, it is convenient to define the effective temperature $T_\text{out}$ of the outgoing state by using the equilibrium relation $T_\text{out} = \pi T_\text{out}^2/12\hbar$ for a 1D chiral channel, which can be easily derived as follows. In a chiral system, the energy flux operator is equal to the energy density operator multiplied by the velocity $J = eF \cdot (\hbar v_F/4\pi)\partial_x \phi(x,t) = (\hbar c/e)^2 j^2(x,t)$. Then, the heat flux can be obtained by subtracting the vacuum energy contribution $J_\text{out} = \langle J \rangle - J_\text{vac}$. Expressing the heat flux in terms of the current noise spectral function and comparing it to the one for the equilibrium noise, we arrive at the following result

\[
T_\text{out}^2 = \frac{3R_q\hbar}{\pi^2} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \omega \left[ S(\omega) - (2\hbar T_c/\pi)^2\right] d\omega.
\]

One can see, that the summation rule (13) guarantees the convergence of the integral in (14) at high frequencies.

We evaluate this integral using Eqs. (9), (11), and (12) in the simple case where the circuit is a resistor, $Z(\omega) = R$, and with the natural assumption $T_Z = T_c$.

The result reads

\[
T_\text{out}^2 = T_c^2 + \frac{6(\hbar \Omega_c)^2}{(\pi\gamma)^2} \left[ I\left(\frac{\hbar \Omega_c}{T_\text{in}}\right) - I\left(\frac{\hbar \Omega_c}{T_c}\right) \right].
\]

where $\Omega_c = (R_q + R)/R_q R C$ is the inverse RC time of the Ohmic contact, and $\gamma = 1 + R_q/R$ is the circuit coupling.
parameter. The dimensionless function $I$ in this equation has the following form

$$I(a) = \int_0^\infty \frac{zdz}{z^2 + a^2 e^{-z}} = \frac{1}{2} \left[ \ln \left( \frac{a}{2\pi} \right) - \frac{\pi}{a} - \psi \left( \frac{a}{2\pi} \right) \right],$$

where $\psi(z)$ is the logarithmic derivative of the Gamma function. The Fig. 4 shows $T_{\text{out}}$ for the floating contact as a function of $T_{\text{in}}$ for different values of $T_e$.

In the case of a cold Ohmic contact, $T_e = 0$, we find

$$\frac{T_{\text{out}}}{T_{\text{in}}} = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{\gamma}, & \text{if } T_{\text{in}} \ll \hbar \Omega_e, \\ \sqrt{3\hbar \Omega_e / \pi \gamma^2 T_{\text{in}}}, & \text{if } T_{\text{in}} \gg \hbar \Omega_e. \end{cases} \quad (16)$$

Note, that for $\gamma = 1 + R_q / R > 1$ additional cooling is provided by the dissipation in the circuit. In the case of a cold incoming state, $T_{\text{in}} = 0$, and finite $T_e$, we have

$$\frac{T_{\text{out}}}{T_e} = \begin{cases} \sqrt{1 - 1/\gamma^2}, & \text{if } T_e \ll \hbar \Omega_e, \\ -3\hbar \Omega_e / 2\pi \gamma^2 T_e, & \text{if } T_e \gg \hbar \Omega_e. \end{cases} \quad (17)$$

Thus, the ability of the Ohmic contact to equilibrate the edge state depends on the energy scale $\hbar \Omega_e$, which, for a floating contact ($\gamma = 1$), becomes comparable to the single-electron charging energy: $\hbar \Omega_e = e^2 / 2\pi C$. To efficiently equilibrate edge states with temperatures, e.g., in the range $T_{\text{in}} \sim 10 - 100$ mK, one needs an Ohmic contact of the size of $L \sim 10 - 100 \mu$m or larger.

So far, the contact’s temperature $T_e$ has been considered an independent parameter, taking (ideally) the value of the base temperature $T_b$. The ability of phonons to cool a contact to the base temperature can be estimated by comparing the incoming heat flux of electrons $\pi T_{\text{in}}^2 / 12h$ to the outgoing flux $\Sigma V (T_e^2 - T_b^2)$ to phonons, where $\Sigma \approx 0.2$ nW/µm²/K⁵ is the electron-phonon coupling constant in metals [27], and $V \approx L^3$ is the volume of the contact. Assuming, that cooling by phonons is efficient, we find the relative correction $(T_e - T_b) / T_e \approx \pi / 60b \Sigma (T_e L)^3$, where we took $T_{\text{in}} = T_e$ for the estimate. On the other hand, $\hbar \Omega = e^2 / 2\pi C \approx e^2 / 2\pi \varepsilon \varepsilon_0 L$, where $\varepsilon \approx 12$ for GaAs. Eliminating $L$, we find that $(T_e - T_b) / T_b \approx (0.03 \hbar \Omega_e / T_e)^3$, i.e., in the regime $T_e \approx \hbar \Omega_e$ considered here heating of the Ohmic contact is indeed weak.

**Multichannel case.—** The generalization of our model to QH systems with the integer filling factors $\nu > 1$ is straightforward. In this case, the interactions at the edge split the spectrum of the collective modes in one charged mode and $\nu - 1$ neutral modes. For a floating contact, one may generalize the scattering theory. However, the easiest way to proceed is by noting that one should simply replace the resistance $R_q$ in the Langevin equation [28] with $R_q / \nu$. Next, all the outgoing neutral modes are, obviously, at equilibrium with the Ohmic contact, because only the charged mode is coupled to its charge $Q$. Finally, even a screened Coulomb interaction at the edge is typically strong enough to equally distribute the heat flux over the $\nu$ electron channels [26] that are accessible experimentally. All this leads to the modification of the circuit parameter $\gamma = 1 + R_q / \nu R_q$ to a similar change in the charge response frequency $\Omega_e = (R_q + eR / R_q RC)$, and to the overall suppression of the heat flux per channel. Expressed in terms of the new parameters, the effective temperature of an electron channel is given by $T_{\text{out}}^2 = T_e^2 + (6/\nu)(\hbar \Omega_e / \pi \gamma^2 [I(\hbar \Omega_e / T_{\text{in}}) - I(\hbar \Omega_e / T_e)])$. In particular, in this case even at small temperatures $T_{\text{in}}, T_e \ll \hbar \Omega_e$, a floating Ohmic contact is able to heat the edge states ($T_{\text{out}} / T_e = \sqrt{1 - 1/\gamma^2}$ at $T_{\text{in}} = 0$) or cool them down ($T_{\text{out}} / T_{\text{in}} = 1 / \sqrt{\nu}$ at $T_{\text{in}} = 0$) by redistributing the energy uniformly over the electron channels.

To conclude, we have shown that a floating Ohmic contact attached to the edge of a QH system can serve as a voltage probe only if it has a sufficiently large capacitance, so that the energy scale $\hbar \Omega_e$, where $\Omega_e$ is the inverse RC time of the contact, is much smaller than the temperature of the QH edge excitations. Such Ohmic contacts can be used to cool an edge channel with temperature larger than $\hbar \Omega_e$, and the efficiency of cooling can be increased by connecting the contact to a circuit with small resistance $R < R_q$. Finally, the equilibrium by an Ohmic contact becomes more efficient at large filling factors.

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