Atomic Three-Body Loss as a Dynamical Three-Body Interaction


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We discuss how large three-body loss of atoms in an optical lattice can give rise to effective hard-core three-body interactions. For bosons, in addition to the usual atomic superfluid, a dimer superfluid can then be observed for attractive two-body interactions. The nonequilibrium dynamics of preparation and stability of these phases are studied in 1D by combining time-dependent density matrix renormalization group techniques with a quantum trajectories method.

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Cold atomic gases in optical lattices have proven a test bed for understanding novel quantum phases [1] and non-equilibrium many-body dynamics [2,3]. Recently, Syassen et al. [4] showed that a strong two-body loss process for molecules in an optical lattice [1] could produce an effective, elastic hard-core repulsion and thus a Tonks gas [4,5]. This is related to the quantum Zeno effect: a large loss dynamically suppresses processes creating two-body occupation on a particular site. Whilst elastic two-body interactions occur in many systems, regimes where elastic three-body interactions dominate are rare in nature. Here we discuss how the ubiquitous, though normally undesirable three-body losses of atomic physics experiments can induce effective three-body interactions. These are associated with interesting quantum phases, including Pfaffian states [6], and could be used to stabilize three-component Fermi mixtures [7], assisting in the production of a color superfluid state [8]. We investigate Bosons in an optical lattice, where a three-body hard-core constraint stabilizes the system with attractive two-body interactions, and a dimer superfluid phase emerges. We focus on the dynamics of this intrinsically time-dependent system, both testing the hard-core constraint for finite loss rates, and studying nonequilibrium properties including decay. In one dimension, the exact evolution is computed by combining time-dependent density matrix renormalization group methods (t-DMRG) [2,3] with a quantum trajectories approach from quantum optics [9].

Three-body recombination [10] in an optical lattice corresponds to decay into the continuum of unbound states, and thus loss from the lattice. This can be described by a master equation in the Markov approximation [9], which for atoms in the lowest band of an optical lattice can be projected onto the corresponding basis of Wannier functions [1,5], associated with bosonic annihilation operators \( b_i \) on site \( i \). We can separate the master equation into terms which conserve particle number, corresponding to an effective Hamiltonian \( H_{\text{eff}} \), and terms which remove three particles on a site:

\[
\dot{\rho}^{(n)} = -i[H_{\text{eff}}^{(n)} - \rho^{(n)}] + \frac{\gamma_3}{12} \sum_i 2b_i^\dagger \rho^{(n+3)}(b_i^\dagger)^3, 
\]

where \( \rho^{(n)} \) denotes the system density operator with \( n \) atoms and \( \gamma_3 \) is the corresponding rate. The effective Hamiltonian is

\[
H_{\text{eff}} = H - i \frac{\gamma_3}{12} \sum_i (b_i^\dagger)^3 b_i^3, 
\]

where \( H = -J \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} b_i^\dagger b_j + \frac{U}{2} \sum_i \hat{n}_i(\hat{n}_i - 1) + \sum_i \varepsilon_i \hat{n}_i \)

with \( J \) the nearest neighbor tunneling amplitude, \( U \) the elastic two-body interaction, and \( \varepsilon_i \) the local potential. The Hamiltonian is valid in the limit where \( J, \varepsilon_i, Un \ll \omega \) with \( \omega \) the band gap and \( n \) the mean density. In an experiment these parameters, in particular \( U \), may be tuned while \( \gamma_3 \) remains constant and large [12]. In Fig. 1(c) we show example values of \( \gamma_3, U \), and \( J \) using numbers for Cesium as a function of lattice depth.

If we begin in a pure state with \( N \) particles, then loss processes lead to heating, in that they produce a mixed state of different particle numbers. Within a fixed particle number sector, the dynamics are described by \( H_{\text{eff}} \). Three-body interactions emerge most clearly in the limit of rapid decay: \( \gamma_3 \gg J, U, \varepsilon_i \). When we define the projector \( P \) onto the subspace of states with at most two atoms per site and \( Q = 1 - P \), then in second order perturbation theory we obtain the effective model

\[
H_{\text{eff}}^P = PHP \frac{2i}{\gamma_3} PHQHP + PHP - i \frac{J^2}{\gamma_3} P \sum_j c_j P, 
\]

where \( c_j = (b_j^2/\sqrt{2}) \sum_{k \in N_j} b_k \), and \( N_j \) denotes the set of nearest neighbors of site \( j \). The term \( PHP \) describes the Hubbard dynamics, Eq. (2), supplemented by the hard-core interaction.
constraint \((b_i^3)^3 = 0\). Furthermore, the effective loss rates decrease as \(J^2/\gamma_3\) [13].

Thus, we see the clear emergence of a three-body hard-core constraint in the limit \(\gamma_3/J \gg 1\). We can study the physics of the projected model PHP to obtain a qualitative understanding of the quantum phases associated with the projection. However, the residual loss processes make this system intrinsically time dependent, and can give rise to heating. We therefore study the full nonequilibrium dynamics, by combining \(t\)-DMRG methods [2,3] with an expression of the master equation as an average over quantum trajectories [9]. Each stochastic trajectory begins from an initial pure state (sampled from the initial density matrix), and can be interpreted as describing a single experimental run, in which losses occurred at particular times \(t_n\) and on sites \(i_n\). The evolution is described by the non-Hermitian \(\hat{H}_{\text{eff}}\), except for times \(t_n\), where losses (or quantum jumps) occur,

\[
\frac{i\hbar}{dt} |\psi(t)\rangle = \hat{H}_{\text{eff}} |\psi(t)\rangle; \quad |\psi(t_n)\rangle = \frac{C_{i_n}}{|C_{i_n}| |\psi(t_n)\rangle}|\psi(t_n)\rangle,
\]

where the jump operator \(C_i = b_i^3\) corresponds to three-body loss on site \(i\). In stochastic simulation of the master equation, the times \(t_n\) are points where the norm of the state falls below a randomly chosen threshold. At these times, a random jump operator is selected according to the probabilities \(p_{i_n} \propto \langle \psi(t_n)|C_i^\dagger C_i|\psi(t_n)\rangle\) and applied. In this way we can both investigate individual trajectories and compute expectation values from the master equation. The latter is performed by stochastic average over both initial states and over jump events, which converges rapidly as the number of trajectories is increased.

The need to simulate many trajectories for convergence is offset by the efficiency of simulating states rather than density matrices [14], and we can also make use of existing optimizations for conserved quantities. Despite the application of local jump operators, we find the evolution quite efficient, especially for small numbers of jumps [15].

As an example of the suppression of loss, we consider preparing a homogenous initial state at unit filling in a deep optical lattice where \(U/J \to \infty\). At time \(t = 0\) we suddenly ramp the lattice to a finite depth, and observe the probability \(p\) that a single three-body loss event has occurred as a function of time. In Fig. 1(c) we plot this probability for different \(U/J\) as a function of \(\gamma_3/J\). We see a clear suppression of loss rates for large \(\gamma_3/J\), and also a substantial decrease for larger \(U/J\), resulting from the decreased amplitude for doubly occupied sites.

In the limit of large \(\gamma_3\), it is instructive to study the equilibrium phase diagram of the projected Hamiltonian PHP. For \(U/J > 0\), we observe the well-known Mott insulator (MI) and atomic superfluid phases of the Bose-Hubbard model. However, the three-body hard-core condition will also stabilize the system for \(U/J < 0\), where we find a dimer superfluid phase [see Fig. 2(a)]. This is characterized by the vanishing of the order parameter signalling superfluidity of single atoms (ASF) \((\langle b_i^\dagger b_i \rangle = 0)\), while a
dimer superfluidity (DSF) order parameter persists \( \langle b_i^2 \rangle \neq 0 \). The superfluid regimes are connected via a quantum phase transition associated with the spontaneous breaking of a discrete \( \mathbb{Z}_2 \) symmetry, reminiscent of an Ising transition \cite{16}; the DSF order parameter transforms with the double phase \( \sim \exp \theta \) compared to the ASF order parameter \( \sim \exp i\theta \). Consequently, the symmetry \( \theta \rightarrow \theta + \pi \) exhibited by the DSF order parameter is broken when reaching the ASF phase.

We can obtain a qualitative mean-field picture using a homogeneous Gutzwiller ansatz wavefunction, given for the projected Hilbert space by \( |\Psi_i\rangle = \prod_i |\Psi_i\rangle \), where \( |\Psi_i\rangle = r_0e^{i\phi_0}|0\rangle_i + r_1e^{i\phi_1}|1\rangle_i + r_2e^{i\phi_2}|2\rangle_i \). Normalization implies \( \sum_o r_o^2 = 1 \), while the filling is \( n = r_1^2 + 2r_2^2 \leq 2 \). To examine the phases, we find the energy \( \tilde{E}/M^d = \langle \Psi |H|\Psi \rangle \), \( E(r_o, \Phi_o) = U \tilde{r}_2^2 - Jz\tilde{r}_2^2[r_0^2 + 2\sqrt{2}r_2r_0\cos\Phi + 2\tilde{r}_2^2] \), where \( \Phi = \Phi_3 + 2\Phi_1 \), and \( M^d \) is the number of lattice sites. For any \( r_o \), the energy is minimized for \( \Phi \) an integer multiple of \( 2\pi \). For \( r_1, r_0 \neq 0 \) placing us in the ASF phase with \( \langle |b_i|^2 \rangle^2 = \tilde{r}_2^2(r_0 + \sqrt{2}\tilde{r}_2^2) = 0 \), the phase-locking expression contributes a “source” term linear in \( r_2 \) to the energy, and consequently the minimum of the energy cannot be located at \( r_2 = 0 \). Thus, a finite atomic condensate always implies a dimer component \( \langle |b_i|^2 \rangle^2 = 2(r_0r_2^2)^2 \), though the reverse is not true.

At fixed \( n \), the energy is a function, e.g., of \( r_1 \) alone. For the second order transition found within our mean-field theory, an instability for atomic superfluidity is indicated by its mass term crossing zero, \( \tilde{E}(r_1 = 0)/\tilde{r}_2^2 = 0 \). This leads to a critical interaction strength for the ASF-DSF transition, \( \tilde{U}_c/\tilde{J}_z = -2[1 + n/2 + 2\sqrt{n}(1 - n/2)] \). Within the DSF phase the order parameter obeys \( \langle |b_i|^2 \rangle^2 = n(1 - n/2) \) independent of the interaction strength. For \( n \rightarrow 2 \), we approach a MI state in a second order transition. At \( n = 1 \) we find that the ASF-DSF transition takes place at the same coupling strength as the ASF-MI transition, but with the opposite sign. The complete mean-field phase diagram in the plane of density and interaction strength is plotted in Fig. 2(a).

From the last term in Eq. (3), we can estimate the initial loss rate from the ground state Gutzwiller wave function. We obtain the rate \( \gamma_{\text{eff}} = 3J^2\gamma/\gamma_3M^d((\tilde{r}_2^2 - n)\times (n + \langle |b_i|^2 \rangle^2)) \), which is zero in the MI, and \( \propto n^2 \) for the DSF, \( \gamma_{\text{eff}} = 3J^2\gamma M^d n^2/\gamma_3 \). In the DSF phase, the critical temperature \( T_c \propto n^{2/3} \) at low densities, and the energy density deposited by a single loss, \( \Delta E_{\text{loss}} = (z+1)|U|n/(2M^d) \). The number of independent loss events needed to melt the DSF is then proportional to \( T_c/\Delta E_{\text{loss}} \), and the melting time strongly decreases for increasing density, proportional to \( \gamma_3/(|U|(z+1)J^2z^{n^{2/3}}) \).

These qualitative features are reproduced in one dimension, as supported by numerical calculation of the ground state for PHP. In Figs. 2(b) and 2(c) we show the characterization of the crossover between the ASF and DSF regimes in one dimension via the off-diagonal elements of the single particle density matrix, \( S(i, j) = \langle b_i^\dagger b_j \rangle \), and the dimer density matrix \( D(i, j) = \langle b_i^\dagger b_j^\dagger b_j b_i \rangle \). In the MI regime, the off-diagonal elements of \( S(i, j) \) and \( D(i, j) \) decay exponentially. As we enter the superfluid regime, quasi-long-range order is visible in the polynomial decay (linear on the logarithmic scale). As \( \tilde{U}/\tilde{J} \) is made more negative, we see a return to exponential decay for the off-diagonal elements of \( S(i, j) \), but the off-diagonal elements of \( D(i, j) \) still decay polynomially and, indeed, increase in magnitude.
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and (b) the lossy trajectories of Fig. 3(c). When a loss
ramp of producing the lossless trajectory. We see that for
state is reached adiabatically, and a ''lossy'' trajectory,
particle number, for example, trajectories. For each ramp
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ramp from the MI state, where we pass through a region
in L.-M. Duan, Europhys. Lett. 81, 20001 (2008). These are small for \( \gamma_3 \) values used here.
This is because nonuniversal behavior (where \( \gamma_3 \neq a^4 \), with \( a \) the scattering length) is observed away from a Feshbach resonance, where the rate of three-body re-
combination is large and weakly dependent on \( a \) [10], while the two-body scattering length \( a \) can be very small (\( U \approx a \)).
Note that off-site processes can place an upper bound on the useful value of \( \gamma_3 \), as increasing \( \gamma_3 \) suppresses on-site loss, but increases the rate of loss from processes involving neighboring lattice sites.

The three-body interactions discussed here could have applications to producing Pfaffian-like states and stabiliz-
ing three-component mixtures. The theoretical approach we have used, quantum trajectories combined with t-DMRG, could also be applied to other classes of master
equations. Open questions regarding the nature of the ASF-
DSF phase transition will be addressed within a quantum field theoretical treatment [17].
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FIG. 4 (color online). Comparison of (a) lossless and (b) lossy trajectories from Fig. 3(c). We show the mean density \( \langle n_i \rangle \) as a function of position and time, and magnitude of the dimer correlation function \( |D(i, j)| \) \( (i \neq j) \) at the end of the ramp.

slowly that without loss, the ground state will be reached with minimal presence of excited states.

In Figs. 3(b) and 3(c) we show the time dependence of the sum of kinetic and interaction energies, and of the total particle number, for example, trajectories. For each ramp type, we choose a “lossless” trajectory, where the ground state is reached adiabatically, and a “lossy” trajectory, where three-body loss events lead to heating of the system (as holes are produced that correspond to excited states).

In Fig. 3(d), we compare the probability for each type of ramp of producing the lossless trajectory. We see that for the ramp from the MI state, where we pass through a region of small \( U/J \), the probability of such a trajectory is essen-
tially zero. For the superlattice ramp, on the other hand, it is much more likely that we will obtain the ground state from a randomly chosen trajectory. This is because the superlattice both allows us to use large \( U/J \), and facilitates the choice of a lower density.

In Fig. 4 we show the local density as a function of time and the final dimer density matrix \( D(i, j) \) for (a) the lossless and (b) the lossy trajectories of Fig. 3(c). When a loss occurs it affects not just the density for the site on which it occurs, but also on neighboring sites due to the knowledge that we obtain of the position of the remaining particles. We also see clearly the destruction of correlations in the region of the system where the loss occurs. Note, however, that a single loss event does not always destroy the properties of the final state, and while the probability of an individual loss event increases with system size, a single loss event will change the character of the final state less.

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[11] Off-site loss terms can arise from nonzero overlap of the corresponding Wannier functions, in analogy to off-site elastic interactions, which are discussed in L.-M. Duan, Europhys. Lett. 81, 20001 (2008). These are small for \( \gamma_3 \) values used here.
[12] This is because nonuniversal behavior (where \( \gamma_3 \neq a^4 \), with \( a \) the scattering length) is observed away from a Feshbach resonance, where the rate of three-body re-combination is large and weakly dependent on \( a \) [10], while the two-body scattering length \( a \) can be very small (\( U \approx a \)).