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Through-the-Membrane Transient Phenomena in PEM Fuel Cells: A Modeling Study

Alireza Goshtasbi,^{1,*} Pablo García-Salaberri,² Jixin Chen,^{3,z} Krishan Talukdar,⁴ Daniel G. Sanchez,⁴ and Tulga Ersal^{1,z}

¹Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, USA

²Depto. de Ingeniería Térmica y de Fluidos, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Leganés 28911, Spain

³Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, Michigan 48121, USA

⁴Deutsches Zentrum für Luft und Raumfahrt (DLR), Institute of Engineering Thermodynamics, 70569 Stuttgart, Germany

This paper presents a 2D, fully coupled and comprehensive transient model that accounts for micro-structural features of various cell layers. The model benefits from state of the art sub-models for reaction kinetics and incorporates the polymer relaxation dynamics. Furthermore, a mixed wettability model is utilized to simulate the transient two phase conditions in the porous layers. The model is validated with transient experimental data under various conditions. A comprehensive simulation study is presented to investigate the impact of operating temperature and relative humidity on the transient response. The effects of cathode Pt loading and operation mode, i.e., current control versus voltage control, are also studied. The cell response is found to be dominated by water transport through its thickness. Additionally, it is found that reducing the Pt loading can influence the performance by changing the water balance in the cell, which has rarely been highlighted in the literature. In particular, at low temperature more water is transported toward the anode when the cathode Pt loading is reduced, since the resistance to water back diffusion is lowered with reduced thickness of the cathode catalyst layer. This trend is reversed at a higher temperature due to increased volumetric heat generation with reduced thickness. The model can help in understanding various transport phenomena and is expected to be useful for inspecting spatio-temporal temperature, potential, and species distributions across the cell's thickness and optimizing the cell design and choice of materials.

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Some of the significant technological challenges to commercialization of polymer electrolyte membrane (PEM) fuel cells have been addressed in the past two decades through extensive theoretical and experimental research. As a result, the PEM fuel cell technology has advanced considerably. In particular, the amount of precious metal used in the catalyst layers (CL) has been significantly reduced while achieving remarkable performance improvements.^{1,2} Nevertheless, important challenges related to cost and durability remain. While further material development is indeed beneficial, some of the existing issues may be addressed through effective control and hybridization of these systems. This will require a good understanding of the processes that govern the fuel cell dynamics. Moreover, in-depth studies of the transients can improve the current understanding of various electrochemical and transport phenomena. Therefore, there is a need for better understanding of the transient response to further enhance performance and lifetime of PEM fuel cells.

Arguably, the dynamic studies of PEM fuel cells have been overshadowed by the significant efforts dedicated to steady state measurements and modeling. However, fuel cell transient response has attracted some attention lately, as it can be used to elucidate and deconvolve complex transport phenomena.³⁻⁸ Several transient models have also been proposed in the literature.⁹⁻¹⁵ These models usually use simplified reaction kinetics and do not account for the micro-structure of various cell layers and the anisotropic material properties. Therefore, these models typically do not have the required fidelity to allow detailed investigation of the transient phenomena affecting the cell performance. Accordingly, it is the main objective of this work to develop a transient model that captures the most salient features of the cell's dynamics across its thickness. Furthermore, we execute the model under a variety of operating conditions to delineate the critical transient phenomena that determine the overall cell dynamics. It should be noted that the model presented here is only helpful in understanding transient phenomena through the thickness of a unit cell

with small active area. In other words, the compressor and channel flow dynamics, along the channel redistributions, and stack thermal dynamics are not discussed here. Nevertheless, the results of this work may be extended along the flow channel and across multiple cells to study the transients at those scales.

Specific to our objective is creating a model that, as much as possible, directly translates the physically measurable parameters and operating conditions into the knowledge about spatio-temporal distributions of critical variables such as temperature and water concentration in different layers. To this end, it is imperative to effectively capture the physical characteristics of the porous layers including the catalyst layers and diffusion media (DM). It is worth pointing out that, as has recently been shown, a representative elementary volume (REV) cannot be clearly defined in the through-plane direction for commercial DM¹⁶ and the REV for the in-plane direction is on par with the land-channel sizes used in fuel cells.^{16,17} Therefore, while the macroscopic models can capture the aggregate behavior, their predictions may significantly deviate from the local predictions by microscopic models.^{16,18} This result bears significance, as it points to the need for more elaborate description of transport in the porous layers. Nevertheless, the excessively high cost of such simulations limits their application to very few conditions and a limited material set. Therefore, the macroscopic models remain the main tool to investigate the internal distributions in a full cell model and including some level of description of the microstructure is the approach adopted in this work to improve their prediction capability. This is achieved here by using a recently developed mixed wettability model for the porous layers.^{19,20} To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first time that a full implementation of the mixed wettability model is being used in a 2D transient model. In addition to the mixed wettability model for porous layers, the presented model accounts for ionomer relaxation dynamics and CL micro-structure, which have been neglected in most of the previous models. Moreover, the effective material and transport properties of the different layers are identified through an extensive literature review of commercially available materials. Therefore, this model is expected to offer higher fidelity than the state of the art models for

*Electrochemical Society Student Member.

^zE-mail: jchen186@ford.com; tersal@umich.edu

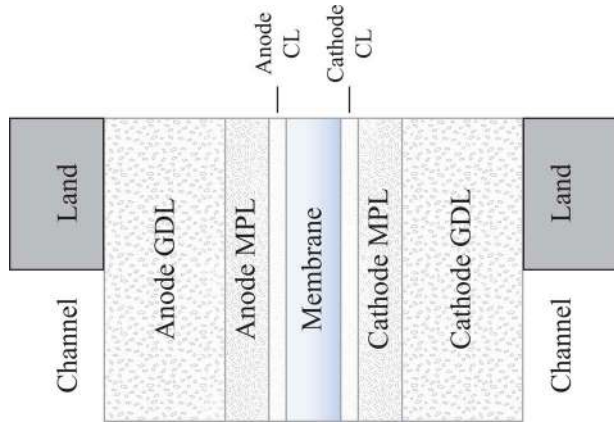


Figure 1. Modeling domain.

the purpose of studying transient phenomena that impact performance and durability.²¹

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First, the model formulation is presented along with a detailed review of the literature relevant to each sub-model to justify the choices made during model development. Simulation results and discussions are provided next, followed by a brief summary and concluding remarks. Model validation with experimental data from the literature is presented in the accompanying Supplementary Information.

Model Formulation

The modeling domain of interest is shown in Fig. 1. The model draws from prior work by Balliet et al.,¹⁰ Zenyuk et al.,²² and Zhou et al.²³ with modifications to several sub-models. Therefore, the model is presented here in its entirety for completeness. A complete list of model parameters is provided in the accompanying Supplementary Information.

Governing equations.—The comprehensive 2D model solves the following governing equations, where the various source terms are given in Tables I and II:

$$\varepsilon_g \frac{\partial c_i}{\partial t} = \nabla \cdot (c_g D_i^{\text{eff}} \nabla x_i) - \nabla \cdot (c_g x_i \mathbf{u}_g) + S_i, \quad [1]$$

$$\frac{\partial (\rho_l \varepsilon_l)}{\partial t} = \nabla \cdot \left(\frac{\rho_l K_l^{\text{eff}}}{\mu_l} \nabla p_l \right) + S_{\text{liquid}}, \quad [2]$$

$$\frac{\partial (\rho_g \varepsilon_g)}{\partial t} = \nabla \cdot \left(\frac{\rho_g K_g^{\text{eff}}}{\mu_g} \nabla p_g \right) + S_{\text{gas}}, \quad [3]$$

Table I. Mass conservation source terms.

Domain	S_{O_2}	S_{H_2O}	S_{liquid}	S_{gas}	S_λ
Anode CL (ACL)	–	$S_{pc} - S_{ad}$	$-M_{H_2O} S_{pc}$	$-M_{H_2} \frac{i_{HOR}}{2F} + M_{H_2O} (S_{pc} - S_{ad})$	S_{ad}
Cathode CL (CCL)	$\frac{i_{ORR}}{4F}$	$S_{pc} - S_{ad}$	$-M_{H_2O} S_{pc}$	$M_{O_2} \frac{i_{ORR}}{4F} + M_{H_2O} (S_{pc} - S_{ad})$	$S_{ad} - \frac{i_{ORR}}{2F}$
MPL and GDL	0	S_{pc}	$-M_{H_2O} S_{pc}$	$M_{H_2O} S_{pc}$	–

Table II. Energy and charge conservation source terms.

Domain	S_T	S_{H^+}	S_{e^-}
Anode CL (ACL)	$-M_{H_2O} S_{pc} H_{pc} + S_{ad} H_{ad} + H_{HOR} + \frac{i_1 i_1}{\sigma_1^{\text{eff}}} + \frac{i_2 i_2}{\sigma_2^{\text{eff}}}$	i_{HOR}	$-i_{HOR}$
Cathode CL (CCL)	$-M_{H_2O} S_{pc} H_{pc} + S_{ad} H_{ad} + H_{ORR} + \frac{i_1 i_1}{\sigma_1^{\text{eff}}} + \frac{i_2 i_2}{\sigma_2^{\text{eff}}}$	i_{ORR}	$-i_{ORR}$
Membrane	$\frac{i_2 i_2}{\sigma_2^{\text{eff}}}$	0	–
MPL and GDL	$-M_{H_2O} S_{pc} H_{pc}$	–	0

$$\varepsilon_{\text{ion}} \frac{\rho_{\text{ion}}}{EW} \frac{\partial \lambda}{\partial t} = \nabla \cdot (N_{w,mb}) + S_\lambda, \quad [4]$$

$$\sum_\alpha \varepsilon_\alpha \rho_\alpha c_{p,\alpha} \left(\frac{\partial T}{\partial t} + \mathbf{u}_\alpha \cdot \nabla T \right) = \nabla \cdot (k_T^{\text{eff}} \nabla T) + S_T, \quad [5]$$

$$\nabla \cdot (\sigma_1^{\text{eff}} \nabla \phi_1) = S_{e^-}, \quad [6]$$

$$\nabla \cdot (\sigma_2^{\text{eff}} \nabla \phi_2) = S_{H^+}. \quad [7]$$

The first equation describes species transport in the microporous layers (MPLs), gas diffusion layers (GDLs), and CLs, where ε_g is the porosity of the layer available for gas transport ($\varepsilon_g = \varepsilon(1 - s)$, with s the liquid saturation and ε the compressed layer porosity), c_g is the total gas concentration, $\mathbf{u}_g = -\frac{K_g^{\text{eff}}}{\mu_g} \nabla p_g$ is the velocity of the gas phase, and c_i , D_i^{eff} , and x_i denote the concentration, the effective diffusivity, and the molar fraction of species i , respectively. The first and second terms on the right hand side model the diffusive and convective fluxes, respectively, while the last term (S_i) is the relevant source term for the specific gas species (see Table I). In the anode, the equation is solved for water vapor molar fraction (x_{H_2O}) and the hydrogen molar fraction (x_{H_2}) is calculated by $x_{H_2} = 1 - x_{H_2O}$. On the cathode side, this equation is solved for water vapor (x_{H_2O}) and oxygen (x_{O_2}) and the nitrogen molar fraction is found from $x_{N_2} = 1 - x_{O_2} - x_{H_2O}$.

Equations 2 and 3 describe the mass conservation of the liquid and gas phases, respectively. These equations model the pressure drop of each phase in the CLs, MPLs, and GDLs according to Darcy's law. Here, ρ_α , ε_α , K_α^{eff} , μ_α , and p_α denote the density, volume fraction, effective permeability (relative permeability times absolute permeability), viscosity, and pressure of phase α . Note that $\varepsilon_g = \varepsilon(1 - s)$ and $\varepsilon_l = \varepsilon s$. Finally, $S_{\text{liquid/gas}}$ denotes the source term for the corresponding phase (see Table I). Note that liquid saturation that appears in these equations through the volume fractions is a variable that depends on capillary pressure. Therefore, closure equations that relate the saturation level to the capillary pressure are required. In this work, the mixed wettability model is used to derive water retention curves (liquid saturation vs. capillary pressure) as well as effective property values such as gas and liquid permeability for the different layers (see Mixed wettability model for porous layers section).

Equation 4 governs water transport in the ionomer phase throughout the catalyst coated membrane (CCM). Therefore, its domain of application is the anode and cathode catalyst layers and the membrane. In this equation, ε_{ion} , ρ_{ion} , and EW denote the ionomer volume fraction, density, and equivalent weight, respectively, while λ is the dimensionless number that quantifies the water content in the ionomer, i.e., the number of water molecules per sulfonic acid group. Finally, S_λ is the source term (see Table I) and $N_{w,mb}$ is the water flux in the ionomer phase across the CCM, which includes the effects of electro-osmotic drag (EOD), diffusion, and thermo-osmosis and is calculated as follows:

$$N_{w,mb} = -n_d \frac{\sigma_2^{\text{eff}}}{F} \nabla \phi_2 - \frac{\rho_{\text{ion}}}{EW} D_{w,mb}^{\text{eff}} \nabla \lambda + D_{T,mb} \nabla T, \quad [8]$$

where n_d is the EOD coefficient, ϕ_2 is the ionic potential, F is the Faraday's constant, σ_2^{eff} is the effective conductivity in the ionic phase, $D_{w,\text{mb}}^{\text{eff}}$ is the effective water diffusion coefficient in the membrane and $D_{T,\text{mb}}$ is the thermal water diffusivity in the membrane. Note that thermo-osmosis is shown to drive water from the cold to the hot side for a hydrophilic membrane.²⁴ As a convention, a positive flux denotes water flux toward the cathode. The membrane water transport properties are given in Table III.

Equation 5 is the energy conservation equation, which governs the temperature distribution. In this equation, ρ_α , ε_α , $c_{p,\alpha}$, and $\mathbf{u}_\alpha = -\frac{K_\alpha^{\text{eff}}}{\mu_\alpha} \nabla p_\alpha$ are the density, volume fraction, specific heat capacity, and velocity of phase α , where α can be the gas, liquid, or solid phase. In addition, k_T^{eff} is the effective thermal conductivity (see Calculation of effective properties sec.) and S_T denotes the heat source term (see Table II). Note that this equation captures heat transfer by conduction (first term on the right hand side) as well as convection (second term on the left hand side).

Equations 6 and 7 are the Ohm's law for electronic (ϕ_1) and ionic (ϕ_2) potentials, respectively. Here, σ_1^{eff} and σ_2^{eff} denote the effective conductivities of the respective phases and S_{H^+/e^-} is the relevant source term (see Table II).

The source terms for mass conservation equations (Equations 1–4) are given in Table I. Here, M_i is the molar mass of species i , $i_{\text{HOR/ORR}}$ is the volumetric HOR/ORR reaction current density, and S_{pc} is the source term due to phase change and is given by:¹⁹

$$S_{\text{pc}} = \begin{cases} k_{\text{evp}} a_{\text{LG}} \left[\frac{p_v - p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T)}{p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T)} \right] & \text{if } p_v > p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T) \\ k_{\text{cnd}} a_{\text{LG}} \left[\frac{p_v - p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T)}{p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T)} \right] & \text{if } p_v \leq p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T) \end{cases} \quad [9]$$

where $k_{\text{evp}/\text{cnd}}$ denotes the rate of evaporation/condensation, a_{LG} is the interfacial area between the liquid and gas phases (calculated by the mixed wettability model), p_v is the vapor pressure, and $p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T)$ is the corrected saturation pressure that takes the Kelvin effect into account. The corrected saturation pressure is given by:

$$p_{\text{sat}}^K(p_c, T) = p_{\text{sat}}(T) \exp\left(\frac{M_{H_2O} p_c}{R \rho_v T}\right). \quad [10]$$

In the above equation, p_c is the capillary pressure ($p_c = p_l - p_g$), R is the universal gas constant, ρ_v is the density of water vapor, and $p_{\text{sat}}(T)$ is the saturation pressure as a function of temperature given by:

$$p_{\text{sat}}(T) = 0.61121 \exp\left[\left(18.678 - \frac{T}{234.5}\right) \frac{T}{257.14 + T}\right] \quad [11]$$

where T is in Celsius and the calculated pressure is in kPa.

In Table I, S_{ad} denotes the source term due to water exchange (absorption/desorption) between the ionomer phase and the pore space

and is given by:

$$S_{\text{ad}} = \frac{k_{\text{ad}} \cdot \rho_{\text{ion}}}{\delta_{\text{CL}} \cdot EW} (\lambda^* - \lambda), \quad [12]$$

where k_{ad} is the interfacial water transfer coefficient (see Table III), δ_{CL} denotes the CL thickness, and λ^* is the dynamic variable for equilibrium water content in the ionomer (see Ionomer water uptake Sec.). Note that water production with electrochemical reaction contributes to S_λ . In other words, the produced water is assumed to be in absorbed phase. This is in agreement with the assumed structure for the CL in this work and has also been used by others.⁹

The source terms for energy and charge conservation (Equations 5–7) are given in Table II. In the table, i_1 and i_2 are the electronic and ionic current densities, respectively:

$$i_1 = -\sigma_1^{\text{eff}} \nabla \phi_1 \quad [13]$$

$$i_2 = -\sigma_2^{\text{eff}} \nabla \phi_2 \quad [14]$$

Moreover, $H_{\text{HOR/ORR}}$ denotes the reversible and irreversible heat of reaction given by:

$$H_{\text{HOR}} = i_{\text{HOR}} (\eta_{\text{HOR}} + \Pi_{\text{HOR}}) = i_{\text{HOR}} \left[(\phi_1 - \phi_2 - E_{\text{rev}}^{\text{an}}) - 0.013 \frac{T}{298.15} \right] \quad [15]$$

$$H_{\text{ORR}} = i_{\text{ORR}} (\eta_{\text{ORR}} + \Pi_{\text{ORR}}) = i_{\text{ORR}} \left[(\phi_1 - \phi_2 - E_{\text{rev}}^{\text{ca}}) - 0.24 \frac{T}{298.15} \right] \quad [16]$$

where $\Pi_{\text{HOR/ORR}}$ is the Peltier coefficient for HOR/ORR,³⁰ $E_{\text{rev}}^{\text{an}} = 0$, and $E_{\text{rev}}^{\text{ca}} = 1.229 - 8.5 \times 10^{-4} \times (T - 298.15) + \frac{RT}{4F} \ln(\rho_{O_2})$ are the reversible potentials in each electrode.

The enthalpy of phase change, H_{pc} , is:

$$H_{\text{pc}} = -2.367 \times 10^{-5} T^4 + 1.882 \times 10^{-2} T^3 - 4.672 T^2 - 2.098 \times 10^3 T + 3.178 \times 10^6 [\text{J/kg}], \quad [17]$$

where T is in Kelvin. Finally, H_{ad} is the heat of sorption (due to water exchange between the ionomer and the pore space, i.e., water vapor) and is given by:³¹

$$H_{\text{ad}} = \begin{cases} M_{H_2O} H_{\text{pc}} - 28.28 \times 10^3 \left[\text{erf}\left(\frac{18.682 M_{H_2O}}{EW} + 0.4016\right) - 1 \right] & \text{sorption} \\ -M_{H_2O} H_{\text{pc}} + 55.65 \times 10^3 \left[\text{erf}\left(\frac{10.399 M_{H_2O}}{EW} + 1.116\right) - 1 \right] & \text{desorption} \end{cases} \quad [18]$$

Ionomer water uptake.—It is imperative for any transient model of a PEM fuel cell to properly capture the dynamics of water sorption, desorption, and transport across the membrane. Historically, diffusive²⁹ and hydraulic³² type models have been used for this purpose. However, there is abundant evidence in the literature suggesting that interfacial transport phenomena as well as swelling of the

Table III. Membrane water transport and uptake properties.

Property [Units]	Equation
n_d [–] ²⁵	$1.2 \tanh\left(\frac{\lambda}{2.5}\right)$
$D_{w,\text{mb}}^{\text{eff}}$ [$\frac{\text{cm}^2}{\text{s}}$] ²⁶	$0.0539 \times \left(1 + \frac{M_{H_2O} \rho_{\text{ion}}}{EW} \lambda\right)^{-2} (1 + 0.0027 \lambda^2) \left[1 + \tanh\left(\frac{\lambda - 2.6225}{0.8758}\right)\right] \exp\left(\frac{-3343}{T}\right)$
$D_{T,\text{mb}}$ [$\frac{\text{mol}}{\text{cm} \cdot \text{K}}$] ²⁴	$\frac{1.04 \times 10^{-4}}{M_w} \exp\left(-\frac{2362}{T}\right)$
k_{ad} [$\frac{\text{cm}}{\text{s}}$] ²⁷	$1.14 \times 10^{-5} f_v \exp\left[2416 \left(\frac{1}{303} - \frac{1}{T}\right)\right]$ for absorption $4.59 \times 10^{-5} f_v \exp\left[2416 \left(\frac{1}{303} - \frac{1}{T}\right)\right]$ for desorption
λ_{eq} [–] ^{27–29}	$f_v = \frac{18\lambda}{EW + 18\lambda}$ is the water volume fraction in ionomer $(1 - s) \left[\lambda_{303} + \frac{\lambda_{353} - \lambda_{303}}{50} (T - 303) \right] + 22s$ $\lambda_{303} = 0.043 + 17.81a - 39.85a^2 + 36.0a^3$ $\lambda_{353} = 0.300 + 10.8a - 16.0a^2 + 14.1a^3$ $a = RH$, and s is the local liquid saturation

polymer backbone may play a significant role in water uptake and transport dynamics.^{33,34} In particular, the gravimetric water uptake experiments conducted by Satterfield et al. have shown very long time constants for membrane water sorption while the desorption time constants were found to be an order of magnitude smaller.³⁴ They suggested that the sorption behavior may be explained through the contributions of interfacial water transport and stress relaxation in the polymer, whereas the desorption dynamics are dominated by the interfacial phenomena. Their experiments included a step in the humidity from fully dry to fully saturated conditions that resulted in significant relaxation behavior. Other studies have found much less pronounced impact of the relaxation dynamics when the membrane was subjected to smaller changes in the humidity conditions.³⁵ Similar results have been reported for ionomer thin films.³⁶ Dynamic vapor sorption (DVS) experiments by Kusoglu et al. have also shown relatively long water uptake times with a time constant that increases with membrane hydration.^{37,38} Their results also indicate that the asymmetry between sorption and desorption is not as pronounced as that observed in Satterfield et al.'s experiments. Such significant difference was also challenged by Silverman et al. who found the desorption to be only about twice faster than sorption.³⁹ In situ measurements of membrane swelling and hydration by GM researchers have also found the hydration and dehydration rates to be similar.⁴⁰

Based on the preceding discussion, it stands to reason to incorporate the slow ionomer water uptake process into the model. Silverman et al. have developed a coupled transport and mechanical model that captures such phenomena.^{31,39} However, adding the mechanical model will result in additional complexity that must be avoided for the purpose of performance modeling. Therefore, we simply use a dynamic variable to represent the quasi-equilibrium water content.^{15,41,42}

$$\lambda^* = (1 - \varphi)\lambda_{\text{eq}} + s_{\text{relax}}, \quad [19]$$

where φ determines the contribution of relaxation phenomena to the ionomer water uptake (a value of 0.15 is used for the simulations in this work), and s_{relax} is a variable accounting for the dynamics of stress relaxation. In particular, its dynamics are assumed to be first order:

$$\dot{s}_{\text{relax}} = -\frac{1}{\tau}(s_{\text{relax}} - \varphi\lambda_{\text{eq}}), \quad [20]$$

where λ_{eq} is the equilibrium water content given in Table III and τ is the relaxation time constant defined as:

$$\tau = \exp(2 + 0.2\lambda). \quad [21]$$

Note that the time constant was chosen to vary with the ionomer water content in accordance with evidence in the literature for this dependence.³⁷ Moreover, the stress relaxation is supposedly a thermally activated process.^{34,43} Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume an Arrhenius type temperature dependence for the associated time constant, which is not included here. Moreover, the effects of compressive stresses on membrane water uptake,^{40,44} and the contentiously debated discrepancy between water uptake by ionomer thin film and bulk ionomer^{36,37} are not taken into account in the model. Future parametric studies should aim at investigating these effects along with the effects of changes to the relaxation model parameters to understand their impact on the overall dynamic response of the cell.

Catalyst layer model.—Conventional catalyst layers of PEM fuel cells consist of Pt catalyst particles dispersed on ionomer bound carbon primary particles. The Pt particle size is in the range of 2–15 nm, while the primary carbon particles may have sizes of up to 80 nm based on the type of carbon support used. Early models of PEM fuel cells regarded CLs as interfaces with no consideration of their structural features. However, the significance of these structural features to the cell performance has been established. A particularly important issue that has resulted in significant efforts in CL modeling is the additional transport resistance observed at lowered Pt loading or with high loaded electrodes after degradation inducing cycles.^{45,46} The experimental approach has utilized limiting current measurements with varying gas composition and/or pressure to separate the pressure dependent and

pressure independent transport resistances.⁴⁷ The transport resistance in the CL is almost entirely independent of pressure and can be estimated with such limiting current measurements. Using this approach, it has been found that the CL transport resistance increases at lower Pt loadings^{48–53} and this increase is strongly dependent on the available Pt area for reaction. Therefore, the resistance appears to be due to the increased flux near each active site at lower loadings.¹ Temperature sensitivities were used to determine the contributions of Knudsen diffusion and permeation through the ionomer thin film to the electrode transport resistance.⁵⁴ The ionomer thin film was found to be the dominant cause of transport resistance in the CL. More recently, the impact of carbon support and its porous structure on the local reactant and bulk protonic transport resistances have been highlighted.^{2,55} Particularly, micro-pores with an opening smaller than 2 nm have been found to limit the reactant access to the Pt deposited inside the carbon pores. Despite such efforts, the root cause of the increased resistance remains largely unknown.⁵⁶ Several hypotheses have been made, but neither has been thoroughly validated.

Numerous models have been proposed to investigate the distribution of critical variables throughout the CLs and unveil the cause of increased transport resistance at lower loadings. The agglomerate model has been the most popular one for this purpose. In this model, the Pt particles are assumed to be dispersed on the primary carbon particles, many of which are assumed to aggregate during the fabrication process to form larger agglomerates covered by an ionomer thin film. The pore space in the CL is divided into two parts: the primary pores between carbon particles in each agglomerate, and the secondary pores formed between the agglomerates. Several variations of this model have been proposed where the intra-agglomerate space is either filled with water (i.e., water-filled agglomerates)^{57,58} or ionomer (i.e., ionomer-filled agglomerates).^{59,60}

Initially, a wide range of agglomerate sizes (100–1000 nm) had been used and significant variations of the ionomer film thickness (10–100 nm) had been reported to match the experimental data.^{61,62} Cetinbas et al. have developed a hybrid method for reconstruction of CL microstructure^{63,64} and reported an agglomerate size distribution between 25 to 300 nm with most agglomerates having a radius in the range of 75 to 200 nm.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the upper limit of the modeling values for the agglomerate size and film thickness is not corroborated by microscopy studies.⁶⁵ Therefore, the validity of this structural picture has come under further scrutiny. In light of these experimental observations, some have argued that the agglomerates probably do not exist and have proposed homogeneous models for the electrode.⁶² Others have continued to use the agglomerate models with agglomerate radii as small as 40 nm,^{22,66} which is essentially the size of a carbon primary particle. Of particular interest is the work by Nissan researchers⁶⁶ who showed that the conventional flooded-agglomerate model is not capable of reproducing experimental results with small agglomerate size and partial ionomer coverage. They modified the model to incorporate transport resistance near the electrochemical surface and showed that the modified model successfully predicted the experimental trends. Generally, more recent models rely on interfacial resistance at either the ionomer-gas or the Pt-ionomer interface or both to reproduce experimental transport resistance values. Jinnouchi et al. used molecular dynamics simulations to associate such resistance with a dense ionomer layer near the Pt surface.⁶⁷ Overall, attributing the additional resistance to interfacial phenomena has become increasingly common in the literature.

Despite its commonality, the interfacial resistance has not been experimentally verified. In fact, Liu et al. measured transport resistance in ionomer thin films and found no evidence of interfacial resistance when 3D diffusion was taken into account.⁶⁸ The uncertainty surrounding ionomer thin film properties, such as water uptake,^{36,69–71} ionic conduction,⁷² and gas permeation,⁶⁵ which can be significantly affected by confinement and substrate interactions,⁷³ has further contributed to the ambiguity of the source of this increased resistance. Some recent works have disputed the interfacial resistances or downplayed its significance. Darling has proposed an agglomerate model in which the increased resistance is mostly attributed to the

spherical diffusion through the agglomerate.⁷⁴ Others have investigated the inhomogeneity of mass fluxes near the Pt particles in agglomerates and the overlap between several agglomerates as possible culprits.^{75,76} Most recently, Muzaffar et al.⁷⁷ have investigated literature data with a previously developed agglomerate model⁷⁸ and found that the reduction in Pt loading probably leads to higher levels of flooding in both the CL and GDL due to reduced vaporization capability of the CL with decreased thickness. They also elaborated the fact that both experimental⁷⁹ and numerical studies^{80,81} show only partial coverage of catalyst particles with ionomer, leaving an alternative transport path for oxygen to reach the active sites without facing the interfacial resistance at the Pt-ionomer interface. Therefore, they concluded that the increased transport resistance may be attributable to reduced oxygen diffusivity due to pore blocking effects of liquid water and the interfacial resistance does not play a significant role. The importance of water management in successful use of low loaded electrodes was also pointed out by Srouji et al.⁸²

The preceding literature review shows that the structural picture of the electrodes and the understanding of the factors that contribute to the transport resistance are still incomplete. Therefore, further model development and experimental investigations are required. Nevertheless, it should be noted that for the purpose of a full cell simulation, most of the proposed models can be parameterized to capture the local oxygen transport resistance, which is the most critical outcome of such models. Moreover, Kulikovskiy has demonstrated that under certain conditions that are most relevant to typical fuel cell operation, the agglomerate model is not required.⁸³ Therefore, unless the goal of the model is to investigate different electrode designs at the nanoscale, a homogeneous model will be sufficient. Here, we use the model proposed by Hao et al.,⁶² which was shown to appropriately capture the increased resistance at lower loadings. The model achieves this by assuming full ionomer coverage and introducing rather significant interfacial resistances, which, in light of the above discussion, are disputable. Nevertheless, it is the general trend of the variations in the transport resistance that is required for our purposes. The model is briefly presented here and the reader is referred to the original publication for further details.⁶²

The model assumes Pt particles are deposited on primary carbon particles that are covered by an ionomer thin film. Liquid water in the pores of the electrode forms a thin film on top of the ionomer. This structural picture is used to derive the volume fraction of each phase (Pt, carbon, ionomer, and pore space) in both the anode and cathode CLs. However, the local transport resistance to hydrogen in the anode CL is assumed negligible and the calculations are only carried out for oxygen transport resistance. The oxygen in the pore space has to (1) dissolve in water, (2) diffuse through the water film, (3) dissolve in ionomer, (4) diffuse through the ionomer film, and (5) be adsorbed on the Pt surface. The model does not account for spherical diffusion, but uses instead a 1D diffusion equation to calculate the local flux of oxygen:

$$N_{O_2} = \frac{c_{O_2}^{\text{pore}} - c_{O_2}^{\text{Pt}}}{R_T}, \quad [22]$$

where N_{O_2} , $c_{O_2}^{\text{pore}}$, and $c_{O_2}^{\text{Pt}}$ are the oxygen flux near the Pt surface, oxygen concentration in the CL pore space, and its concentration at the Pt surface, respectively. R_T is the total local transport resistance:

$$R_T = R_{w,\text{int}} + \frac{\delta_w}{D_{O_2,w}} + R_{\text{ion},\text{int}} + \frac{\delta_{\text{ion}}^{\text{eff}}}{D_{O_2,\text{ion}}} + R_{\text{Pt},\text{int}}^{\text{eff}}, \quad [23]$$

where the first, third, and last terms describe the interfacial resistances at the liquid film, ionomer film, and Pt surfaces, respectively. The fractional terms denote diffusional resistance through the water and ionomer thin films. A key argument made in developing the model is a geometrical one, where an effective diffusion length through the ionomer is calculated based on the effective surface area of a single Pt particle and the effective ionomer surface area available for that particle:

$$A_{\text{Pt}}^{\text{eff}} = 4\pi r_{\text{Pt}}^2 \theta_{\text{Pt}}, \quad [24]$$

$$A_{\text{ion}}^{\text{eff}} = \frac{4\pi(r_c + \delta_{\text{ion}})}{n_{\text{Pt}}}, \quad [25]$$

where r_{Pt} and r_c are the Pt and carbon primary particle radii, respectively, θ_{Pt} denotes the fraction of Pt surface not covered with oxide species (see Reaction kinetics Sec.), δ_{ion} is the ionomer film thickness, and n_{Pt} is the number of Pt particles deposited on a single carbon particle. The effective ionomer film thickness is then calculated by:

$$\delta_{\text{ion}}^{\text{eff}} = \frac{A_{\text{ion}}^{\text{eff}}}{A_{\text{Pt}}^{\text{eff}}} \delta_{\text{ion}}. \quad [26]$$

The same scaling factor is used to scale the interfacial resistance at the Pt surface:

$$R_{\text{Pt},\text{int}}^{\text{eff}} = \frac{A_{\text{ion}}^{\text{eff}}}{A_{\text{Pt}}^{\text{eff}}} R_{\text{Pt},\text{int}}. \quad [27]$$

This scaling is one of the most important features of the model as it compensates for the fact that 3D spherical diffusion is neglected, and allows for the effects of high fluxes near sparsely deposited Pt particles to be captured by the model. It is imperative, however, to be cautious and not put too much emphasis on the source of the local transport resistance in this model. As mentioned earlier, the electrode structure assumed in this model is contentious. Nevertheless, on a macro-level, the predictions match the experimental observations, which is the most important aspect for full cell simulations.

Finally, another important assumption made in the model is that the interfacial resistances are proportional to the diffusional resistances. This is done due to the lack of measured data for the interfacial resistances at various interfaces. In particular, three fitting parameters k_1 , k_2 , and k_3 are introduced:

$$R_{\text{ion},\text{int}} = k_1 \frac{\delta_{\text{ion}}}{D_{O_2,\text{ion}}}, R_{\text{Pt},\text{int}} = k_2 \frac{\delta_{\text{ion}}}{D_{O_2,\text{ion}}}, R_{w,\text{int}} = k_3 \frac{\delta_w}{D_{O_2,w}} \quad [28]$$

Therefore, the various terms contributing to the transport resistance are identified. Noting that:

$$N_{O_2} = -\frac{i_{\text{ORR}}}{4F a_c x}, \quad [29]$$

where i_{ORR} is the volumetric ORR current density, a_c is the volumetric surface area of the ionomer, and x is the number fraction of carbon supported Pt particles (used to model the effects of catalyst dilution by bare carbon), Equation 22 can be written as:

$$R_T = \frac{4F a_c x (c_{O_2}^{\text{pore}} - c_{O_2}^{\text{Pt}})}{i_{\text{ORR}}}. \quad [30]$$

This algebraic equation can be solved numerically to find the oxygen concentration at the Pt surface. It is worth pointing out that an analytical solution is possible in the case that reaction order is assumed to be unity for ORR.⁶² Nevertheless, such an assumption may be unrealistic and in some cases inconsistent with the ORR kinetics model (see Reaction kinetics sec.). Therefore, we use the numerical solution with no assumption on the reaction order for ORR to avoid such inconsistencies.

It is also important to have a consistent set of structural parameters for the CLs. In particular, volume fraction of different phases ought to be known. These volume fractions can be calculated as follows:^{60,63}

$$\varepsilon_c = \frac{1}{\rho_c} \frac{L_c}{\delta_{\text{CL}}}, \quad [31]$$

$$\varepsilon_{\text{Pt}} = \frac{1}{\rho_{\text{Pt}}} \frac{L_{\text{Pt}}}{\delta_{\text{CL}}}, \quad [32]$$

$$\varepsilon_{\text{ion}} = (I/C) \varepsilon_c \frac{\rho_c}{\rho_{\text{ion}}} \left(1 + \frac{M_{H_2O} \rho_{\text{ion}}}{\rho_l EW} \lambda \right), \quad [33]$$

where ε_i is the volume fraction of i , $L_{c/\text{Pt}}$ is the carbon/Pt loading, ρ_i is the density of i , δ_{CL} is the CL thickness, and (I/C) denotes the ionomer to carbon ratio. The remaining CL volume constitutes its pore

space ($\epsilon_{CL} = 1 - \epsilon_c - \epsilon_{Pt} - \epsilon_{ion}$). Finally, the ionomer and liquid water film thicknesses are given by:

$$\delta_{ion} = r_c \left[\left(\frac{\epsilon_{ion}}{\epsilon_c} + 1 \right)^{(1/3)} - 1 \right], \quad [34]$$

$$\delta_w = \left[s\epsilon_{CL} \left(\frac{r_c^3}{\epsilon_c} \right) + (r_c + \delta_{ion})^3 \right]^{(1/3)} - (r_c + \delta_{ion}). \quad [35]$$

This completes the CL model used in this work. The reader is referred to⁶² for further details about this model. As for the parameter values, an I/C ratio of 1.1 and an electrochemically active area (ECSA) of 65 m^2_{Pt}/gr_{Pt} are assumed for both anode and cathode CLs. The anode Pt loading is assumed to be 0.1 mg/cm^2 with a Pt/C weight percentage of 30%, while the cathode Pt loading is changed between 0.4 and 0.05 mg/cm^2 , considering a Pt/C weight percentage of 40% in all cases.

Reaction kinetics.—Accurate models for the HOR and ORR half reactions are required for the model. HOR is known to have facile kinetics and does not result in significant performance loss under most typical conditions. Therefore, it is typically described using a simplified Butler-Volmer kinetics model. Here, we use the dual-pathway kinetics model proposed by Wang et al.,⁸⁴ where the volumetric current density is found by:

$$i_{HOR} = a_{Pt} \frac{c_{H_2}}{c_{H_2}^{ref}} \left[i_{OT} \left(1 - \exp\left(-\frac{2F\eta_{HOR}}{\vartheta RT}\right) \right) + i_{OH} \left(\exp\left(\frac{F\eta_{HOR}}{\vartheta RT}\right) - \exp\left(-\frac{F\eta_{HOR}}{\vartheta RT} - \frac{F\eta_{HOR}}{2RT}\right) \right) \right], \quad [36]$$

where a_{Pt} is the active volumetric surface area of Pt, i_{OT} and i_{OH} are the exchange current densities for the Tafel and Heyrovsky pathways, respectively, ϑ is a potential constant, and η_{HOR} is the anode overpotential.

The ORR kinetics are more complicated than the HOR and require further attention. Again, various forms of the Butler-Volmer model have been used to describe the ORR kinetics. More recently, the effects of surface coverage have been considered to derive a modified Tafel expression:⁸⁵

$$i_{ORR} = -i_{0,ca} a_{Pt} (1 - \theta_{PtO}) \left(\frac{c_{O_2}^{Pt}}{c_{O_2}^{ref}} \right)^{\gamma_{ca}} \exp \left[-\frac{\alpha_{ca}}{RT} F \eta_{ORR} - \frac{\omega \theta_{PtO}}{RT} \right], \quad [37]$$

where $i_{0,ca}$, α_{ca} , η_{ORR} , γ_{ca} , are the cathode exchange current density, transfer coefficient, ORR overpotential and reaction order, respectively, and ω denotes the energy parameter for the Temkin isotherm. The model results in a potential dependent Tafel slope. The oxide coverage is potential and time dependent as cyclic voltammograms (CV) show considerable difference between the anodic and cathodic sweeps.⁸⁵ A simple sigmoidal curve can be fitted to steady-state measurements:⁶²

$$\theta_{PtO} = \frac{1}{1 + \exp[22.4(0.818 - E)]}, \quad [38]$$

where E is the cathode potential vs. reference hydrogen electrode (RHE).

A more elaborate model for ORR kinetics is the double trap (DT) model originally proposed by Wang et al.^{86,87} The model includes two pathways for oxygen adsorption: a reductive adsorption (RA) and a dissociative adsorption (DA) pathway. The latter is followed by a reductive transition (RT) to adsorbed OH. In either case, the adsorbed OH is desorbed through a reductive step (RD) to form water. The original formulation neglected the reverse RD step and concluded that ORR activity is limited by the desorption of strongly adsorbed O and OH. Moore et al.⁸⁸ modified the model by including the backward reactions and refitting the parameters and found ORR to be adsorption limited. Moreover, the coverage of adsorbed species predicted by the modified model tends to zero at high overpotentials, whereas a constant

nonzero value was predicted with the original model.⁸⁶ The modified model is in better agreement with the experimental coverage values reported by Subramanian et al.⁸⁵

Other modifications to the DT model have been proposed as well. Markiewicz et al.⁸⁹ added two elementary reactions to the model: a reductive addition of a proton to oxygen molecule, producing an adsorbed protonated superoxide, and another reductive addition of proton followed by dissociation into adsorbed OH. Through these modifications, they reported a significant coverage of Pt sites by adsorbed HO₂ species at high overpotentials. More recently, Jayasankar et al.⁹⁰ replaced the DA step with an associative adsorption (AA) into adsorbed HO₂, which is followed by dissociative transition steps into adsorbed O and OH. They have also extended the model to include oxide growth mechanisms. Their results corroborate those of Markiewicz et al., as they also find an increase in HO₂ coverage at high overpotentials. This can have significance for studies with low loaded catalysts, as it provides another possible explanation for the reduced performance observed experimentally.

In this work, we use the modified DT model proposed by Moore,⁸⁸ as it has been parameterized for fuel cell polarization curves and used by others in full cell simulation.^{19,22} In this model, the ORR current can be described as the current from a single RD step:

$$i_{ORR} = a_{Pt} i^* \left[\exp\left(-\frac{\Delta G_{RD}^*}{kT}\right) \theta_{OH} - \exp\left(-\frac{\Delta G_{-RD}^*}{kT}\right) (1 - \theta_O - \theta_{OH}) \right], \quad [39]$$

where i^* is a reference prefactor (similar to the exchange current density in the Butler-Volmer model), k is the Boltzmann constant, ΔG_{RD}^* and ΔG_{-RD}^* are the potential dependent activation energies of the forward and backward RD step, respectively, and θ_i denotes the coverage of species i . The expressions for the activation energies and species coverage can be found in Ref. 88

The DT model is used for simulation case studies. However, when comparing with experimental data, we have chosen to work with the Tafel model in Equation 37 as its parameters are more intuitive and allow for easier parameterization of the model and can also reproduce the kinetic current predicted by the DT model with a varying reaction order.⁹¹

It should be noted that several effects have been neglected to simplify the model and avoid ambiguity in the results. First, the steady-state coverage profiles are used in the kinetic equations and the dynamics of oxide growth are ignored. These dynamics can be very slow as observed in low frequency impedance spectra^{92,93} and coulometric measurements.⁹⁴ Such dynamics can result in a hysteresis loop in the Tafel plot obtained through CVs even when a low potential prehold is used to reduce the oxide layer.⁹⁵ Therefore, oxide growth dynamics can have a profound impact on current transients, especially at higher potentials. However, including these dynamics adds to the complexity of a model, whose main focus is on mass transport and hydration effects. Hence, the oxide growth dynamics are neglected in this work. It should also be pointed out that the ORR activity is shown to be affected by presence of ionomer.^{96–98} This effect is not explicitly taken into account in the current model, since doing so will add to the uncertainty in the parameter set. Nevertheless, the exchange current density values (or the reference prefactor in the case of the DT model) used are supposed to capture this reduced activity.

Finally, the dependence of ORR kinetics on the relative humidity (RH) is also neglected in this work. This effect was reported by Xu et al.⁹⁹ to be significant, resulting in up to 100 mV difference at dry condition, even when protonic resistance in the CL was taken into account.¹⁰⁰ However, work by GM shows much less pronounced effects of RH on ORR kinetics.^{101,102} This discrepancy in the reported values could also be partly due to the effects of RH on water oxidation and subsequent catalyst poisoning.¹⁰³ The accessibility of Pt in the inner pores of porous carbon support is also shown to decrease at low RH values, which can result in loss of electrochemically active area.¹⁰⁴ Regardless, the RH effects on ORR kinetics may be included in the model by scaling the exchange current density in the BV model (i_0) or

565 the reference prefactor in the DT model (i^*). A scaling factor varying
 566 linearly with ionomer water content has been used for this purpose
 567 by Gerteisen et al.⁹ More recently, a scaling factor that changes with
 568 ionomer water content in a sigmoidal fashion has been proposed,⁴²
 569 which is in a better agreement with the experimental trends. Such
 570 scaling factors may be treated as fitting parameters in performance
 571 models to enhance the predictive capabilities. Nevertheless, we have
 572 chosen to leave this factor out, in order to simplify the model and allow
 573 for a clearer understanding of the transport phenomena.

574 **Mixed wettability model for porous layers.**—The main goal of
 575 a model for the porous layers is to define a mapping from operat-
 576 ing conditions and material properties to effective charge, heat, and
 577 mass transport properties. This problem has been studied on a variety
 578 of length scales ranging from microscopic lattice Boltzmann¹⁶ and
 579 pore network modeling studies¹⁰⁵ to macroscopic models with empiri-
 580 cal relationships.¹⁰⁶ The microscopic models, along with significant
 581 advances in experimental techniques to characterize porous layers at
 582 higher resolutions, can be used to develop a fundamental understand-
 583 ing of various transport phenomena in such layers. Even though such
 584 models cannot be used in full cell simulations due to significant com-
 585 putational requirements, they can be utilized to refine the macroscopic
 586 models of lower complexity.

587 Understanding the water phase change process and its transport
 588 through the porous layers is also of crucial importance. To this end,
 589 one particular model for porous layers that has gained more popularity
 590 in recent years is the mixed wettability pore size distribution (PSD)
 591 model that was proposed by Weber et al.¹⁰⁷ The model represents the
 592 pores as bundles of cylindrical capillaries that are randomly joined
 593 together using log-normal distributions. The key feature of the model
 594 is that it accounts for mixed wettability of the layers, which is ignored
 595 for the most part in many of the macroscopic models. Therefore, both
 596 hydrophilic (HI) and hydrophobic (HO) pores are considered to derive
 597 PSDs and contact angles. The original implementation by Weber
 598 et al.¹⁰⁷ assumed the HI and HO PSDs to be identical. Furthermore, a
 599 two-point discrete contact angle distribution was assumed. A similar
 600 model was used by Eikerling for transport studies in the cathode CL,
 601 although he did not consider mixed wettability, choosing to investigate
 602 the PSDs due to primary and secondary pores in the CL.¹⁰⁸ More re-
 603 cently, Villanueva studied effects of different PSDs for the HI and HO
 604 pores.²⁰ However, recent implementation of the model in a full cell
 605 simulation by the same group seems to be using similar PSDs for both
 606 HI and HO pores.¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that this model was further
 607 extended by Weber to include a continuous contact angle distribution
 608 (CAD).¹⁰⁹ This extension was shown to improve the predictive capa-
 609 bilities as well as the numerical robustness of the model for use in full
 610 cell simulations. A continuous CAD with a discrete PSD was used by

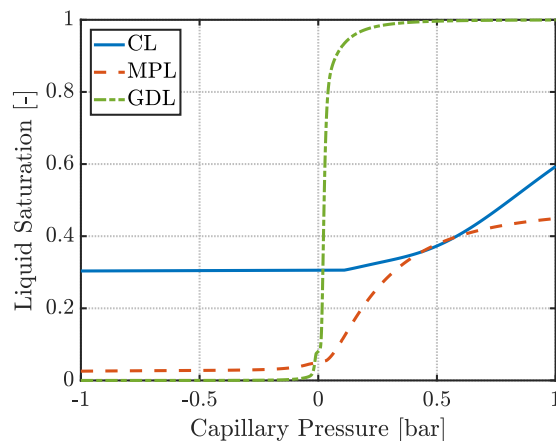


Figure 2. Water retention curves used in this work for the different porous layers.

Cheung et al.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, adoption of the continuous CAD has
 remained minimal in the literature due to unavailability of CAD for
 most of the porous layers of interest.

This work utilizes the mixed wettability model with an implemen-
 tation that allows for different PSDs to be used for HI and HO pores
 and also includes the continuous CAD. However, we obtain PSDs and
 contact angles from the literature, and therefore our implementation
 coincides with the original implementation by Weber et al.¹⁰⁷ when
 continuous CAD is not available.

The model equations can be found in the literature^{20,109} and are
 omitted here for space considerations. The inputs to the model include
 the PSDs, the fraction of HI pores, and CADs (currently two-point
 discrete CADs are used). The model is used to obtain water retention
 curves (liquid saturation vs. capillary pressure), relative permeabilities
 of the gas and liquid phases, Knudsen radii, and liquid-gas interfacial
 area available for phase change in the CLs, MPLs, and GDLs. The
 model calculations are conducted off-line and the resulting curves
 are used in the full cell simulations using cubic-spline fitting. The
 model parameters used for the simulation case studies in this work
 are presented in Table IV and the resulting water retention curves
 are shown in Fig. 2. The CL parameters used in this study are those
 reported by Mashio et al.¹¹¹ who obtained experimental PSDs through
 nitrogen adsorption. In particular, the PSD for a CL with graphitized
 Ketjen Black carbon support and an ionomer to carbon ratio of 0.9
 is used here. The MPL and GDL PSDs are those reported by Zhou

Table IV. Mixed wettability model parameters.

Parameter		Value		
		CL (GKB) ¹¹¹	MPL (SGL 24) ²³	GDL (SGL 24) ¹⁹
Characteristic pore radii [μm]	r_1	0.002	0.072	14.2
	r_2	0.006	0.125	34
	r_3	0.025	2	—
	r_4	0.080	—	—
Characteristic pore widths	s_1	0.60	0.35	1.00
	s_2	0.60	0.50	0.35
	s_3	0.45	0.90	—
	s_4	0.80	—	—
Characteristic pore fractions	f_1	0.05	0.45	0.28
	f_2	0.12	0.10	0.72
	f_3	0.73	0.45	—
	f_4	0.10	—	—
Hydrophilic volume fraction	F_{HI}	0.30	0.05	0.08
Hydrophilic contact angle	θ_{HI}	55	84	70
Hydrophobic contact angle	θ_{HO}	91	110	122

et al.^{19,23} for SGL 34 series that are also applicable for the SGL 24 series used in this work.

It should be noted that, as has been shown by Zenyuk et al.,¹⁷ the GDL PSD changes with compression. Therefore, it seems reasonable to use a PSD corresponding to higher compression under the land compared to the one used under the channel. However, using the PSDs that were reported for SGL series by Zenyuk et al. under various compressions,¹⁷ we found that the effective transport properties of interest show little change with the PSD variations at the compression levels of interest (1 to 1.5 MPa). Therefore, the changes in the PSD with compression under the land are ignored in this work. Finally, as it has been alluded to by Weber,¹⁰⁹ the bundle of capillaries model breaks down for wide PSDs, which in turn results in very low relative permeabilities predicted by the model. We have found this to be especially problematic for the MPL. Therefore, a 5-th order power law is used to estimate the liquid and gas phase relative permeabilities for the MPL.

Calculation of effective properties.—To complete the model formulation, effective properties, such as gas diffusivity and thermal conductivity values are needed. Some of the layers demonstrate rather considerable anisotropy due to their heterogeneous structure, which should be taken into account. Furthermore, the effects of nonuniform compression under the channel and lands should be considered to obtain an accurate in-plane distribution of the variables of interest.^{40,112} Accordingly, we have carefully examined the literature for the reported values of such transport properties. When applicable, the land-channel variations in parameter values are applied in a continuous fashion using sigmoid functions. This is in better agreement with the observed pressure distribution and also simplifies numerical convergence.

In this work, we use SGL 24BC and Nafion 211 as the diffusion media and membrane, respectively. These materials are chosen due to their standard application in the fuel cell literature and an abundance of experimental characterization data available for them. The layer thickness and porosities are listed in Table V. Note that a compressed GDL thickness is assumed based on a compressive load of 1 MPa, which is expected to result in a strain of about 0.2.¹¹⁵ While a uniform thickness is used for both the channel and land locations, the collapse of pore space is applied to the land area, where a reduced porosity of 0.69 is used for the GDL. The CL, and MPL are assumed to be incompressible. Furthermore, note that Nafion 211 has no reinforcement, yielding $\epsilon_{\text{ion}} = 1$ in the membrane region. Finally, it should be pointed out that an intermediate composite region is believed to exist between the MPL and GDL with transport properties that are considerably different from those of either layers. Since the properties of this intermediate region are not well known, it is not explicitly modeled in this work. The material property variations between adjacent layers are taken into account using smooth sigmoid functions to improve convergence. A detailed discussion of the effective transport properties used in the simulation studies follows.

• **Effective diffusivity** - In calculating the diffusivity of species i , contributions from both molecular and Knudsen diffusion are taken into account:

$$D_i = \left(\frac{1}{D_{\text{Kn},i}} + \frac{1}{D_{\text{mix},i}} \right)^{-1}, \quad [40]$$

where $D_{\text{Kn},i}$ is the Knudsen diffusivity and $D_{\text{mix},i}$ is the molecular diffusion coefficient. Knudsen diffusivity is given by:

$$D_{\text{Kn},i} = \frac{2r_{\text{Kn}}}{3} \sqrt{\frac{8RT}{\pi M_i}}, \quad [41]$$

where $r_{\text{Kn},i}$ is the Knudsen radius of the porous layer, which is obtained from the mixed wettability model in this work, and M_i is the molecular mass of species i . The molecular diffusion coefficient is given by:¹¹⁶

$$D_{\text{mix},i} = \left(\sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^{N_s} \frac{x_j}{D_{i,j}} \right)^{-1}, \quad [42]$$

where x_j is the molar fraction of species j and $D_{i,j}$ denotes the binary diffusion coefficient of species i in j .¹¹⁷ With D_i available, the effective diffusivity is calculated as

$$D_i^{\text{eff}} = f(\epsilon)g(s)D_i, \quad [43]$$

which accounts for the tortuous pathway for gas transport inside the porous layers as well as the pore blocking effects of liquid water accumulation. Several microstructure-property functional relationships have been proposed for both $f(\epsilon)$ and $g(s)$ in the literature, most of which take the form of a power law.^{118,119} Zamel et al. provide a good review of the relevant literature on this topic.¹²⁰ In this work, since we consider SGL 24BC as the diffusion medium, we have used the following relationship for $f(\epsilon)$ recently suggested by Holzer et al.:¹²¹

$$f(\epsilon)_{\text{IP}} = 1.074\epsilon - 0.335, \quad [44]$$

$$f(\epsilon)_{\text{TP}} = 0.906\epsilon - 0.252, \quad [45]$$

where the subscripts IP and TP stand for the in-plane and through-plane directions, respectively. These relationships were suggested for SGL 25BA series, which do not have the MPL coating. Due to lack of data, the same relationships are used for the MPL. The reader should be cautious in applying these relationships to other types of diffusion layers, as they are explicitly derived for SGL carbon papers. Typical power laws are better applicable in general and are suggested for different types of diffusion layers.

As for $g(s)$, the following relationships are used:¹¹⁸

$$g(s)_{\text{IP}} = (1-s)^{2.25}, \quad [46]$$

$$g(s)_{\text{TP}} = (1-s)^{2.15}. \quad [47]$$

These relationships were determined for Toray carbon papers and are used here due to lack of data for SGL series. It should be noted that the nearly isotropic relationships were developed for local conditions, i.e., domains with flat saturation distributions.¹²² In contrast, Niu et al. found a more significant difference between the liquid saturation effects on the in-plane and through-plane diffusion coefficients, fitting the results with cubic and quadratic power laws, respectively.¹¹⁹ Therefore, such functional relationships should not be taken for granted. Rather, we believe that it is a better practice to leave the order of dependence as a fitting parameter when experimental performance data are available.

Finally, the correction factor for effective diffusivity calculations in the CL is calculated as follows:^{19,108}

$$f(\epsilon)g(s) = (1-s)^2 \left(\frac{\epsilon - \epsilon_p}{1 - \epsilon_p} \right)^2 H(\epsilon(1-s) - \epsilon_p), \quad [48]$$

Table V. Thickness and porosity of cell layers.

Layer	Thickness [μm]	Volume Fraction/Porosity [–]
MB	25.4	1
ACL	5 (Pt loading of 0.1 mg/cm ²)	0.431
CCL	15/7.5/3.75/1.875 (Pt loading of 0.4/0.2/0.1/0.05 mg/cm ²)	0.479
MPL	60 ¹¹³	0.6 ¹¹⁴
GDL	140	0.8 (Channel) and 0.69 (Land)

where ε_p is the percolation threshold, which is assumed to be 0.25 in this work, and H is the Heaviside function.

• **Absolute permeability** - A range of values for absolute gas and liquid permeabilities are reported in the literature. In most of the cases, the absolute permeability of the GDL is found to be on the order of 10^{-11} m^2 .¹²³ The MPL permeability values are typically one to two orders of magnitude smaller than those for the GDL.¹²⁴ In spite of such measurements, it has been shown that these permeability values will result in a negligible pressure drop across the porous layers due to oversimplification of the capillary dominated transport through the use of Darcy's law.^{22,125} Therefore, it has been suggested that the experimentally reported values should be reduced by several orders of magnitude to obtain a realistic pressure drop.²² In addition to these considerations, Holzer et al. recently found that the through-plane permeability values are slightly higher than the in-plane values for SGL 25BA GDLs.¹²³ Taking these into account, the absolute permeabilities assumed in the model are given in Table VI.

• **Thermal conductivity and heat capacity** - There is an extensive literature on the thermal conductivity of the PEM fuel cell layers through both modeling and experimental means with somewhat scattered results. In selecting the thermal transport parameters, one has to pay attention to the changes in thermal conductivity with liquid saturation, in addition to the anisotropy and compression effects. Another difficulty is in distinguishing between the thermal properties of the MPL and the GDL from the data obtained from a composite layer. Here we briefly review the existing literature for SGL papers.

One of the earliest works in this area was by Khandelwal et al. who measured the TP thermal conductivities of various cell layers.¹²⁶ They reported a value of $0.31 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ for SGL BA series (with no MPL). Unfortunately, they did not report the number specification of the GDL. This can bear some significance as the SGL 24 series have more binder that can improve the fiber to fiber contact and increase the thermal conductivity.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, this value is well within the range of $0.26\text{-}0.37 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ reported by others for the same type of GDL.¹²⁷⁻¹³⁰ Accordingly, the base value of GDL TP thermal conductivity is set to $0.3 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ under the channel and to $0.45 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ under the land due to the inhomogeneous compression.¹³⁰ As for the IP thermal conductivity, a base value of $12 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ is used^{131,132} for both the channel and land locations as the effect of compression on IP conductivity is assumed to be minimal.

For the MPL thermal conductivity, the reported values are far more inconsistent than those for the GDL. Such discrepancies stem mostly from unknown contact resistances, uncertainties about the MPL thickness in a combined layer, assumed compressibility or incompressibility of the MPL with applied pressure, and the nature of the transition region between the MPL and GDL. These have resulted in reported values for the TP thermal conductivity ranging from 0.035 ¹³³ to $0.6 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$.¹³⁰ An interesting observation was made by Burheim et al.,¹³⁴ who argued that the MPL has a lower thermal conductivity than the GDL ($0.08 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$), with an intermediate composite region between the two layers that has the highest thermal conductivity with an essentially flat temperature distribution. Here we use a value of $0.15 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ for both the channel and land locations. This is based on the assumption of incompressibility of the MPL, which has

been questioned recently.^{134,135} Nevertheless, this value is in the range of reported values in the literature. The base value for the IP thermal conductivity of the MPL is chosen to be $3 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ based on the literature.¹³¹

The reported TP thermal conductivities for the CL range from 0.04 ¹³⁶ to $0.34 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$.¹³⁷ In this work, we use the base value of $0.27 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ reported by Khandelwal et al.¹²⁶ for both the IP and TP thermal conductivities assuming no anisotropy for the CL.¹³⁷

Liquid accumulation in the pores can alter the thermal conductivity of the porous layers. In this work, we use the following approximation to capture this effect for the TP thermal conductivity of the GDL:¹¹⁵

$$k_T^{\text{eff}} = k_{T,\text{base}} + 1.44s, \quad [49]$$

where $k_{T,\text{base}}$ is the base value reported in Table VI. For the TP thermal conductivity of other layers (CL and MPL) and the IP conductivity of all porous layers, volume averaging is employed:

$$k_T^{\text{eff}} = k_{T,\text{base}} + \varepsilon s k_{T,l}, \quad [50]$$

where $k_{T,l} = 0.569 \text{ W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})$ is the thermal conductivity of liquid water.

Finally, the thermal conductivity of the membrane in both the IP and TP directions is given by:¹³⁸

$$k_{T,\text{mb}}^{\text{eff}} = 0.177 + 3.7 \times 10^{-3} \lambda \quad [\text{W}/(\text{m} \cdot \text{K})]. \quad [51]$$

The volumetric specific heat capacities (ρc_p) used in the model are: 1.9 , 1.562 ,¹⁰ 1.98 ,^{10,139} and 1.5827 ^{139,140} $\text{J}/(\text{cm}^3 \cdot \text{K})$ for the membrane, CL, MPL, and GDL, respectively.

• **Electronic and ionic conductivity** - The electronic conductivity of the porous layers should be subject to similar considerations as the thermal conductivity. The values used for the various layers in this work are obtained from the work of Sadeghifar et al.¹⁴¹ and are listed in Table VI. As for the ionic conductivity of the membrane and the CLs, the conductivity is calculated as:¹⁰⁷

$$\sigma_2^{\text{eff}} = \varepsilon_{\text{ion}}^{1.5} \cdot 0.35(f_v - 0.045)^{1.5} \exp \left[\frac{15000}{R} \left(\frac{1}{303.15} - \frac{1}{T} \right) \right]. \quad [52]$$

The debated suppression of ionic conductivity in thin ionomer films is not taken into account in this work.¹⁴² Future work should aim at investigating such effects through parametric studies.

• **Evaporation and condensation rates** - A value of $2 \times 10^{-2} \text{ mol}/(\text{cm}^2 \cdot \text{s})$ is used for the condensation rate to avoid the non-physical case of oversaturated gas phase.¹⁹ The evaporation rate is set to $2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ mol}/(\text{cm}^2 \cdot \text{s})$. Even though this value is lower than the condensation rate, it yields rather fast evaporation kinetics, which agrees with the experimental findings of Zenyuk et al.¹⁴³ that showed the evaporation to be transport-limited. The discrepancy between the evaporation and condensation rates is corroborated by experimental findings in the literature.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the rate of phase change is expected to decline with temperature,¹⁴⁴ which is not taken into account in this work. It should be noted that the evaporation rate is a critical parameter and may have a significant impact on water balance in the cell depending on the operating conditions. Future work should

Table VI. Transport parameters used in the model.

		Through-Plane			In-Plane		
		CL	MPL	GDL	CL	MPL	GDL
Channel	$K_l^{\text{abs}} [\text{cm}^2]$	2×10^{-13}	3×10^{-11}	4×10^{-9}	2×10^{-13}	3×10^{-11}	3×10^{-9}
	$K_g^{\text{abs}} [\text{cm}^2]$	2×10^{-12}	3×10^{-11}	4×10^{-9}	2×10^{-12}	3×10^{-11}	3×10^{-9}
	$k_T [\frac{\text{W}}{\text{m} \cdot \text{K}}]$	0.27	0.15	0.3	0.27	3	12
	$\sigma_1 [\frac{\text{S}}{\text{cm}}]$	2	2	6	2	50	51
Land	$K_l^{\text{abs}} [\text{cm}^2]$	2×10^{-13}	3×10^{-11}	4×10^{-9}	2×10^{-13}	3×10^{-11}	3×10^{-9}
	$K_g^{\text{abs}} [\text{cm}^2]$	2×10^{-12}	3×10^{-11}	4×10^{-9}	2×10^{-12}	3×10^{-11}	3×10^{-9}
	$k_T [\frac{\text{W}}{\text{m} \cdot \text{K}}]$	0.27	0.15	0.45	0.27	3	12
	$\sigma_1 [\frac{\text{S}}{\text{cm}}]$	2	2.5	9	2	50	51

aim at a sensitivity analysis for this parameter to better understand its impact on the performance in the two phase regime.

Boundary conditions.—The model boundary conditions (BCs) are given in Table VII, where \mathbf{n} denotes the unit normal vector. Symmetry boundary conditions (i.e., zero flux) are applied at the top and bottom boundaries of the modeling domain shown in Fig. 1. The temperature BCs include two heat flux BCs at the channel and land locations. The channel heat flux corresponds to convective heat transport with the gas stream ($h_{\text{conv}} = 0.2 \frac{\text{W}}{\text{cm}^2 \cdot \text{K}}$), while the land BC accounts for the thermal contact resistance ($R_{T,\text{cont}} = 2 \frac{\text{cm}^2 \cdot \text{K}}{\text{W}}$) between the plate and the GDL. The molar fractions of gas species are also modeled with mass flux BCs at the channel location to account for the convective mass transport resistance. In the corresponding equation, $D_{i,j}^{\text{free}}$ denotes the bulk diffusivity of species i in species j , Sh is the dimensionless Sherwood number ($=2.7$), and D_h is the hydraulic diameter of the channel. Dirichlet BCs are used for gas pressures at the channel boundaries. The liquid pressure BC requires further attention. Various types of BCs have been used for this purpose, including Dirichlet BC for liquid saturation or capillary pressure,¹⁴⁵ as well as Neumann type BC.⁹ In this work, we use the following BC:

$$-\mathbf{n} \cdot \left(-\frac{\rho_l K_l^{\text{eff}}}{\mu_l} \nabla p_l \right) = N_l = -k_{l,\text{flux}} s \left[0.5 \left(1 + \tanh \left(\frac{s - s_0}{\sigma_s} \right) \right) \right], \quad [53]$$

where $k_{l,\text{flux}}$ is a parameter determining rate of water outflow, s_0 controls the liquid saturation at which water outflow begins, and σ_s is a dimensionless parameter used to smooth the transition between no flux BC and the outflow BC. Note that the parameter s_0 essentially accounts for the break-through pressure, which is the capillary pressure required for liquid water to flow out of the porous GDL. The values of the three parameters used in this work are: $k_{l,\text{flux}} = 8 \times 10^{-4} \frac{\text{g}}{\text{cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}}$, $s_0 = 0.1$, and $\sigma_s = 0.01$. It should be pointed out that this BC can be parameterized to be identical to the BC used by Zhou et al.¹⁹ However, it has the advantage that the parameters are more intuitive, which can simplify the parameterization process.

Numerical implementation and model validation.—The model is implemented in the commercial finite element software COMSOL Multiphysics 5.3a. A mapped mesh consisting of 5080 quadrilateral elements is used throughout the domain with increased mesh density in the membrane and catalyst layers. Furthermore, the mesh density is exponentially increased near the boundaries between adjacent layers to accommodate the different material properties. The backward differentiation formula (BDF) method is used for time stepping and the maximum time step size is limited to 200 milliseconds. The resulting linear system is solved using the MUMPS direct solver provided in COMSOL. To improve the computational efficiency, an under-relaxation scheme is employed, where the value of liquid saturation at the previous time step is used to calculate effective properties such as the diffusion coefficients at the current time step. This was achieved using the Previous Solution operator in COMSOL 5.3a. In a preliminary study, it was found that the under-relaxation scheme can result in up to

five times faster solutions in the two-phase regime. The results for the 340 seconds long simulation case studies in this paper were computed in 5 to 12 hours depending on the condition, with the most difficult cases being the ones where the transition from dry to wet conditions takes a long time. The simulations were run on a desktop computer with a 3.5 GHz processor and 16 GB of RAM.

The model is validated with experimental data by Gerteisen et al.⁹ The results can be found in the Supplementary Information accompanying this paper.

Simulation Case Studies

To better understand the transient behavior of the cell, several simulations are conducted using the model developed in this work. In particular, the transient performance under a variety of temperature and humidity conditions as well as different Pt loadings in the cathode CL is investigated. Furthermore, we investigate the cell dynamics under both potential and current control operating modes. The former constitutes running the model with voltage as an input, while the latter takes the cell current density as the input. As will be shown, the dynamics of the cell response can be dramatically different depending on the operating condition. All of the simulations in this work were conducted at a pressure of 1.5 bar for both sides. The gas feeds are assumed to be pure hydrogen and air for the anode and cathode sides, respectively. Finally, same RH values are used for both the anode and cathode sides and initial conditions for all simulations are identical.

Potential-dynamic simulations.—The first set of simulations are those under voltage control or potential-dynamic mode of operation. Here a voltage profile is applied and the current density is allowed to vary with time. The time varying current density also means that the rate of water production changes with time, which complicates the analysis of the dynamics to some extent. Nevertheless, useful insights can be obtained from these simulations.

The voltage profile for these simulations is shown in Fig. 3. The profile is made up of the following voltage steps: 0.8-0.6 V, 0.6-0.4 V, 0.4-0.6 V, and 0.6-0.8 V. Note that the step changes are smooth and happen over a period of 1 second for numerical convergence. This profile allows us to inspect the transients during both load increments and decrements. The 100 second hold time used at 0.6 and 0.4 V does not allow the system to fully reach its steady state conditions. Nevertheless, this hold time is limited due to computational reasons and is long enough for the model to settle to a quasi steady state before another change in the load.

Overall, 36 simulations are conducted under the potential-dynamic mode based on a full factorial design for variations in RH (30, 60, and 90%), operating temperature (40, 60, and 80°C), and cathode Pt loading (0.4, 0.2, 0.1, and 0.05 mg/cm²). Note that the CL thickness is assumed to scale linearly with the Pt loading. The resulting current density dynamics for all 36 simulations are shown in Fig. 4. The corresponding average water contents in the membrane for all the cases are shown in Fig. 5. Furthermore, for the conditions that result in liquid buildup in the GDL, the average liquid saturations in the cathode

Table VII. Model boundary conditions (*denotes zero flux BC for the corresponding variable).

Variable	CH	LAND	MPL CL	CL MB
ϕ_1	*	an:0, ca: $E_{\text{cell}}/i_{\text{cell}}$	—	*
ϕ_2	—	—	*	—
T	$-\mathbf{n} \cdot (-k_T^{\text{eff}} \nabla T) = h_{\text{conv}}(T_{\text{cell}} - T)$	$-\mathbf{n} \cdot (-k_T^{\text{eff}} \nabla T) = \frac{1}{R_{T,\text{cont}}}(T_{\text{cell}} - T)$	—	-
x_i	$-\mathbf{n} \cdot (-c_g D_{i,j}^{\text{free}} \nabla x_i) = \frac{Sh}{D_h}(c_{g,\text{CH}} x_{i,\text{CH}} - c_g x_i)$	*	-	-
p_l	$-\mathbf{n} \cdot \left(-\frac{\rho_l K_l^{\text{eff}}}{\mu_l} \nabla p_l \right) = N_l$	*	—	*
P_g	P_{CH}	*	—	*
λ	—	—	*	—

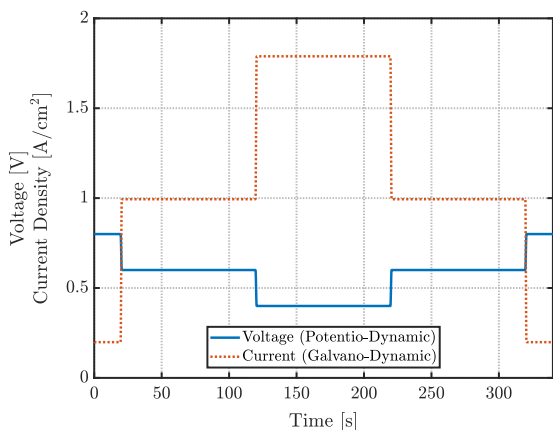


Figure 3. Voltage and current profiles used for potention- and galvano-dynamic simulations, respectively.

GDL are shown in Fig. 6 (the cases with $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$, $\text{RH} = 60\%$ and Pt loadings of 0.4 and 0.2 mg/cm^2 also result in some liquid saturation during the voltage hold at 0.4 V, but are not shown in the figure). The anode side remains dry for the simulated conditions, which is mostly due to the high EOD.

Based on these results, several conclusions can be made about the through-the-membrane phenomena affecting the transient response of the cell. The following analysis of the average response is organized

based on the step change in the load. Discussions on the distribution of the critical variables are provided later in the paper.

Voltage step from 0.8 to 0.6 V.—During this step change, the current responds monotonically with varying settling times that decrease with channel RH, i.e., a faster response for more humidified conditions, which can be attributed to sufficient membrane humidification. This can be observed in Fig. 5, which shows the membrane water content dynamics, where the transient response is found to significantly depend on the operating conditions. In particular, under dry conditions that dry out the membrane prior to the voltage step down, the membrane water content increases monotonically with the step change in voltage. This increase is less pronounced at higher temperatures, where further increase in temperature at higher loads results in lower water uptake by the membrane. As the humidity increases and the membrane holds enough water in its initial state prior to the step change, we observe some cases with reverse response, i.e., an initial decrease in the membrane water content followed by an increasing trend (see, for example, the case with $T = 40^\circ\text{C}$, $\text{RH} = 60\%$ and a Pt loading of 0.4 mg/cm^2 in Fig. 5). This reverse response is due to EOD that tends to dry out the anode side of the membrane and is only seen at higher current densities. Another observation is that the changes in the membrane hydration are much more pronounced at lower temperature, where slight variations in water production rate can significantly alter the membrane water content. The slow relaxation dynamics discussed in the Model Formulation section are also evident in Fig. 5. In particular, we note that the relaxation dynamics become slower at higher water contents. These relaxation effects are not observable in the current dynamics, since the ohmic drop at this relatively low load

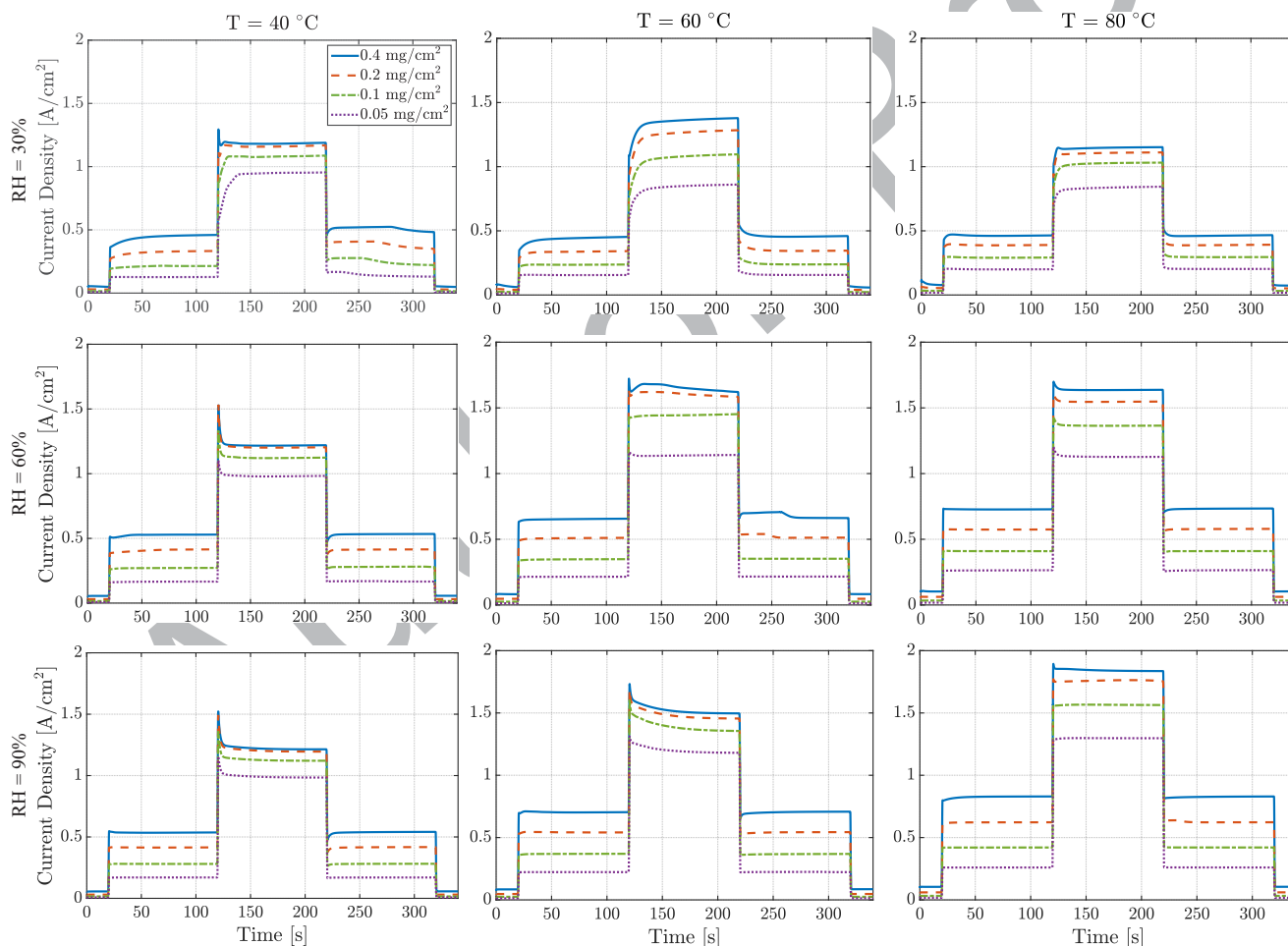


Figure 4. Average current dynamics for the potention-dynamic simulations.

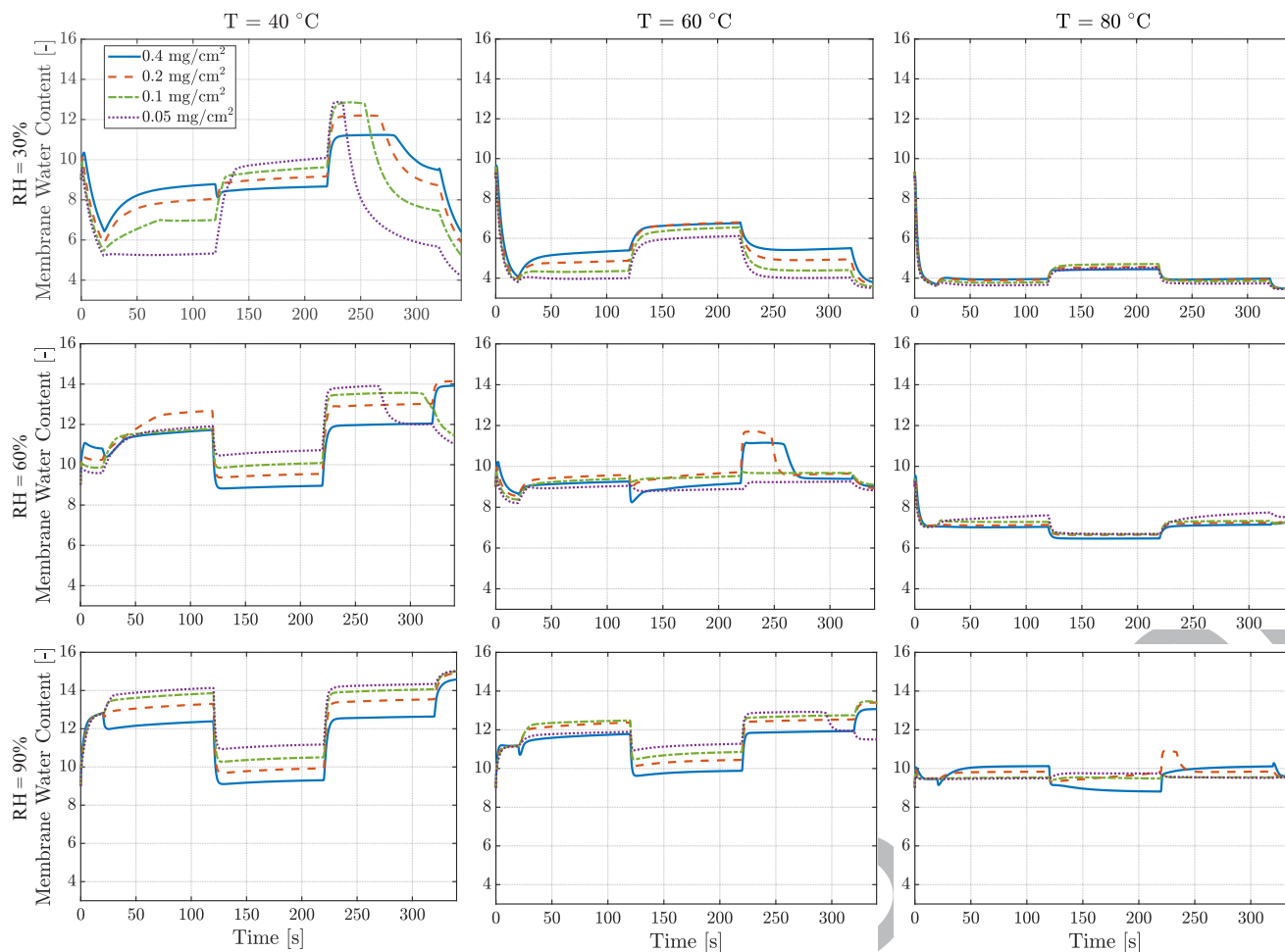


Figure 5. Average membrane water content dynamics for the potio-dynamic simulations.

is insignificant. Finally, as shown in Fig. 6, some liquid water builds up in the cathode GDL after the voltage step down for three conditions with low temperature and high humidity. As expected, the build up of liquid is faster under cooler and wetter conditions, while for some conditions the dynamics are slow and the liquid saturation does not reach a steady state within the 100 second hold at 0.6 V (see, for example, the case with $T = 40^\circ\text{C}$, $\text{RH} = 60\%$ and a Pt loading of 0.4 mg/cm^2 in Fig. 6).

The figures also demonstrate that the cathode Pt loading has an impact on the transient response by influencing the current generation, membrane hydration, and liquid saturation dynamics. More specifically, Fig. 4 shows that higher current densities are achieved with higher loadings, which in turn affect the membrane humidification process, especially under drier conditions, where the membrane is humidified with the electrochemically generated water. This can be clearly seen in Fig. 5 for $T = 40^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 30\%$. It is observed that with higher loadings, the water generation is high enough to humidify the membrane, whereas with a loading of 0.05 mg/cm^2 , the membrane remains dry after the step change in the voltage. Additionally, Fig. 5 shows that the membrane water content is indeed influenced by the Pt loading, which can be associated with different levels of current and heat generation as well as a change in the overall water balance in the cell with the CL thickness. It can also be observed that the cases with higher cathode Pt loading show higher levels of liquid saturation in the GDL (Fig. 6). This can be attributed to the fact that higher Pt loading results in higher current density and therefore higher rate of water generation. In addition, the resulting variations in the CL thickness with changes in Pt loading mean that lower loaded CLs generate more heat on a volumetric basis, which creates a stronger drive for

water evaporation. The impact of Pt loading on the overall water balance in the cell is discussed in further detail below as well as in the discussion of the galvano-dynamic simulations, where the results are not convoluted by varying levels of water generation.

Voltage step from 0.6 to 0.4 V.—The second voltage step results in more involved dynamics in some cases, but the current response can be categorically identified as being monotonically increasing or displaying an overshoot. In particular, the drier conditions tend to result in a monotonic increase in the current density (see the first row of Fig. 4). Similar to the previous step, this monotonic response is associated with a hydrating membrane. This is mostly evident, for instance, at $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 30\%$, where the relaxation dynamics for the membrane water uptake also play a role in the slow increase in current density. Under wetter conditions, however, the gas phase in the cathode CL is saturated with vapor and the membrane protonic resistance is low enough prior to the step change. This low protonic resistance can support high current generation immediately after the step change. The high current density dries out the anode side of the membrane with EOD and increases the protonic resistance, which results in a performance drop as seen in Fig. 4. The overshoot response due to EOD is relatively fast and settles within 5 seconds of the step change, when the generated water on the cathode side diffuses back toward the anode and rehydrates the dry portion of the membrane.¹⁴⁶ It is also observed that the overshoot becomes progressively less significant as the temperature increases. The large overshoots at low temperatures can be attributed to the high sensitivity of the membrane hydration state to changes in the current density. This high sensitivity stems from more rapid changes in the environmental conditions (T and RH) in the

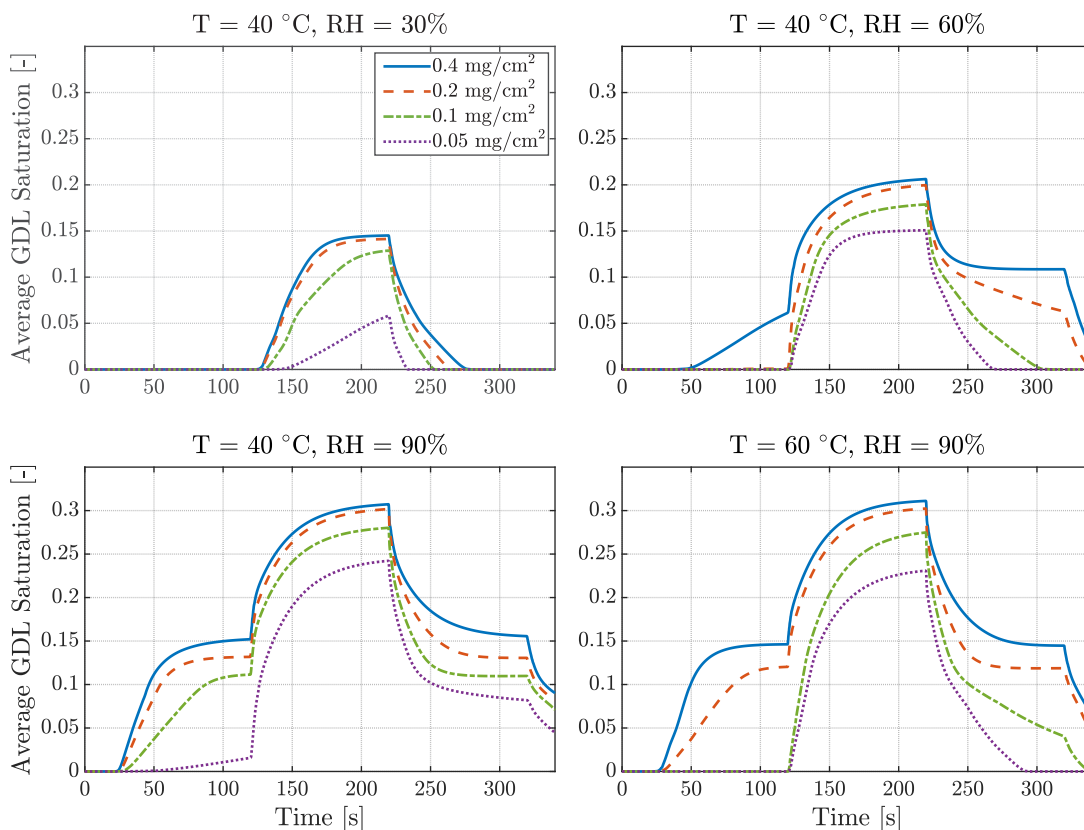


Figure 6. Average liquid saturation dynamics in the cathode GDL for the potentiodynamic simulations.

1013 CL and the increased protonic resistance at these lower temperatures.
 1014 It should be noted that flooding of the porous layers, discharging of
 1015 the electrochemical double layer, and mass transport limitations are
 1016 also believed to lead to this type of behavior.⁴ However, the overshoot
 1017 in the presented results is due to membrane dry out with EOD,
 1018 which is in agreement with other experimental results.¹⁴⁶ Following
 1019 this overshoot, the wetter conditions display a relatively slow drop in
 1020 performance during the hold at 0.4 V (e.g., see the case with $T = 60^{\circ}\text{C}$
 1021 and $\text{RH} = 90\%$ in Fig. 4). This slow drop in performance is attributable
 1022 to liquid build up in the GDL that incurs a mass transport resistance
 1023 and is most significant for the cases where the current density goes
 1024 above 1.5 A/cm^2 .

1025 The case with $T = 60^{\circ}\text{C}$, $\text{RH} = 60\%$, and a Pt loading of 0.4
 1026 mg/cm^2 displays interesting dynamics after the voltage step. An initial
 1027 overshoot due to EOD is observed that causes the current density
 1028 to drop by about 0.1 A/cm^2 within 2 seconds of the step change.
 1029 This drop is then followed by an increase of about 0.06 A/cm^2 during
 1030 the next 15 seconds. This increase is due to liquid accumulation in
 1031 the CL that helps the membrane humidification without causing mass
 1032 transport limitations. Afterwards, the slow current decay due to liquid
 1033 accumulation in the cathode GDL can be observed, which continues
 1034 until the next voltage step. In fact, this particular order of liquid build
 1035 up in the porous layers (the CL pores followed by those of the MPL
 1036 and GDL) is seen under most typical conditions. However, the observability
 1037 of this behavior from measurements of current alone depends
 1038 on the water retention capabilities of the different layers as well as the
 1039 operating conditions used for the experiments.

1040 As for the membrane water content, the most notable observation
 1041 is that for drier conditions where the gas phase in the CL remains un-
 1042 saturated, this voltage step results in better membrane humidification
 1043 due to higher rates of water generation (Fig. 5). However, this trend
 1044 is reversed for wetter conditions, where the water content drops after
 1045 this voltage step. This drop is again attributable to water removal to
 1046 the cathode through higher EOD at higher current densities. Addition-

1047 ally, the variations in membrane water content with the voltage step
 1048 are more significant at lower temperatures as was the case during the
 1049 previous step change. Average liquid saturation in the cathode GDL
 1050 also exhibits trends similar to those for the previous step (Fig. 6).
 1051

1052 **Voltage step from 0.4 to 0.6 V and from 0.6 to 0.8 V.**—Similar to
 1053 the previous steps, the current response to the step increase in voltage
 1054 is either monotonically decreasing (as is the case at $T = 60^{\circ}\text{C}$ and
 1055 $\text{RH} = 30\%$) or exhibits an undershoot. Again, this behavior can be
 1056 directly correlated with membrane water content and further discus-
 1057 sion is omitted here. Instead, we focus on the trends during the dry-out
 1058 phase when the voltage is increased. In particular, we note that under
 1059 some drier conditions, the performance starts to decay after a while.
 1060 This is seen, for instance, for all Pt loadings at $T = 40^{\circ}\text{C}$ and
 1061 $\text{RH} = 30\%$ in Fig. 4. Looking at the membrane water content dynamics in
 1062 Fig. 5, we note that this decay in performance is directly related to
 1063 membrane water loss. This behavior can be explained by a moving
 1064 evaporation front that starts in the GDL and progresses toward the
 1065 CL as time goes on. Therefore, immediately after the step change the
 1066 ionomer in the cathode CL is in contact with a liquid reservoir, which
 1067 improves water uptake. As the evaporation front reaches the CL and
 1068 the accumulated liquid evaporates, the membrane starts to lose water,
 1069 which results in further performance decay. In these simulations, the
 1070 time delay between the step change in voltage and the evaporation of
 1071 CL liquid water depends on the operating conditions as well as the CL
 1072 thickness, with hotter conditions and thinner CLs generally resulting
 1073 in the shortest time delays. More generally though, this time delay is
 1074 determined by the HI contact angle of the CL as well as the evaporation
 1075 rate used in the model. A lower HI contact angle makes evaporation
 1076 of water in the HI pores more difficult and prolongs the time delay,
 1077 whereas a high evaporation rate reduces this delay.

1078 Finally, it should be mentioned that based on experimental results,
 1079 a better performance may be expected at 0.6 V after the hold at 0.4 V
 1080 (220-320 seconds) compared to the performance at 0.6 V before the
 1081

hold at 0.4 V (20-120 seconds). This performance gain is attributable to better membrane hydration as well as clearing of the Pt sites from oxide coverage at low potentials. This improved performance will diminish slowly as the membrane dehydrates and oxide species grow on the Pt surface again. As explained in the Model Formulation section though, this work only captures the former dynamics, as the oxide growth is ignored in our model and steady state coverage values are used.

The characteristic responses observed after the last voltage step are similar to those discussed so far and further discussion is omitted here.

To further investigate the transient phenomena through the cell's thickness, Fig. 7 illustrates the average liquid saturation in the CL and GDL under both channel (CH) and land (LN) regions of the cell, the average ionomer water content in the anode and cathode CLs, and the normalized membrane water flux defined as:

$$\beta = \frac{N_{w,mb}}{i_{cell}/2F}, \quad [54]$$

which is averaged over the area of the membrane. As a convention, a positive value denotes water flux toward the cathode. The presented results are for the cold and dry conditions ($T = 40^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 30\%$) with high (0.4 mg/cm^2) and low (0.05 mg/cm^2) Pt loading in the cathode CL.

First, we observe that immediately after the second step decrease in voltage (0.6 to 0.4 V at 120 seconds), the cathode CL becomes flooded. This flooding takes place within 10 seconds of the step change. Also, note that the CL flooding occurs slightly faster under the land location compared to the channel location. After all the hydrophilic pores in the CL are filled, water starts to condense in the GDL. Most of the condensation happens under the land, where lower temperature and higher resistance to vapor transport promotes the phase change process. This liquid water then flows toward the channel location. This can be seen in the figure, as there is a delay between liquid accumulation under the land and channel regions of the GDL. This delay is governed by the time it takes for the liquid water condensed under the land to reach the channel location. After the voltage is increased back to 0.6 V at 220 seconds, we see that the GDL dry out is initiated under the channel. The dry out happens at a slower pace under the land location. Once the GDL is completely dry, the CL starts to lose its liquid water. As for the ionomer water content in the CL, two main observations can be made. First, at lower loads the ionomer water contents in both CLs are close and as the load is increased, a more significant distribution develops across the membrane thickness with intensified EOD and

back diffusion. Second, we note that after the load is decreased, the CLs maintain a high ionomer water content as long as the liquid water in the CL has not evaporated. After that liquid water has evaporated though, the cathode ionomer loses water to its pore space, which also diminishes the water back diffusion to anode, which in turn results in dry out of the anode CL. This behavior can also be seen in the last column of Fig. 7, where the smallest values for β are obtained when the cathode CL has liquid water while the anode CL is dry, which is in agreement with experimental measurements by Adachi et al.¹⁴⁷ It is also seen that this flux is significantly reduced after the liquid reservoir in the cathode CL has evaporated (see the plots between 220 and 300 seconds). This is specially pronounced for the case with low Pt loading. Another important observation from the normalized water flux plots is the significant overshoots and undershoots during the step changes. This behavior is associated with EOD that immediately drives water to the cathode side, whereas the back diffusion requires time to establish a balancing water flux to counter EOD. Such transients qualitatively agree with experimental measurements.^{148,149} In addition, it can be seen that higher current densities generally tend to force more water toward the cathode (larger β values) due to intensified EOD, which is in agreement with experimental results.^{150,151}

Finally, the distribution of critical variables for some conditions are shown in Figs. 8-9. In particular, the distributions for the membrane and cathode temperatures, cathode liquid saturation, ionomer water content, and volumetric ORR current density are shown for high (0.4 mg/cm^2) and low (0.05 mg/cm^2) Pt loadings. These distributions are obtained at the end of the hold at 0.4 V. The temperature plots show a rather significant temperature gradient (about 1.5°C) across the MPL thickness, which is due to its low thermal conductivity. This low conductivity also results in heating the CL and enhances water evaporation.²³ The cathode MPL and GDL remain free of liquid water under these hot conditions, whereas the hydrophilic pores in the cathode CL are filled with liquid water for the hot and wet ($T = 80^\circ\text{C}$, $\text{RH} = 90\%$) conditions. A considerable gradient of water content is established across the thickness of the CCM, with a dry anode CL and a wet cathode CL. There is a close correspondence between the location of maximum water content in the cathode CL and the volumetric rate of ORR. In particular, under the dry conditions (Fig. 8), protonic resistance is a major contributor to performance loss. Therefore, the highest volumetric current is observed under the land location, where the membrane water content is highest. At higher humidities (Fig. 9) the location of maximum current generation moves toward the channel

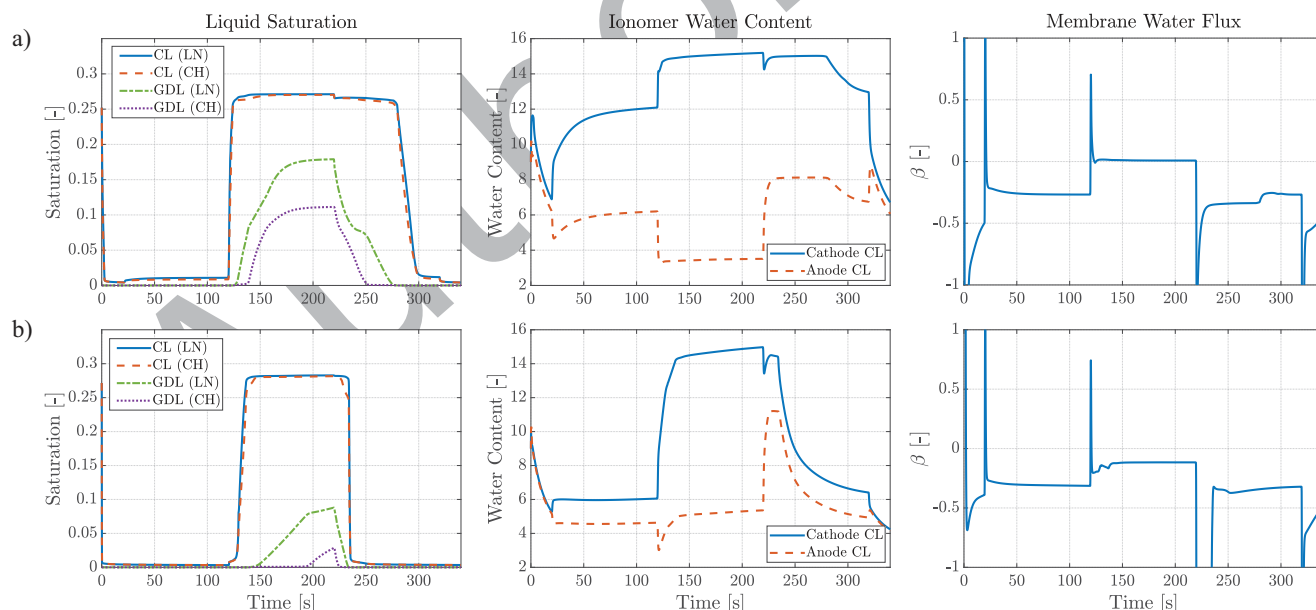


Figure 7. Average dynamics of liquid saturation, ionomer water content in the CLs, and normalized membrane water flux for the potention-dynamic simulations at $T = 40^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 30\%$ with cathode Pt loading of a) 0.4 , and b) 0.05 mg/cm^2 .

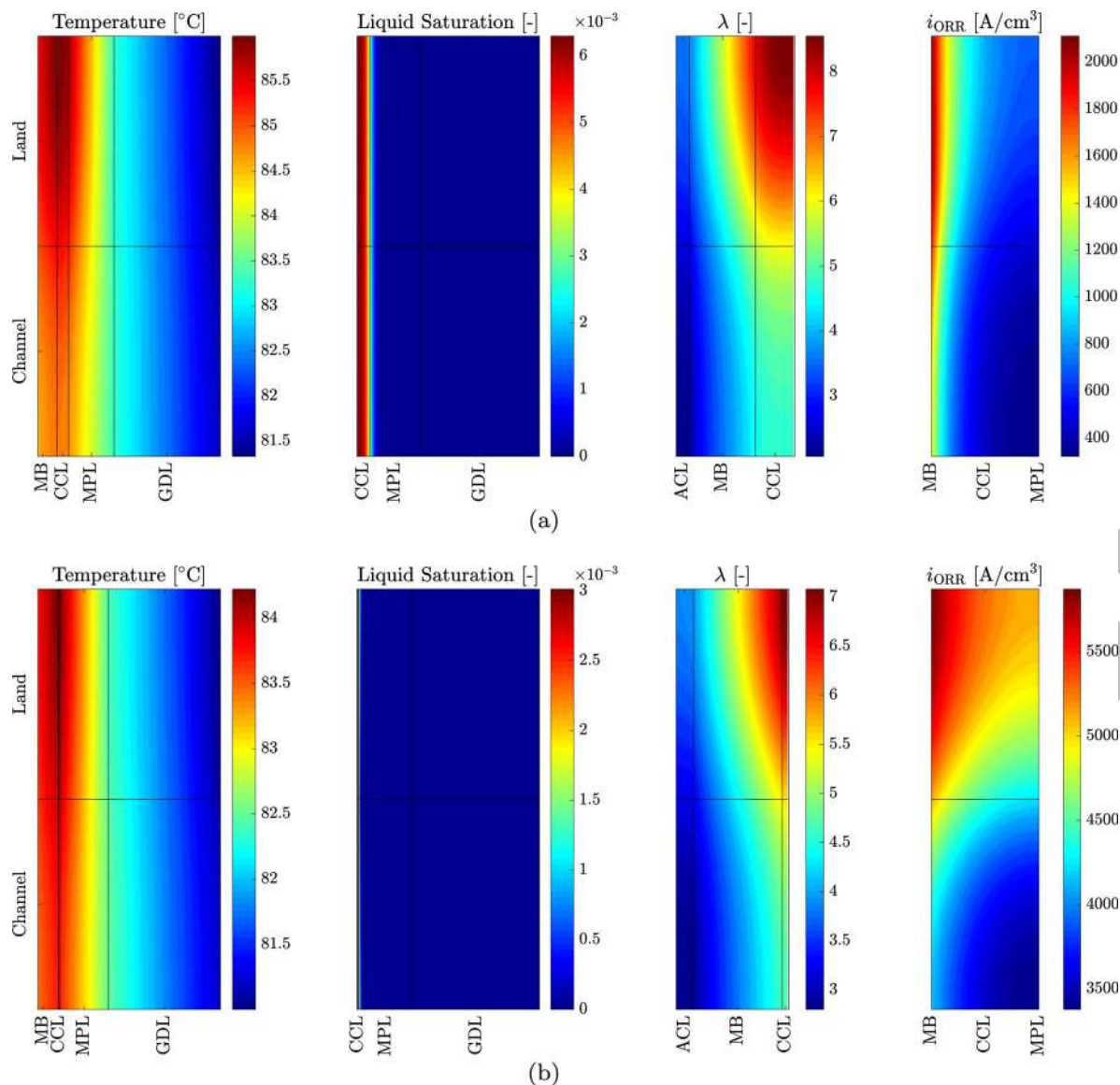


Figure 8. Distribution of temperature, liquid saturation, ionomer water content, and ORR volumetric current density for the potio-dynamic simulations under the hot-dry ($T = 80^{\circ}\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 30\%$) operating condition at $t = 219$ s (highest load just before the following voltage step up) with Pt loadings of: a) 0.4 and b) 0.05 mg/cm^2 .

1161 region, where the mass transport limitations are minimal. Furthermore, 1162 a higher portion of the Pt is utilized, as the region close to the MPL 1163 is not severely limited by proton transport resistance. Comparing the 1164 low and high Pt loading cases, the most notable difference is in the 1165 volumetric current distributions, which stems from the thinness of the 1166 CL with low Pt loading and the resulting increase in volumetric cur- 1167 rent density. In particular, note that the current distribution across the 1168 CL thickness is more uniform for the thin CL as seen previously.⁷²

1169 **Galvano-dynamic simulations.**—For this set of simulations, a 1170 current profile shown in Fig. 3 is applied and the cell voltage is calcu- 1171 lated. The profile is made up of the following steps: 0.2-1.0 A/cm^2 , 1172 1.0-1.8 A/cm^2 , 1.8-1.0 A/cm^2 , and 1.0-0.2 A/cm^2 . The magnitude of 1173 the steps are chosen to be relatively high in order to excite the system 1174 dynamics. Similar to the voltage steps, these step changes are smooth 1175 and happen over a period of 1 second.

1176 Overall, 16 simulations are conducted under the galvano-dynamic 1177 mode with variations in RH (60, and 90%), operating temperature (60, 1178 and 80°C), and cathode Pt loading (0.4, 0.2, 0.1, 0.05 mg/cm^2). The 1179 driest and coldest conditions used for the potio-dynamic simula-

1180 tions could not be simulated in the galvano-dynamic mode with the 1181 selected current profile. This is due to the severe anode dry out with 1182 EOD that occurs during a step change in current density¹² and results 1183 in numerical issues under these dry conditions, where the membrane 1184 hydration is low prior to the increase in load.

1185 The resulting voltage dynamics for all 16 simulations are shown 1186 in Fig. 10. The corresponding average water content in the membrane 1187 for all the cases are shown in Fig. 11 and the average liquid saturations 1188 in the cathode GDL are shown in Fig. 12. Similar to the analysis for 1189 the potio-dynamic case, below we organize the discussion in terms 1190 of the current density step.

1191 **Current density step from 0.2 to 1.0 A/cm^2 .**—After the first step 1192 in the current density, the voltage drops and a steady state value is 1193 achieved within 20 seconds. Only the case with $T = 80^{\circ}\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} =$ 1194 90% with a Pt loading of 0.4 mg/cm^2 demonstrates a slight undershoot 1195 that is a characteristic response of PEM fuel cells due to dry out of 1196 the membrane by EOD as mentioned earlier.¹⁴⁶ This dry out can also 1197 be observed in Fig. 11. It should be noted that mass transport limita- 1198 tions at higher loads can also contribute to this behavior.¹⁵² However,

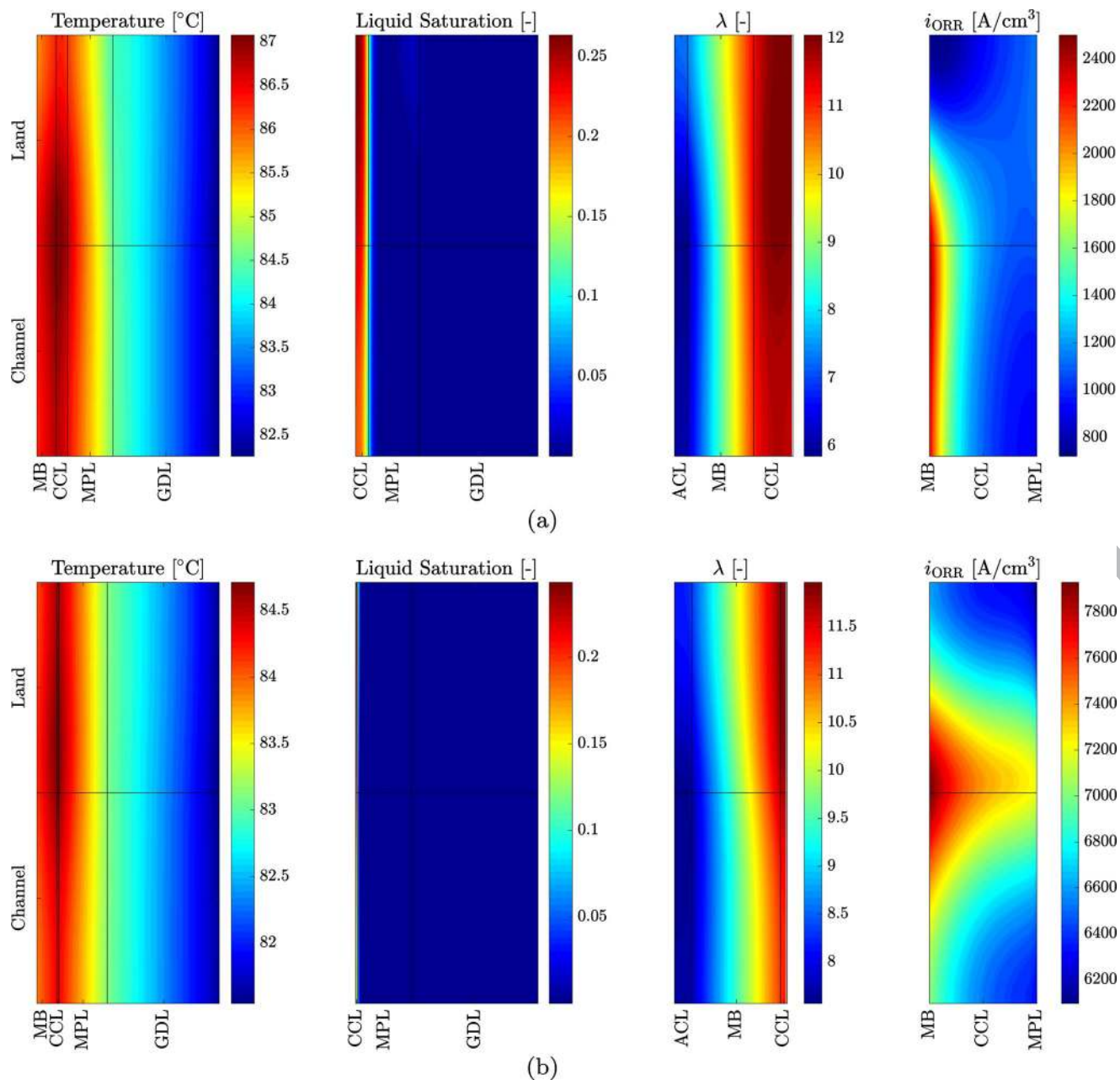


Figure 9. Distribution of temperature, liquid saturation, ionomer water content, and ORR volumetric current density for the potention-dynamic simulations under the hot-wet ($T = 80^{\circ}\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 90\%$) operating condition at $t = 219$ s (highest load just before the following voltage step up) with Pt loadings of: a) 0.4 and b) 0.05 mg/cm^2 .

membrane dry out is the only contributing factor in this case, since the operation is well within the ohmic region and mass transport effects are relatively insignificant. To finalize our discussion of the voltage response, it is worth mentioning that higher Pt loading is observed to consistently result in improved performance under all four simulated conditions at $1.0 \text{ A}/\text{cm}^2$.

As for the GDL liquid saturation, only the coolest ($T = 60^{\circ}\text{C}$) and most humidified ($\text{RH} = 90\%$) condition results in vapor condensation after this step change in the current density (Fig. 12). This condensation continues throughout the entire 100 seconds hold at $1.0 \text{ A}/\text{cm}^2$, where the higher Pt loadings result in slightly higher liquid accumulation in the GDL. This higher liquid saturation is due to the fact that the thicker catalyst results in higher cell voltage and reduced volumetric heat generation, which lowers the overall cell temperature by about 0.4°C . The average saturation of 0.2 agrees with the *in-operando* re-

sults by Banerjee et al.¹⁵³ They also propose fitting the time evolution of liquid saturation with a first order dynamic equation and obtain a time constant of 2.3 minutes for similar operating conditions using an SGL 25BC diffusion medium. Similar dynamics are observed by others as well.¹⁵⁴ Our results indicate a time constant of about 33 seconds, which is more than 4 times faster than that reported by Banerjee et al.¹⁵³ This discrepancy between the model predictions and experimental results may be attributed to differences in cell geometry, membrane and catalyst layers, and thermal properties assumed for SGL 24BC in this work.

Current density step from 1.0 to $1.8 \text{ A}/\text{cm}^2$.—The voltage response to the second step increase in current density is seen to be monotonically decreasing in most cases, while some cases ($T = 60^{\circ}\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 60\%$ in Fig. 10) exhibit the characteristic undershoot dis-

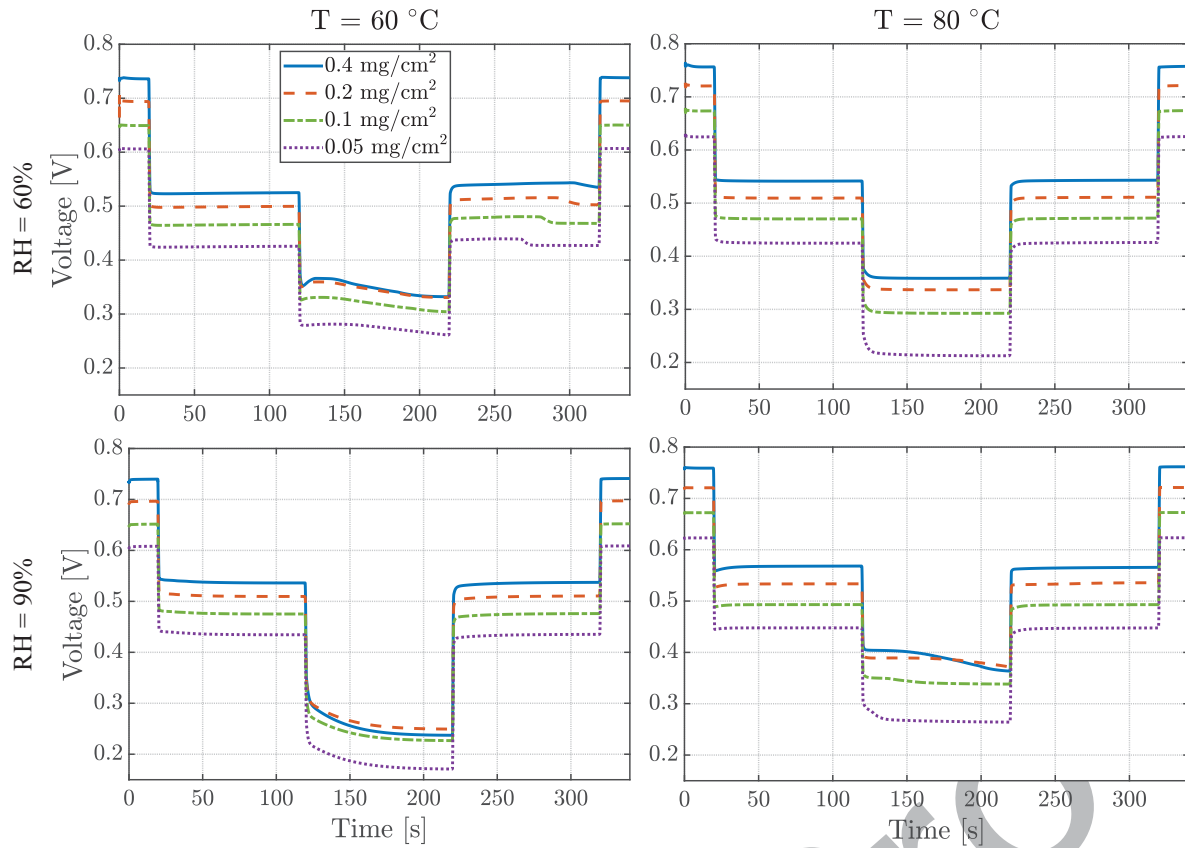


Figure 10. Average voltage dynamics for the galvano-dynamic simulations.

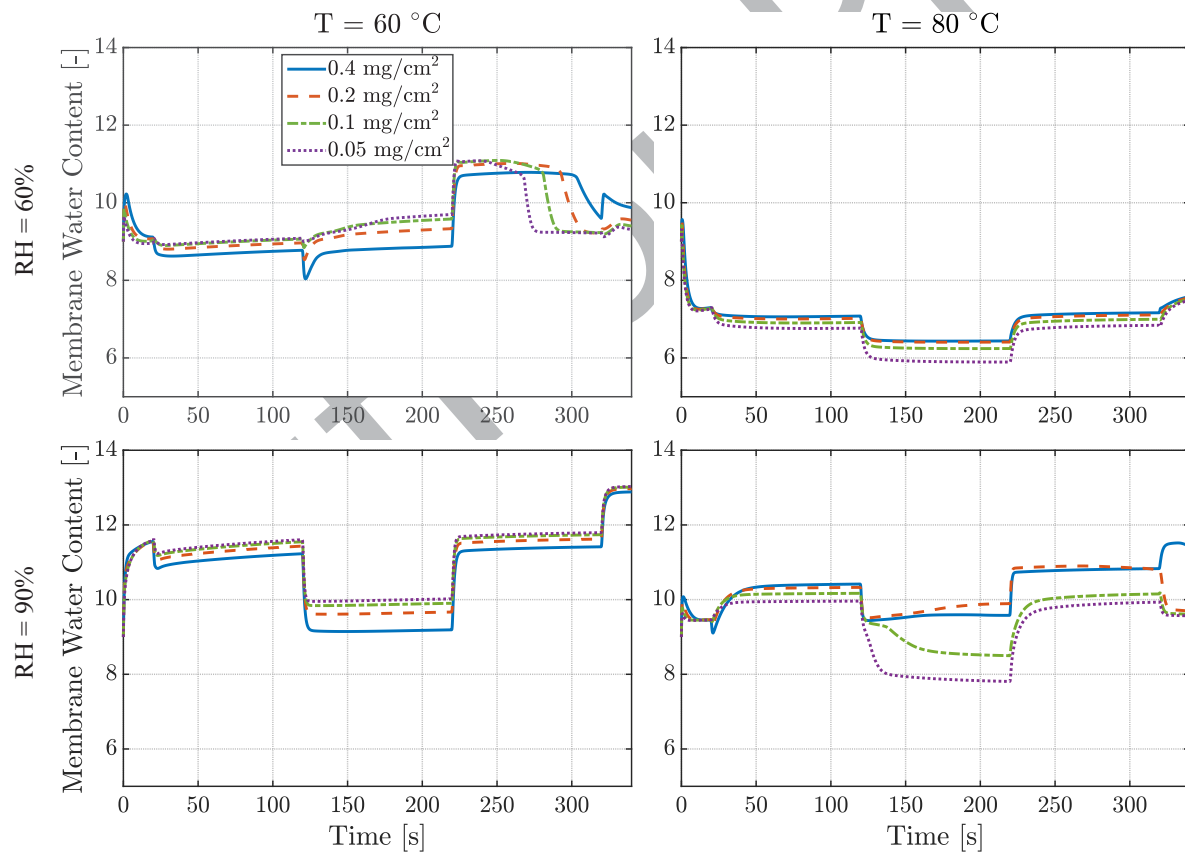


Figure 11. Average membrane water content dynamics for the galvano-dynamic simulations.

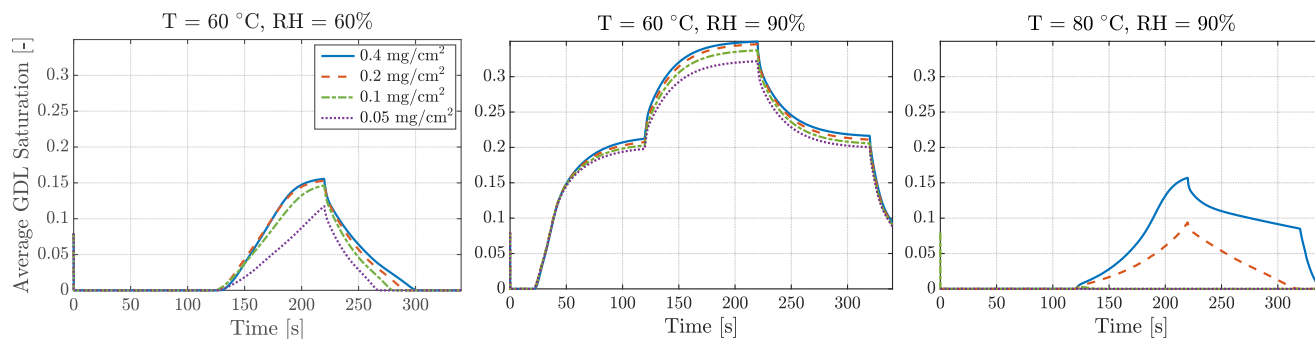


Figure 12. Average liquid saturation dynamics in the cathode GDL for the galvanodynamic simulations.

1228 cussed earlier. The monotonic voltage decay is a sign of well humidified membrane and increasing mass transport limitations with slowly
 1229 accumulating liquid water (e.g., $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 90\%$ in Fig. 10
 1230 and Fig. 12). For the operating condition where a voltage undershoot
 1231 is observed, the performance recovers to some extent after the step
 1232 change with water back diffusion and rehydration of the anode side of
 1233 the membrane. However, this voltage recovery is followed by a further
 1234 decay as the cathode GDL floods with liquid water (Fig. 12).

1235
 1236 An important observation is the fact that at $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 90\%$,
 1237 reducing the Pt loading from 0.4 to 0.2 mg/cm^2 seems to improve
 1238 performance. This seemingly peculiar behavior is directly related to
 1239 the changes in the membrane water content with CL thickness. In par-
 1240 ticular, Fig. 11 shows that at 60°C and 1.8 A/cm^2 , thinner catalysts
 1241 consistently result in better membrane hydration. This is explained fur-
 1242 ther when discussing the water balance in the cell later in this section.
 1243 The higher membrane water content achieved at 0.2 mg/cm^2 reduces
 1244 the ohmic drop, while the Pt reduction at this level does not impose
 1245 significant mass transport issues. Therefore, the performance is im-
 1246 proved. Yet another interesting observation is related to the impact of
 1247 Pt loading on voltage dynamics at $T = 80^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 90\%$. Specifi-
 1248 cally, we observe that immediately after the load increase, the highest
 1249 Pt loading achieves the best performance. But this performance decays
 1250 more rapidly than the cases with lower Pt loading, to the point that at
 1251 the end of the 100 second hold at 1.8 A/cm^2 , the cell with a Pt loading
 1252 of 0.2 mg/cm^2 has a higher voltage than that with a Pt loading of 0.4
 1253 mg/cm^2 . This is directly related to faster liquid accumulation in the
 1254 GDL with a thick CL which is due to lower cell temperatures (Fig. 12).
 1255 The heat generation in the two thinnest CLs is high enough to inhibit
 1256 any liquid accumulation (Fig. 12), which results in lower membrane
 1257 water contents as seen in Fig. 11 and reduced performance.

1258 **Current density steps from 1.8 to 1.0 A/cm^2 and from 1.0 to**
 1259 **0.2 A/cm^2 .**—For the simulated conditions, the step decreases in cur-
 1260 rent density result in monotonic voltage increase with relatively fast
 1261 dynamics. A hysteresis effect may be expected due to membrane

1262 hydration-dehydration and Pt oxide coverage dynamics. The former
 1263 effect can be seen to some extent in the simulations results at $T =$
 1264 60°C and $\text{RH} = 60\%$. The most notable feature of the voltage re-
 1265 sponse to load decreases at this condition is a drop in performance
 1266 after a considerable time delay. This is due to evaporation of liquid
 1267 water reservoir in the cathode CL and the ensuing loss of membrane
 1268 water (Fig. 11) and was discussed in detail for the potio-dynamic
 1269 simulations. Other conditions show almost no hysteresis, since they
 1270 are well humidified. Furthermore, as mentioned in the Model Formu-
 1271 lation section, the Pt oxide growth dynamics are neglected in our model,
 1272 which further contributes to the lack of hysteresis in our results.

1273 Further insight about the water balance in the cell can be gained by
 1274 comparing the normalized membrane water fluxes (β) shown in Fig.
 1275 13. The figure illustrates β values (defined by Eq. 54) for different
 1276 operating conditions and cathode Pt loadings at 119 seconds, which
 1277 corresponds to the hold at 1.0 A/cm^2 just before the following step
 1278 increase in the load. Some clear trends can be observed in these results.
 1279 First, we note that increasing the RH increases β . This is due to the fact
 1280 that the cathode CL typically has a high RH under all conditions due
 1281 to the electrochemical water generation. A low RH dries out the anode
 1282 CL and promotes water back diffusion, which explains lower β values.
 1283 Another important observation is the impact of temperature on β . At
 1284 lower RH conditions ($\text{RH} = 60\%$), we observe that β increases with
 1285 temperature. This is due to the fact that parts of the cathode CL remain
 1286 subsaturated at low RH and high temperatures, which reduce water
 1287 back diffusion and increases β . At higher RH conditions ($\text{RH} = 90\%$),
 1288 the cathode CL remains saturated at both low and high temperatures.
 1289 Therefore, the water activity in the anode CL determines the driving
 1290 force for water back flow. As this water activity diminishes at higher
 1291 temperatures, the water back diffusion is more pronounced, which
 1292 yields a lower value of β .

1293 Similar arguments can be used to explain the seemingly counterin-
 1294 tuitive impact of Pt loading on the water balance. In particular, we note
 1295 that at lower temperature, β increases with Pt loading and the resulting
 1296 increase in CL thickness. This trend is reversed at higher temperature,

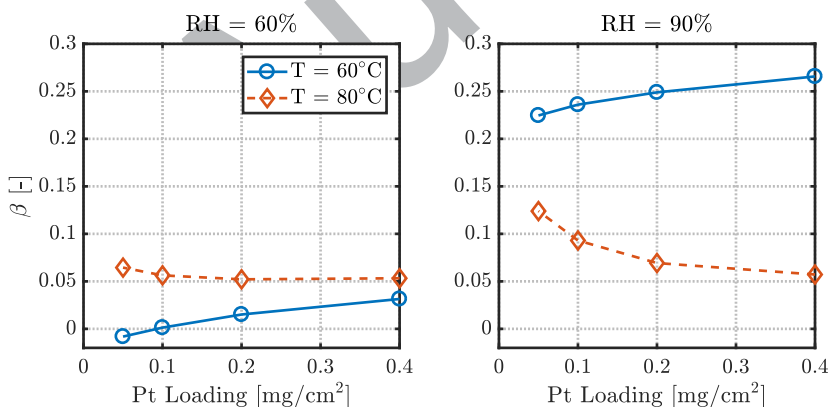


Figure 13. Normalized average water flux in the membrane (positive is toward cathode) at $t = 119$ s (medium load just before the following current step up) for the galvanodynamic simulations.

1297 where a higher Pt loading reduces β . The trend at $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$ can be explained by the fact that at this lower temperature, the CL is saturated for all Pt loadings. A lower Pt loading means that the water that is produced in the CL close to the MPL has a lower resistance to diffuse back to the anode, since the cathode CL is thinner and the diffusion path is shorter. This means that a thinner CL reduces β . When the temperature is increased, subsaturated conditions emerge in parts of the CL as mentioned before. Therefore, an increase in the temperature diminishes the driving force for water back diffusion and increases β . As thinner CLs generate more heat, the local CL temperature increases further, which in turn increases β . This result bears significance as it shows that in addition to changes in local transport resistance, Pt loading impacts the performance by influencing the water balance in the cell. This overall observation partially confirms the hypothesis by Muzaffar et al.⁷⁷ who claimed that the performance changes with Pt loading reduction may mostly stem from a tipping water balance in the cell. However, their conclusion was based on the assumption that

1314 the CL is the main source of vaporization in the cell and a thinner CL 1315 makes the cell inherently more susceptible to flooding. On the other 1316 hand, the phase change rate is assumed to be relatively high in our 1317 model based on the experimental evidence in the literature that suggest 1318 the phase change kinetics should be fast enough not to impose 1319 any limitations.¹⁴³ This high rate of phase change allows the GDL to 1320 vaporize a relatively large amount of liquid. Nevertheless, our results 1321 also highlight the role of Pt loading and CL thickness in the cell water 1322 balance.

1323 Our discussion of the galvano-dynamic simulations has focused 1324 on average response of the cell so far. However, the distribution of 1325 temperature, water, and reaction rates are also of critical importance. 1326 An example of such distributions is provided in Fig. 14 for high (0.4 1327 mg/cm^2) and low (0.05 mg/cm^2) cathode Pt loading. The figure shows 1328 a rather significant in-plane temperature gradient in the membrane and 1329 CL, where a temperature difference of up to 4°C is observable. This 1330 temperature difference is due to the high current generation under the

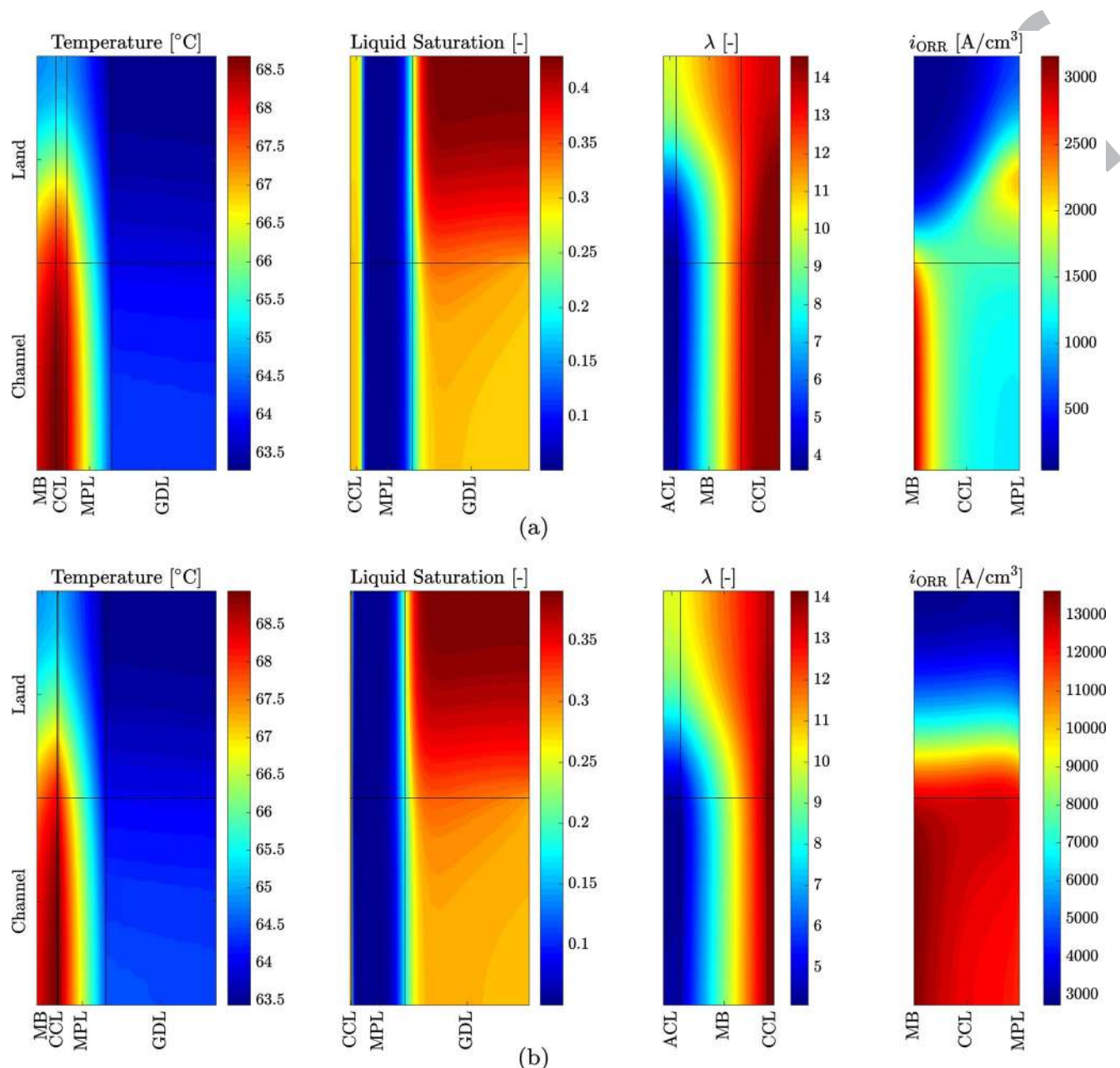


Figure 14. Distribution of temperature, liquid saturation, ionomer water content, and ORR volumetric current density for the galvano-dynamic simulations under $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 90\%$ operating condition at $t = 219$ s (highest load just before the following current step down) with Pt loadings of: a) 0.4 and b) 0.05 mg/cm^2 .

1331 channel location along with the limited heat dissipation through the
1332 channel boundary.

1333 Furthermore, we see that the cathode GDL has a very high saturation
1334 at this operating condition, which imposes significant mass
1335 transport limitations and results in limited current generation under
1336 the land area. It should be pointed out that a higher liquid saturation
1337 is observed under the land while a rather uniform distribution is seen
1338 through the GDL thickness. Zenyuk et al. found a higher liquid saturation
1339 under the channel in a compressed GDL due to the in-plane
1340 porosity distribution resulting from land compression.¹⁵⁵ However,
1341 the temperature distribution in an operating fuel cell usually shifts the
1342 water accumulation toward the land region.¹⁵³ This flooding under the
1343 land has much less pronounced impact on the overall performance
1344 compared to flooding under the channel,¹⁵⁶ since the land region is
1345 already transport limited by the longer diffusion paths. In terms of
1346 the through-plane liquid distributions, there is evidence in the literature
1347 for increased saturation in higher porosity regions of the GDL.¹¹³
1348 Furthermore, Banerjee et al.¹⁵³ found the highest level of saturation
1349 to occur close to the land. Finally, capillary fingering is believed to
1350 be a major transport mechanism for liquid water.^{155,157} The model in
1351 this work assumes a constant GDL porosity through the thickness, so
1352 the pooling effects cannot be captured. The rather uniform through-
1353 plane liquid distribution stems from the temperature distributions in
1354 our simulations. Finally, the macro-homogeneous model in this work
1355 does not allow for simulation of capillary fingering. Therefore, the liquid
1356 saturations predicted by the proposed model are only insightful on
1357 an aggregate level and detailed knowledge about the micro-structures
1358 are needed to obtain accurate distributions.¹⁶

1359 The non-uniform current generation pattern also affects water distribution
1360 in the ionomer phase. In particular, we see that under the
1361 land, the water content is more uniform across the thickness of the
1362 CCM, whereas significant gradients emerge under the channel, where
1363 current generation is high. Comparing the low and high Pt loading
1364 cases, we observe that the lower Pt loading results in slightly higher
1365 temperatures, which in turn reduce liquid saturation in the cathode
1366 GDL. Moreover, the current distribution through the thickness of the
1367 cathode CL is more uniform for the lower loaded CL as discussed
1368 earlier.⁷²

The preceding analysis provides some insight about the quasi
1369 steady state distributions of critical variables. To better understand
1370 the water transport transients during the following current step down,
1371 the distributions of liquid pressure in the cathode CL and the mem-
1372 brane water content before and after the step change are shown in Fig.
1373 15 and Fig. 16, respectively, for the high Pt loaded CL (0.4 mg/cm^2).
1374 Fig. 15 shows that immediately before the step change at 219.5 seconds,
1375 liquid pressure is highest under the channel. The flow directions
1376 provided in the figure show an interesting pattern, where the liquid
1377 water is found to flow mostly toward the membrane in the land region
1378 and mostly toward the MPL in the channel region. This behavior
1379 is closely tied to a similar flow pattern in the membrane as seen in
1380 Fig. 16, where a recirculation is observed at 219.5 seconds. More
1381 specifically, it is seen that at the furthest location under the land,
1382 the membrane water flux is toward the anode. As we move closer to
1383 the channel location, the flux turns progressively toward the cathode.
1384 As the load is reduced to 1.0 A/cm^2 , EOD is relieved and water back
1385 diffusion dominates during the transients (as was observed in Fig. 7
1386 for the potio-dynamic simulations). This results in the membrane
1387 water flux to be dominantly toward the anode (Fig. 16 at 221 seconds),
1388 which also pushes liquid water toward the membrane to compensate
1389 for the back diffusion (Fig. 15 at 221 seconds). Two seconds after
1390 the step change, a smoother water profile is established across the
1391 membrane thickness and water back diffusion has diminished (Fig.
1392 16 at 222.5 seconds). This creates a dominant flux toward the cathode.
1393 At the same time, a higher liquid pressure is observed in the
1394 cathode CL, where a stagnation front has emerged in the middle (Fig.
1395 15 at 222.5 seconds). In particular, in the half of the CL close to the
1396 membrane, the flow is found to be toward the membrane, whereas in
1397 the other half to the right of the stagnation front, the flow is found
1398 to be toward the MPL. As time goes on and a quasi steady state is
1399 achieved at this reduced load, the stagnation front moves further toward
1400 the membrane (Fig. 15 at 230 seconds), while the membrane
1401 water flux turns toward the cathode throughout the membrane thickness
1402 (Fig. 16 at 230 seconds). The existence of the stagnation front
1403 is in agreement with our earlier observation that a thick catalyst layer
1404 increases the resistance to water flow toward the anode. The transients
1405 during a step increase in the load are the reverse of those presented
1406 here.

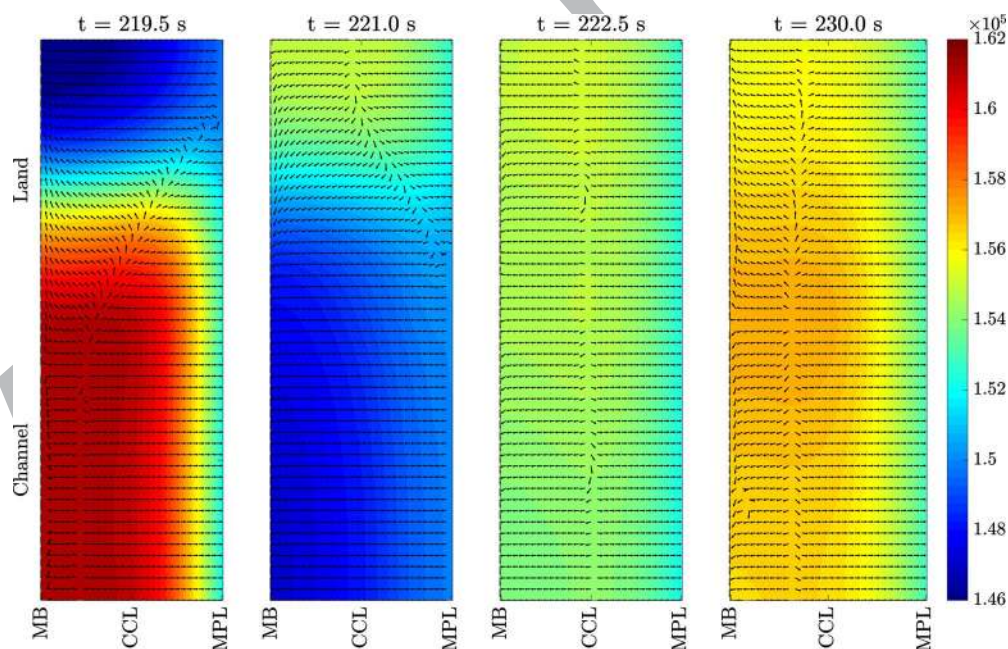


Figure 15. Liquid pressure (in [Pa]) and flow in the cathode CL during load decrease from 1.8 to 1 A/cm^2 at $T = 60^\circ\text{C}$ and $\text{RH} = 90\%$ (Pt loading of 0.4 mg/cm^2). From left to right: immediately before the step change, 0.5 seconds after the step change, 2 seconds after the step change, the quasi steady state achieved after the step change.

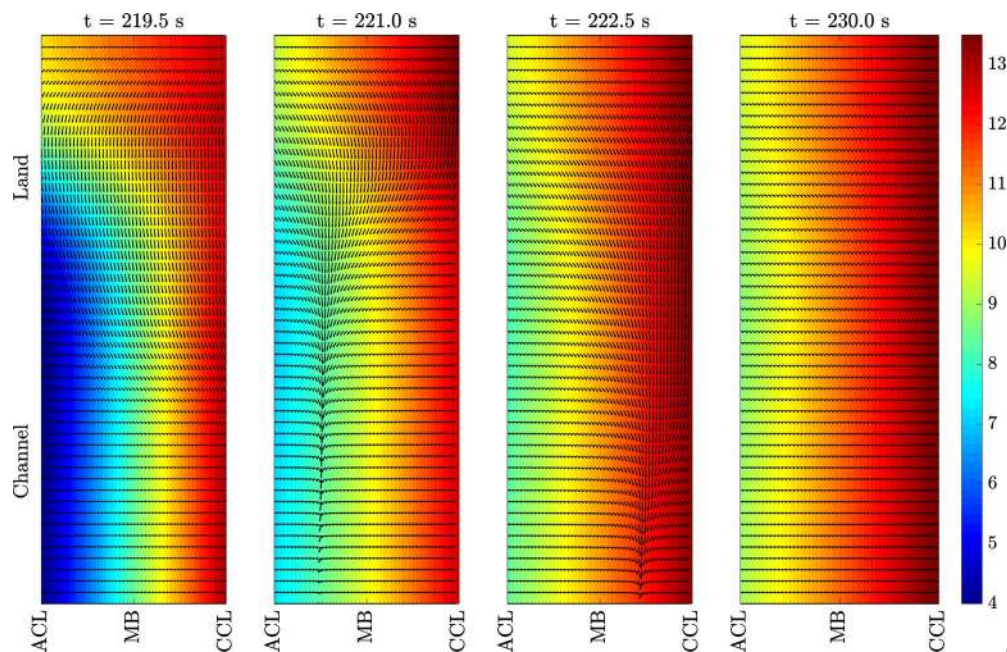


Figure 16. Membrane water content and flow during load decrease from 1.8 to 1 A/cm² at T = 60°C and RH = 90% (Pt loading of 0.4 mg/cm²). From left to right: immediately before the step change, 0.5 seconds after the step change, 2 seconds after the step change, the quasi steady state achieved after the step change.

1408 The dynamics of in-plane current density distribution during load
 1409 changes can also improve understanding of the transient phenomena.
 1410 To this end, the corresponding distributions for the hot and wet operat-
 1411 ing condition (T = 80°C and RH = 90%) during the load increase from
 1412 1.0 to 1.8 A/cm² are shown in Fig. 17 for both low (0.05 mg/cm²) and
 1413 high (0.4 mg/cm²) cathode Pt loadings. We see that immediately before
 1414 the step change, both Pt loadings result in a relatively uniform in-plane
 1415 current distribution. However, as the load is increased to 1.8 A/cm²

1416 the region under the channel tends to generate more current with both
 1417 Pt loadings. It can be seen, however, that the in-plane distribution is
 1418 more uniform for the lower Pt loading case. This is attributable to the
 1419 fact that the thinner CL results in higher cell temperatures and lower
 1420 liquid build up, which reduces the mass transport limitations under the
 1421 land region. We also note that current generation under the land is low
 1422 even immediately after the load increase and before any liquid accu-
 1423 mulation. This agrees with experimental results by Schneider et al.,

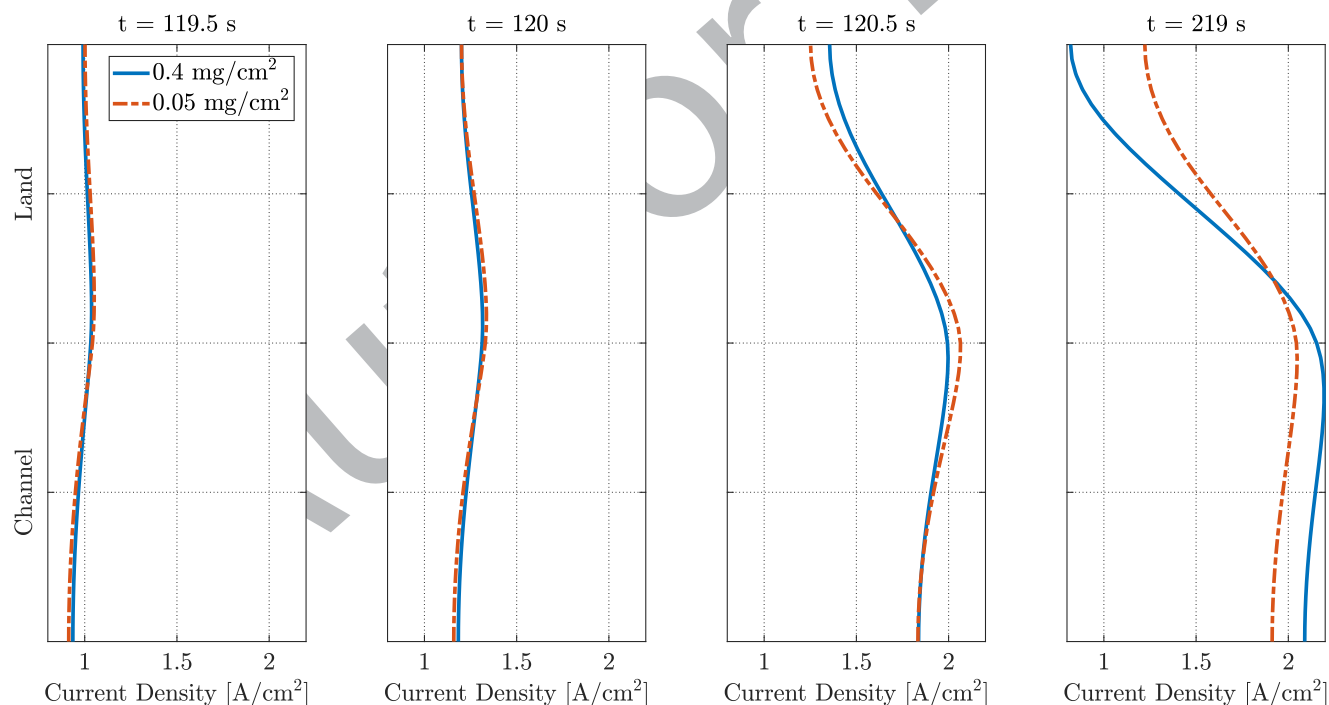


Figure 17. In-Plane current density distribution for the galvanodynamic simulations during load increase from 1 to 1.8 A/cm² at T = 80°C and RH = 90% for high and low cathode Pt loadings. From left to right: immediately before the step change, mid-way through the step change, immediately after the step change has completed, the quasi steady state achieved after the step change.

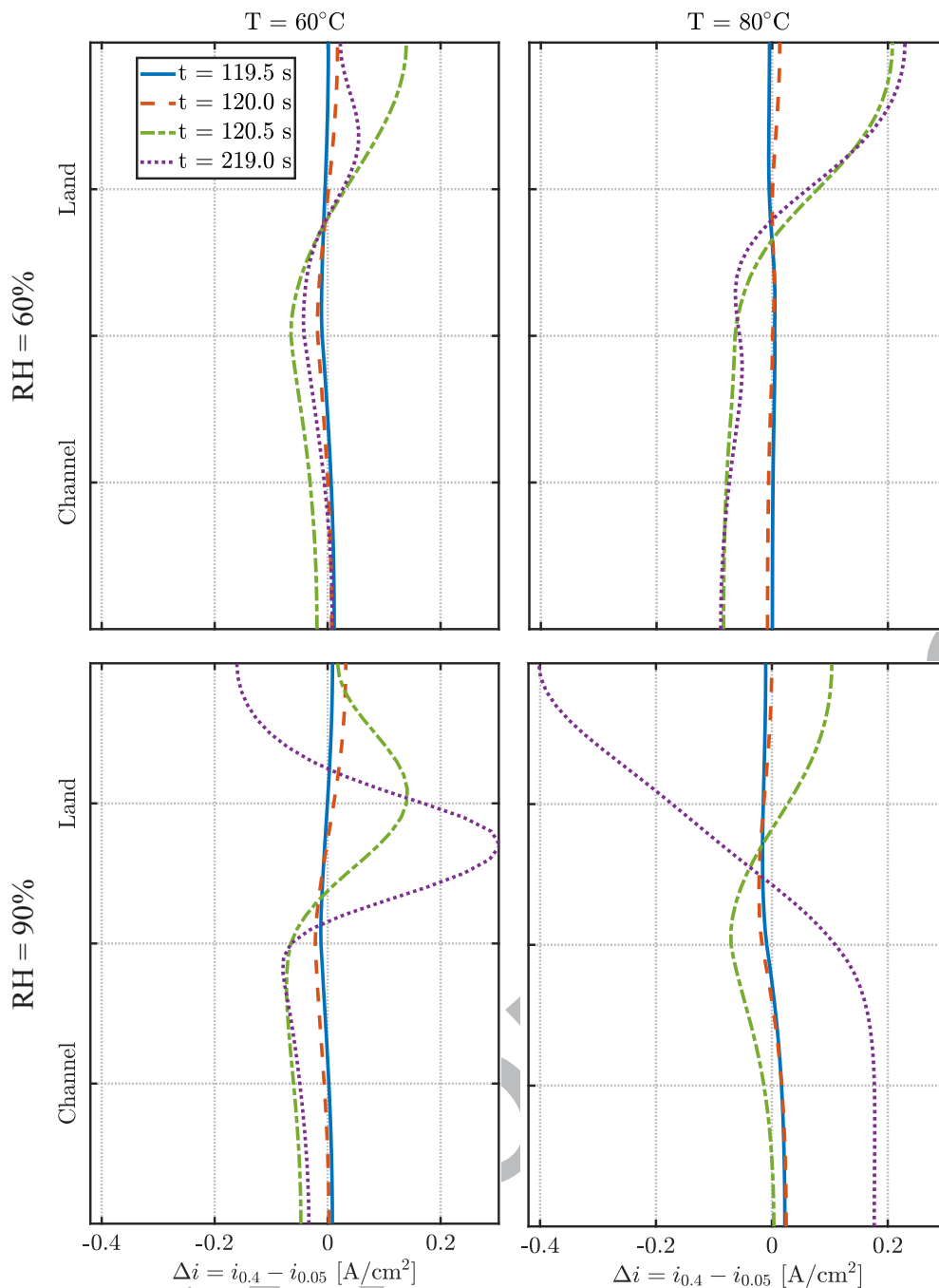


Figure 18. In-Plane current density distribution difference between high- and low-loaded CLs during load increase from 1 to 1.8 A/cm².

1424 who found the land region to be transport limited even prior to any
1425 liquid build up in the GDL.^{158,159}

1426 To further investigate the impact of Pt loading on the dynamics of
1427 in-plane current distribution, the difference between the current den-
1428 sities with high and low Pt loadings during the same load change are
1429 shown in Fig. 18 for all simulated operating conditions. The figure
1430 shows that at 1.0 A/cm² the difference between the current distri-
1431 butions is relatively insignificant as was seen earlier. As the load in-
1432 creases, however, the cathode Pt loading and CL thickness seem to
1433 have varying impacts on the current distribution at different operat-
1434 ing conditions. In particular, under drier conditions (RH = 60%), the
1435 higher Pt loading and CL thickness result in improved performance
1436 under the land region immediately after the step change. At T = 60°C
1437 this performance enhancement under the land fades toward the new

1438 quasi equilibrium state, as more liquid builds up in the GDL when a
1439 thicker CL is used. However, at the higher temperature (T = 80°C)
1440 that inhibits liquid accumulation, the new equilibrium results in a
1441 distribution difference that is close to that obtained immediately after
1442 the load change. When the RH is increased to 90%, the response is
1443 dominated by liquid accumulation dynamics in the GDL. More specifi-
1444 cally, thicker CLs make the GDL more susceptible to rapid liquid
1445 build up, as they generate less heat. Therefore, the performance is
1446 diminished under the land region. This results in a particularly sig-
1447 nificant difference at T = 80°C and RH = 90%, where the thick CL
1448 prompts considerable GDL liquid saturation at 219 seconds, whereas
1449 the thin CL leads to a relatively dry GDL. Therefore, the high Pt
1450 loaded cathode CL shows a remarkable performance drop in the land
1451 region.

Conclusions

A comprehensive model that captures the most salient transient phenomena across the thickness of a unit cell is developed in this work. The model draws from and extends the existing models in the literature by incorporating state of the art reaction kinetics for the HOR and ORR, the mixed wettability model for porous layers, a consistent homogeneous model for the CL micro-structure, as well as the ionomer relaxation dynamics. The model predictions are compared with experimental data obtained through voltammetry and voltage step experiments under a variety of conditions and a good agreement is obtained.

The developed model is executed with different humidity and temperature conditions under both current and voltage control operational modes and varying Pt loadings in the cathode CL. The results of these simulations shed light into the transient processes that determine the dynamic response of PEM fuel cells to load changes. In particular, we have found the transient response to be dominated by water redistribution in the cell. The timescales of this redistribution are dependent on the operating conditions and are controlled by the membrane water uptake and two phase flow in the DM for dry and wet conditions, respectively. Furthermore, the modeling results suggest that changing the cathode Pt loading, and thereby, the cathode CL thickness, can influence the performance by affecting the water balance in the cell. Specifically, the thinner CL results in higher rates of heat generation on a volumetric basis while leading to a shorter diffusion path for water transport toward the anode. Our simulation results suggest that, based on the operating conditions, the combination of these effects lead to distinctly observable trends in normalized membrane water flux with respect to changes in the cathode Pt loading. Additionally, we have found that through its effect on water balance in the cell, the cathode Pt loading can have a profound impact on the transient response to load changes for some operating conditions. These findings can further improve understanding of the impacts of Pt reduction on various aspects of PEM fuel cell performance and its transient response. More broadly, the model can be used to develop further insight into spatio-temporal distribution of variables that are critical to performance and degradation.

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ORCID

Alireza Goshtasbi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9575-6091>
 Jixin Chen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5020-8024>
 Tulga Ersal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6811-8529>

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