

Upheaving Self-Heating Effects from Transistor to Circuit Level using Conventional EDA Tool Flows

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Abstract—In this work, we are the first to demonstrate how well-established EDA tool flows can be employed to upheave Self-Heating Effects (SHE) from individual devices at the transistor level all the way up to complete large circuits at the final layout (i.e., GDS-II) level. Transistor SHE imposes an ever-growing reliability challenge due to the continuous shrinking of geometries alongside the non-ideal voltage scaling in advanced technology nodes. The challenge is largely exacerbated when more confined 3D structures are adopted to build transistors such as upcoming Nanosheet FETs and Ribbon FETs. By employing increasingly-confined structures and materials of poorer thermal conductance, heat arising within the transistor’s channel is trapped inside and cannot escape. This leads to accelerated defect generation and, if not considered carefully, a profound risk to IC reliability. Due to the lack of EDA tool flows that can consider SHE, circuit designers are forced to take pessimistic worst-case assumptions (obtained at the transistor level) to ensure reliability of the complete chip for the entire projected lifetime – at the cost of sub-optimal circuit designs and considerable efficiency losses. Our work paves the way for designers to estimate less pessimistic (i.e., small yet sufficient) safety margins for their circuits leading to higher efficiency without compromising reliability. Further, it provides new perspectives and opens new doors to estimate and optimize reliability correctly in the presence of emerging SHE challenge through identifying early the weak spots and failure sources across the design.

Index Terms—Transistor self-heating, reliability, computer aided design, standard cell characterization

I. INTRODUCTION

Transistor Self-Heating Effect (SHE) is an ever-increasing reliability concern due to the continuous scaling in the semiconductor fabrication process. With more confined 3D structures and insulating materials in modern transistor designs, heat arising in the transistor’s channel area cannot be dissipated easily and is hence “trapped” inside the transistor’s channel, as depicted in Fig. 1. Due to SHE, the transistor effectively operates at a temperature higher than its surrounding material would reveal. This does not only impact the electrical characteristics of the transistor but, importantly, also its *reliability*. Under increased temperatures, existing reliability degradations are further exacerbated. In particular, transistor aging effects are considerably accelerated, ultimately leading to earlier failure of the chip. Therefore, to ensure reliability of the complete chip for its entire projected lifetime (e.g., 10 years), SHE must be accurately considered from the transistor level all the way up to the final chip (i.e., GDS-II level). On the one hand, overestimation leads to a loss in efficiency because it will employ safety margins larger than what is really required. On the other hand, underestimation leads to unreliable operation during the projected lifetime. Hence, the

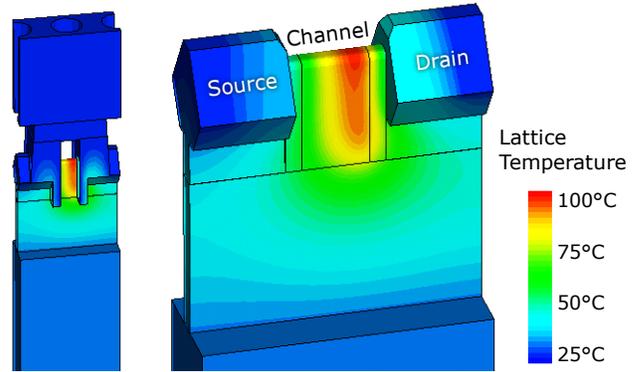


Fig. 1. SHE in 14 nm FinFET, modeled in Synopsys TCAD after calibration against industrial measurements. The insulating gate is removed visually, unveiling the temperature hot spot inside the channel. The surrounding material remains relatively cool, concealing SHE from on-chip thermal sensors.

key challenge is how circuit designers can accurately estimate reliability in the presence of emerging SHE to employ small yet sufficient safety margins.

While SHE is widely studied at the transistor level, research on its impact at the circuit level is still in its infancy and none of the existing EDA tool flows can consider SHE during the chip design. Most research is currently limited to merely ring oscillators or simple logic cells using SPICE simulations. With the lack of EDA support for SHE, circuit designers are forced to fall back to worst-case estimations or measurements obtained from the transistor level. To ensure reliability, they must assume the highest expected SHE-induced degradations to occur in every transistor across their entire chip. While it does guarantee reliability, such an approach leads to largely pessimistic safety margins, causing sub-optimal circuit designs and lost potential in the advanced technology.

In this work, we demonstrate how conventional EDA tools can be employed to propagate SHE from the transistor level all the way to the circuit level. This enables designers to *seamlessly and accurately* estimate the impact of SHE from the transistor level to the chip level.

Our main contributions within this work are as follows:

- We demonstrate, for the first time, the application of standard cell characterization in combination with the existing Static Timing Analysis (STA) to propagate SHE from individual transistors to the full chip level. This enables designers to accurately and seamlessly unveil SHE-induced reliability degradation using conventional EDA tool flows.

- We demonstrate our proposed approach using 14 nm FinFET transistor models and multiple circuit designs, ranging from a simple adder to a full processor (RISC-V) core. We provide comprehensive cross-layer investigation for SHE at the transistor, standard cell, and circuit level.

II. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

When a transistor is in its ON-state and current flows between the source and drain terminals, heat is generated in the conducting channel due to the Joule effect. In traditional planar MOSFETs, such generated heat is rapidly dissipated through the substrate, without causing notable impact. With more advanced structures like FDSOI, the buried-oxide layer adds additional insulation and hence hinders heat dissipation. furthermore, thicker high- κ material within the gate stack (required for reducing the leakage) also hinders the heat dissipation, “trapping” the generated heat inside the channel. In FinFET, in which the channel is covered on three sides, we can already observe a remarkable hot spot, as demonstrated in Fig. 1. In addition, with gate-all-around (e.g., Nanosheet, Nanowire, Ribbon) FETs rapidly emerging as the next generation after FinFET, the SHE challenge exacerbates because the channel becomes completely surrounded by the gate in which heat cannot anymore escape [1], [2]. While the research on SHE is plentiful for different devices, studies on larger circuits are still very limited. Most works focus on the device itself and perform their analysis on minimal circuits such as ring oscillators [3], simple operational amplifiers [4], or 6-T SRAM cells [5]. [6] appears to be the first work studying SHE on a large scale. The work first evaluates SHE for different frequencies on individual transistors. Then, the obtained SHE is mapped to the cells in the circuit based on their expected workload, i.e., the switching frequency of the cells. In contrast to our work, the connectivity of the cells in the circuit is not considered. Importantly, only a couple of simple standard cells have been analyzed in [6] and not a complete standard cell library as done in our work. In [7], authors aimed at mitigating the impact of SHE on delay by operating circuits at lower supply voltage—exactly at the “zero-temperature coefficient”, in which temperature has almost no impact on delay. Importantly, [7] considered the worst-case SHE obtained from the transistor level, which is quite pessimistic.

A. Limitations of State-of-the-Art SHE Analysis

One way to investigate transistor-level SHE is physics-based (TCAD) simulations, as shown in Fig. 1. Once SHE is captured in a transistor “compact model”, analog circuit (SPICE) simulations offer another alternative to study SHE on single transistors or even multiple gates. In most works, individual transistors are simulated with constant (DC) or sinusoidal (AC) currents to obtain SHE temperatures for different voltages and frequencies. Fig. 2 shows an example of a DC simulation to obtain the SHE temperatures for different numbers of fins and supply voltages on 14 nm nFinFET and pFinFET transistors.

While low-level tools like TCAD and SPICE are suitable to study SHE in isolation, they neglect how transistors commonly operate in CMOS circuits. Instead of delivering constant currents, transistors are employed to quickly charge or discharge

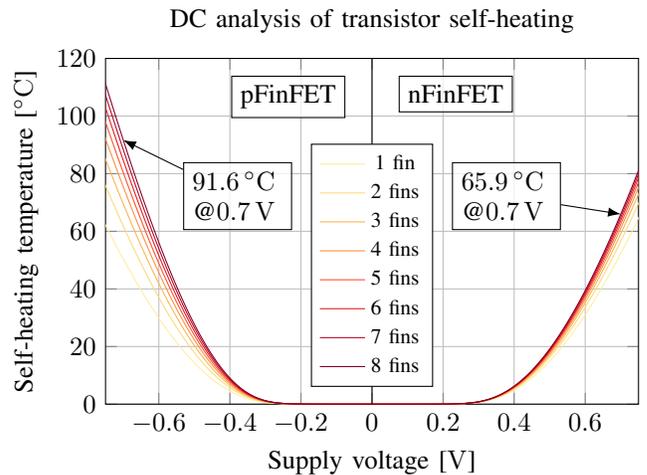


Fig. 2. SPICE simulations of 14 nm FinFET transistors delivering constant currents. Note that the presented SHE temperature is an additional temperature increase that comes on top of the die’s temperature.

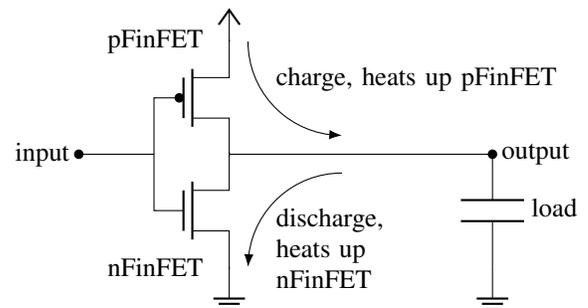


Fig. 3. A simple inverter gate. The load capacitance connected to the output is charged and discharged through the pFinFET and nFinFET, respectively.

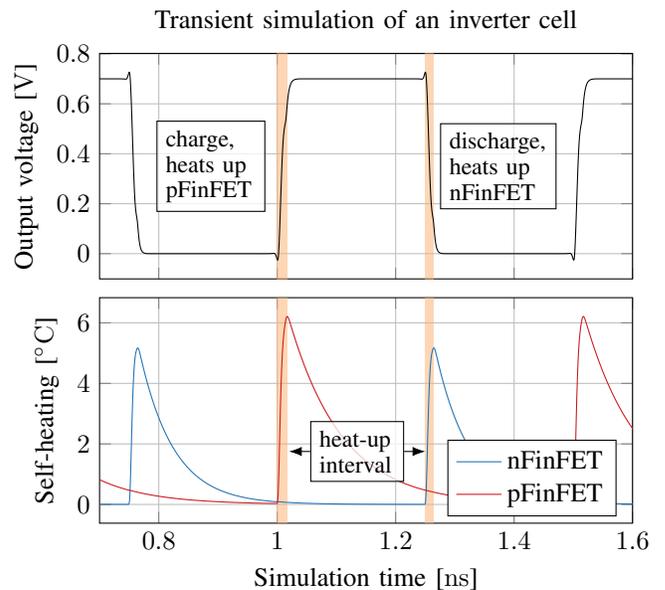


Fig. 4. Transistor SHE temperatures of an inverter cell with a fanout of 3, switching at 2 GHz. Because of the short heating periods, SHE temperatures of the transistors within the inverter are significantly lower than the DC analysis (see Fig.2) would suggest.

connected wires and gates in order to represent a logical state inside the circuit. To meet the timing requirements of the circuit, most capacitances need to be charged in a fraction of the clock cycle. As a result, transistors experience only a brief period of time in which current actually flows through the channel and heat is generated.

We demonstrate SHE in the context of CMOS circuits on a small inverter gate, depicted in Fig. 3. Whenever the input signal switches to the “low” state, the output capacitance is charged through the pFinFET, causing a rapid increase in its SHE temperature. On the opposite edge, when the input is “high”, the output capacitance is discharged through the nFinFET, causing its SHE temperature to rise respectively. Fig. 4 shows the transient simulation of the inverter gate in SPICE. Compared to the DC simulation shown in Fig. 2, we see that the SHE temperatures of both transistors are significantly lower due to the short time frame of current flow. In fact, the amplitude of a transistor’s SHE temperature heavily depends on the capacitance it needs to charge. The larger the output capacitance, the more current is required to flow through the transistor in order to charge the capacitance. Consequently, the time frame of current flow is extended and the transistor has more time to build up its SHE temperature.

It is important to note that the SHE of each transistor within a standard cell will be different, based on their respective load capacitances. For most transistors, this capacitance is fixed within the cell design and the transistor’s SHE can be determined immediately. However, for transistors connected to the output pins of cells, the load capacitance depends on the connectivity of the cell within the larger circuit design. This makes it challenging to determine each transistor’s expected SHE temperature upfront. At the same time, we see that worst-case temperatures obtained by DC simulations are highly pessimistic. While assuming such worst-case temperatures can indeed ensure a reliable design, it comes at the cost of severely overestimating required safety margins, which, consequently, leads to sub-optimal designs.

III. OUR APPROACH FOR CIRCUIT-LEVEL SHE ANALYSIS

The SHE temperatures of transistors are not the only attributes of standard cells depending on outside capacitances. Most important metrics of standard cells, such as delays, transition times, and power consumption, depend on the interconnection of the cell within the circuit design. Therefore, during the characterization process, standard cells are simulated under different input signal transition times (slews) and output capacitances (loads). The resulting measurements are stored in 2D-look-up tables in the standard cell library. When an attribute of a cell instance (e.g., its delay) needs to be determined within a circuit, the value is interpolated from the corresponding look-up table based on the slew and load that that cell instance exhibits. In this work, we are building on top on this established concept by embedding SHE temperatures as look-up tables into the standard cell library. This enables us to exploit existing tool flows to perform look-up and interpolation on the embedded SHE temperatures and elevate this information to higher levels. The general idea of our approach is outlined in Fig. 5. Since the cell library file

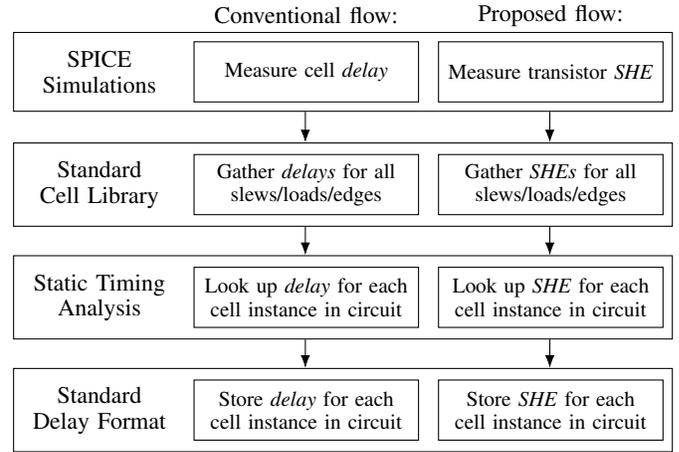


Fig. 5. High-level perspective on our idea. By replacing delays with SHE temperatures in crucial files, we can utilize the conventional EDA tool flow to propagate SHE information to the circuit level.

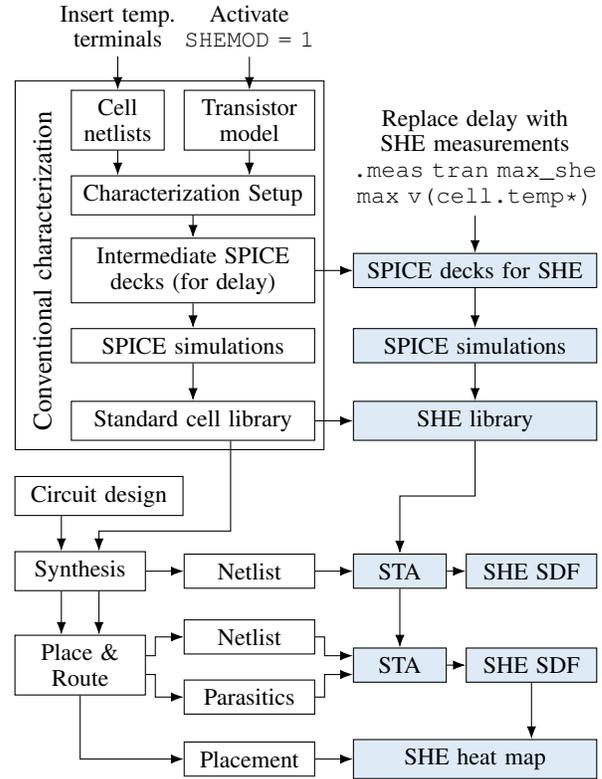


Fig. 6. Detailed workflow of our proposed approach. The colored boxes show how our flow is build on top of the established tool flow.

format does not provide look-up tables for SHE temperatures, we utilize the delay table and replace all delay values in the library with our SHE measurements. This allows us to use STA, which would usually work on the delay values, to perform the SHE look-up for us. The STA tool can also back-annotate all calculated SHE temperatures into a Standard Delay Format (SDF) file, which allows us to easily obtain the SHE in all cell instances throughout the studied circuit.

Since we are replacing existing values in the library, most of the so-called “heavy lifting” can be then done by the conventional EDA tools. Only some additional scripting is required to apply necessary changes at crucial points in the tool flow. Fig. 6 shows a detailed overview of our proposed SHE flow and how it is connected with the conventional tool flow. In preparation to the first step of our flow, we require a transistor compact model with SHE calibrated and enabled. In addition, we connect a fifth terminal to each transistor in our standard cell netlists, which is implemented as a temperature sensor in our compact model. This terminal is used to obtain the SHE temperature during SPICE simulation. After the initial setup, standard cell library characterization is performed as usual with a commercial tool flow. The resulting standard cell library is used for later synthesis tasks but also serves as a template for our SHE library. In addition, we obtain the intermediate SPICE files that are generated during the characterization process. These have the benefit of already covering all relevant timing arcs and slew-load combinations for each cell. Within these SPICE files, we replace the delay measurements with SHE measurements for each transistor. By re-running the adjusted SPICE files, we obtain the required SHE measurements for all transistors in the standard cells. At this point, we have to make decisions on how to accumulate our data so it will fit into the format of the cell library. First, in the transient SPICE simulations, we have to reduce the temperature curves to single values. For our purpose, we reduce our SHE curves to the peak SHE temperature per transistor. Second, the standard cell library stores only a single delay for each cell. Therefore, we also have to reduce our SHE temperatures from multiple transistors in the cell to the single point of interest. Again, we select to store only the hottest transistor for each slew-load measurement, since this is of the biggest interest for our reliability analysis. We further address the resulting limitation later in section IV-C.

With the regular standard cell library and our custom SHE library at hand, we can perform a variety of experiments using tools from the conventional EDA flow. First, we perform synthesis as well as place and route on our circuit designs, using the regular standard cell library. After obtaining the gate-level netlists, we apply our custom SHE library in STA. STA performs the 2D-interpolation on our former delay tables and calculates the correct SHE for each cell. The usual timing report and constraints checking in STA has no meaning in our application. Instead, we are interested to write back all calculated SHE temperatures for each cell into our “SHE SDF” files. Last but not least, we combine the placement information of the circuit with our SHE-SDF to draw a SHE heat map, which helps to visualize reliability concerns in the design.

IV. EVALUATION OF OUR PROPOSED APPROACH

In Section II-A, we already looked at SHE on the transistor level. In this section, we employ our proposed approach to further evaluate SHE on the cell and the circuit levels. To this end, we employ the industry-standard FinFET transistor compact model (BSIM-CMG) [8], calibrated against Intel 14nm measurements [9], including accurate calibration for SHE [2]. All standard cell netlists and geometries are obtained

Highest SHE temperature for each cell in the library

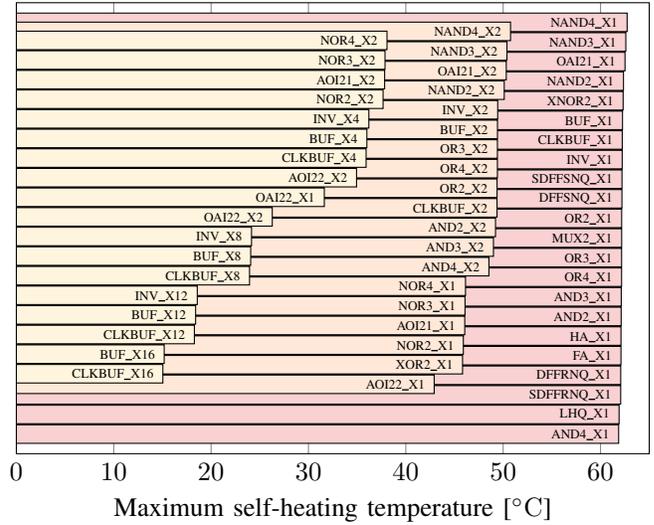


Fig. 7. Maximum SHE temperature occurring in each cell during full library characterization. For visual compactness, the cells are roughly clustered and depicted in three overlapping bar charts.

from the NanGate open cell library [10], including layout parasitics. We evaluate our approach on combinational circuits from the EPFL benchmark suite [11] as well as the “zero-riscy” RISC-V processor core [12]. In our implementation of the proposed flow, we used commercial EDA tool flows from Synopsys (for SPICE, library characterization, logic synthesis, and STA) and Cadence (for the chip physical design including place and route down to the GDS-II).

A. SHE on the Cell Level

During cell library characterization, we simulate all standard cells for a wide range of slews and loads to make sure that all possible scenarios in later circuit designs are covered. Within these slew-load boundaries, the maximum SHE temperature that can occur within each cell is shown in Fig. 7. The differences between the individual cells are quite substantial, ranging from 15°C to 63°C. One important factor is the driving strength of the cell, indicated by the suffixes X1 to X16. Cells with low driving strength, i.e., small-scaled transistors driving the output pin, tend to be very susceptible to SHE. On the other hand, cells with high strength and larger output transistors (e.g. X8 and more) show good resilience against SHE. Although early DC analysis in Fig. 2 suggests the opposite, *larger transistors* (i.e., more fins) can charge their connected capacitances faster, actually reducing the heat-up time of the transistor and thus *lowering the impact of SHE*.

From the SHE look-up tables that we build for each cell (and timing arc) during characterization, we can also extract the sensitivity of SHE towards changing slews and loads. Fig. 8 shows how SHE changes along the slew and load axes of all SHE tables in our library. The load curves confirm our early SPICE experiments, showing that higher load capacitances lead to increased SHE temperatures. However, we also see that

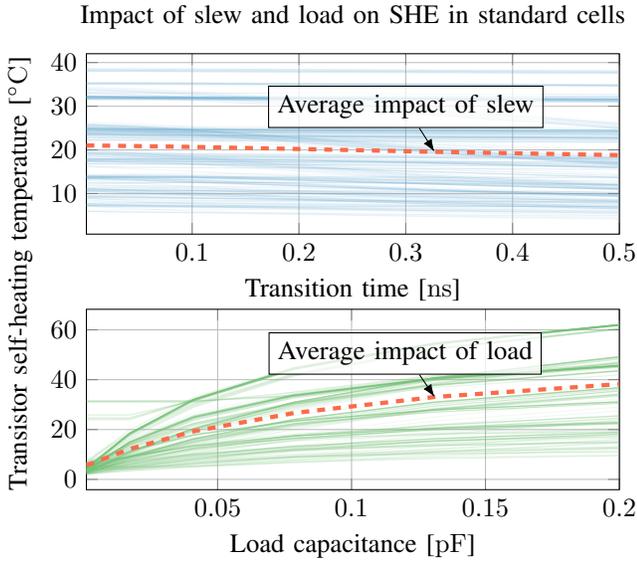


Fig. 8. During characterization, we build SHE look-up tables for 304 timing arcs across 59 standard cells. The depicted curves show how SHE changes in each of the 304 SHE tables long the slew and load axes.

slews have the opposite effect, slightly mitigating the impact of SHE for longer transition times.

B. SHE on the Circuit Level

With our SHE library prepared, we can employ STA to determine all SHE temperatures in a circuit while accurately considering the slews and loads for all cell instances. Following our flow outlined in Fig. 6, we first synthesize all circuits with the regular standard cell library. After synthesis, we perform STA on the circuit gate-level netlists with our SHE library. The resulting SHE temperatures for all cells are collected in the SHE SDF. Fig. 9 gives a first impression on the outcome, showing the maximum SHE temperature that occurs within each circuit. Importantly, we see that the peak SHE temperatures differ heavily between circuits, and also remain way below the 91.6°C determined by DC simulation in Fig. 2. Since we are aware of the importance of capacitances for SHE, we must be concerned about additional parasitic capacitances introduced to the circuits after place and route. Therefore, we perform place and route for three selected circuits: adder, multiplier, and the RISC-V core. After place and route, the critical path delays of these circuits are increased by 31%, 40%, and 43%, respectively. At the same time, their peak SHE temperature is increased to 27.87°C (+81.5%), 53.33°C (+11.8%), and 54.17°C (+8.3%), respectively, showing that circuit parasitics have a considerable impact on SHE.

Fig. 10 draws a more detailed picture of circuit SHE, showing all cells used in the RISC-V circuit and their corresponding SHE distribution. On the right-most side, we can identify AND2_X1, DFFRNQ_X1, and CLKBUF_X1 as the cells exhibiting the highest SHE temperatures in the circuit, with over 50°C above chip temperature. However, we also notice that, at the same time, the average SHE among all instances of these cells (blue dots) is relatively low. Therefore,

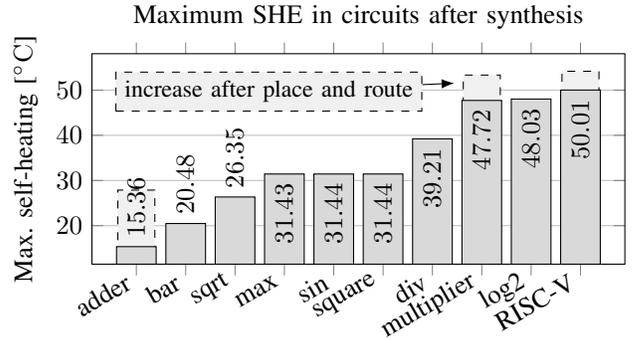


Fig. 9. The largest SHE temperature observed in a circuit heavily differs between the designs. Larger circuits tend to experience higher SHE spikes.

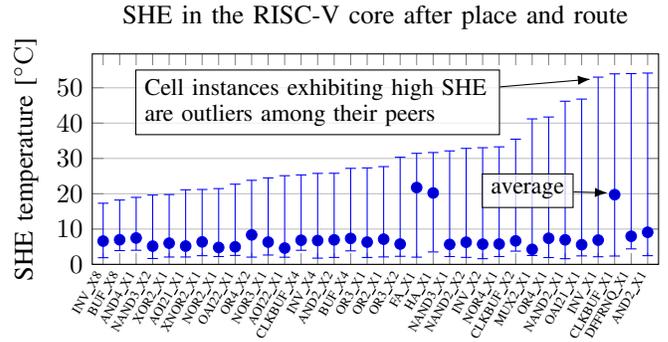


Fig. 10. Distribution of SHE in the RISC-V core. The upper and lower end of each bar represents the max and min SHE instances of that cell type exhibit. The dot in between indicates the average SHE of all cell instances. Out of the 54 cells employed in the circuit, the left-most 20 cells with the lowest peak SHE have been removed from the figure for visual clarity.

we can conclude that the placement and connectivity of the cell inside the circuit play a decisive role in its expected SHE temperature. It also shows that, although Fig. 7 reveals potential candidates for high-temperature cells, ultimately, the decisions from synthesis (and place and route) tools decide whether a cell will be a potential risk to reliability or not.

Finally, we can combine the cell-wise SHE information from the SHE SDF with the placement information of the circuit to visualize reliability hot-spots in the circuit. Fig. 11 shows the SHE heat map of the RISC-V circuit. The figure underlines that only a few cell form the potential points of failure while the majority of cells remain comparatively cool.

C. Discussion, Limitations, and Perspective

With our proposed SHE framework, we are able to reveal circuit-level SHE on a detailed cell-by-cell basis for the first time. Fig. 12 shows the expected degradation of our technology node for different temperatures, using state-of-the-art physics-based BTI transistor aging model [13]. Assuming a maximum tolerated degradation of e.g., $\Delta V_{th} = 25\text{ mV}$ on all transistors, we can give very different lifetime guarantees based on the circuit's upper-bound SHE, as can be noticed. Alternatively, we can also derive the expected degradation for our technology and synthesize our design against less

SHE heat map of the RISC-V core

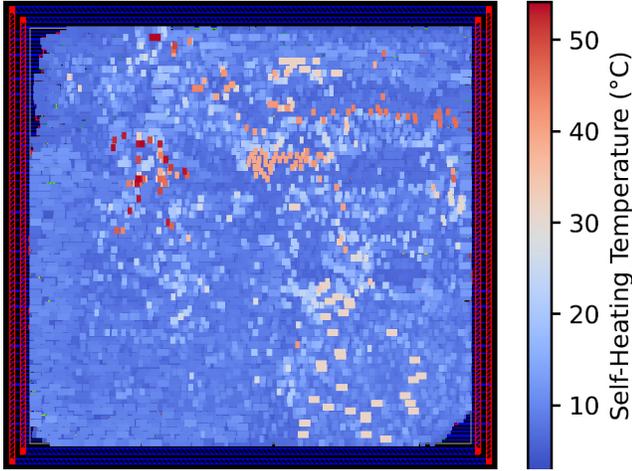


Fig. 11. Each cell in the RISC-V circuit is colored according to its SHE and drawn on top of the layout obtained from the Cadence place and route tool. Note that temperatures are not “spreading” to neighbor cells—SHE temperatures are trapped inside the individual transistor.

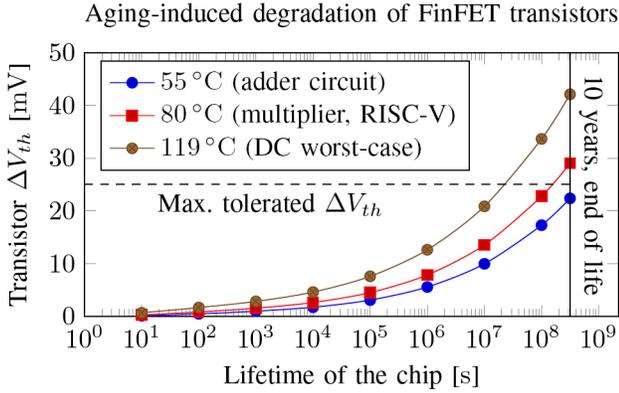


Fig. 12. Expected degradation of our circuits under SHE. The shown temperatures are selected by adding the calculated SHE temperatures on top of the regular 27°C chip temperature.

pessimistic corners. Ultimately, even more precise estimations could be achieved by considering the heterogeneous SHEs across the circuit and deriving more accurate degradation estimations for each individual cell [14], which is the focus of our future work.

The SHE temperature of the employed 14 nm FinFET transistor dissipates within a single cycle, as shown in Fig. 4. Other more advanced technologies sustain SHE longer, building up higher SHE temperatures over multiple cycles. This is currently not considered in our framework. Nevertheless, it can straightforwardly be extended by introducing additional setup cycles in the extracted SPICE decks, shown in Fig. 6. Finally, our SHE-aware library currently only captures the hottest transistor for each slew-load point within a cell. This limitation is introduced by the structures of the existing tool flows. However, it can be circumvented by repeating the proposed flow multiple times, capturing a different transistor in each iteration if more accurate analysis is needed.

V. CONCLUSION

By incorporating SHE temperatures into standard cell libraries, we demonstrated a novel approach to upheave SHE from the transistor all the way up to the circuit level, using conventional EDA tool flows. SHE evaluation using standard STA, SDF, and detailed heat maps opens the door toward better reliability awareness, more accurate safety margins, and less pessimistic circuit designs in advanced technology nodes.

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