Draft version March 11, 2020
Typeset using LATEX **twocolumn** style in AASTeX62

AST5220-Milestone II: The Recombination History

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Abstract

We have simulated the recombination history of the universe under the assumptions of the only (baryonic) matter content of the universe being hydrogen and not having any reionization epoch. We have computed the evolution of the optical depth $\tau(x)$ and the visibility function $\tilde{g}(x)$, as well as their first two derivatives, as functions of the log-scale factor x. To do so, we first had to compute the free electron density n_e through finding the free electron fraction X_e by solving the Saha and Peebles equations. Defining recombination to happen when $X_e = 0.5$, we determined the time of recombination to be at $x = -7.16$ corresponding to a redshift $z = 1285.7$. The transition from an opaque to a transparent universe defining the surface of last scattering when $\tau = 1$ or at the peak of $\tilde{g}(x)$ both found to be at $x = -6.99$ or at redshift $z = 1080$.

The codes for this paper can be found at:
https://github.com/SagittariusA-Star/AST5220-Milestones

1. INTRODUCTION

After having simulated the large scale background evolution of the universe in Stutzer (2020), we now want to compute the optical depth and the visibility function of the universe throughout its evolution. The computations made will expand upon the code previously made (Stutzer (2020)). The optical depth and the visibility function are important quantities as, they essentially quantify how far a photon can travel in the universe before getting absorbed (when looking back in time). We make several assumptions, which amongst other things are that extinction through Thomson scattering provides the only extinction process and that the only baryons is hydrogen atoms. Also the epoch of reionization will be neglected, as a simplification. Computing the optical depth and visibility function is in principle not that hard, however, only if one is provided the density of free electrons. Thus, most of the work is finding the electron density evolution of the universe and from it the optical depth and visibility function.

2. METHOD

The formulas and equations presented here are provided by Winther (2020), unless otherwise stated.

2.1. *The Optical Depth*

As mentioned in the introduction computing the optical depth of the universe is in theory governed by fairly simple relations. When light travels through a medium, a given amount of photons are removed and added to the beam. The amount of photons that are added depend on the emissivity of the medium. We assume here that the gas the light travels through in the universe does have a negligible emissivity. Further more the amount of attenuation is given by the extinction coefficient

$$\alpha = n_e \sigma_T, \tag{1}$$

where we assume Thomson scattering on electrons to be the only mechanism to attenuate photons. Here $\sigma_T = \frac{8\pi}{3}\frac{\alpha^2\hbar^2}{m_e^2c^2}$ and n_e are the Thomson cross section and the free electron density respectively. The optical depth is given by

$$\tau(\eta) = \int_\eta^{\eta_0} n_e \sigma_T a d\eta', \tag{2}$$

where a and η are the scale factor and the conformal time of the universe. We however will for practical reasons choose to solve for τ by solving the ordinary differential equation (ODE)

$$\frac{\mathrm{d}\tau}{\mathrm{d}x} = -\frac{n_e\sigma_T}{H} = -\frac{n_e\sigma_T}{H}c, \tag{3}$$

where $x = log(a)$ and $H = \frac{\dot{a}}{a}$ are the log-scale factor and the Hubble parameter respectively. The Hubble parameter is found by the Friedmann equation through the previously developed code in Stutzer (2020). We choose this ansatz instead of the integral, so we can use the `ODEsolver` routine provided by Winther (2020). We went from natural units to SI units in the last step. The equations provided by Winther (2020) are given in natural units, however we want them to be in SI units, so as to enable solving in C++ using the constants in `Utils.h` provided by Winther (2020). We will show the dimensional analysis to go from natural units to SI on the example above, and than just provide the equations in SI units with all the constants from now on. As one can see in eq. (3) the l.h.s. of the equation if dimensionless because τ and x both are. Thus the r.h.s. must be dimensionless too. We however see that the r.h.s. has units

$$1 = \frac{[n_e][\sigma_T]}{[H]}[c]^\alpha = \frac{\mathrm{m}^{-3}[\mathrm{m}^2]}{\mathrm{s}^{-1}}[c]^\alpha = \frac{\mathrm{s}}{\mathrm{m}}[c]^\alpha \tag{4}$$

The only physical constant that is reasonable to use here is thus the light speed c, with units m/s, thus $\alpha = 1$ in this case. Similarly, when having units for instance Js or K "too much" on one side in natural units, one can correct with the reduced Planck constant or Boltzmann constant to go to SI units.

Now, as can be seen from eq. (3), there is one problem however; we need to know the electron density. We will address this problem in the next subsection.

2.2. *The Free Electron Fraction and Density*

In order to compute the optical depth we need to know the free electron density n_e. We can compute this through the free electron fraction X_e and use the baryon, i.e. hydrogen density as a translational factor. We thus get that the electron density as a function of the electron fraction and the hydrogen (baryon) density is

$$n_e = X_e n_H, \tag{5}$$

where

$$n_H = n_b \approx \frac{\rho_b}{m_H} = \frac{\Omega_{b0}\rho_{c0}}{m_H a^3}, \tag{6}$$

where we have assumed all baryons to be in hydrogen. This should be a reasonable approximation since the hydrogen atoms comprise almost all of the baryons in the universe. Here the baryon density parameter and the critcal density today are given as their regular expressions found in and computed in Stutzer (2020). The time dependence of the baryon density is solely in the scale factor dependent $a^{-3} = e^{-3x}$ factor.

The remaining job to find n_e is to find the electron fraction X_e. This turns out to be the hardest part of the total work. We can find X_e through solving the Boltzmann equation for a recombination/ionization reaction of the type $e^- + p^+ \rightleftharpoons H + \gamma$. At early times the energies of the constituent particles were high enough to keep this reaction in equilibrium. As long at the reaction is close to equilibrium Saha's approximation (Dodelson 2003, p. 70) ensures that

$$\frac{n_e n_p}{n_H} = \frac{n_e^{(0)} n_p^{(0)}}{n_H^{(0)}}, \tag{7}$$

where the $n_i^{(0)}$ denote the equilibrium distribution species i. As the universe's charge is net zero, we can safely assume their to be as many free electrons as protons, i.e. $n_e = n_p$. Using this assumption we get the Saha equation for recombination given as

$$\frac{X_e^2}{1 - X_e} = \frac{1}{n_b}\left(\frac{m_e T_b k_B}{2\pi\hbar^2}\right)^{3/2} e^{-\epsilon_0/T_b k_B} \equiv R. \tag{8}$$

Here m_e and ϵ_0 are the electron mass and the ionization energy of hydrogen respectively (Winther 2020). The temperature T_b is the baryon temperature, which in principle should be found separately, however we can approximate it to the radiation temperature T_r (Winther 2020). It is is thus given as $T_b = T_r = T_{\mathrm{CMB}}/a = 2.7255\mathrm{K}/a$.

Because eq. (8) is a simple quadratic equation its solution is simply $X_e = \frac{1}{2}(-R \pm \sqrt{R^2 + 4R})$, where R stand for the r.h.s. of Saha's equation. Note that only the "+"-solution is physically valid. We will also briefly come back to this solution in sec. 2.3 to discuss some numerical issues with this solution.

We have, however, not yet found a complete solution, since the Saha equation is only valid if X_e is close to unity. To solve for X_e if X_e falls below some tolerance, which we choose to be $X_e = 0.99$ than we need to use the better approximation to X_e given by the Peebles' equation

$$\frac{dX_e}{dx} = \frac{C_r(T_b)}{H}\left[\beta(T_b)(1 - X_e) - n_H \alpha^{(2)}(T_b) X_e^2\right]. \tag{9}$$

Here

$$C_r(T_b) = \frac{\Lambda_{2s\to1s} + \Lambda_\alpha}{\Lambda_{2s\to1s} + \Lambda_\alpha + \beta^{(2)}(T_b)}, \tag{10}$$

$$\Lambda_{2s\to1s} = 8.227\mathrm{s}^{-1} \tag{11}$$

$$\Lambda_\alpha = H\frac{(3\epsilon_0)^3}{(8\pi)^2(\hbar c)^3 n_{1s}} \tag{12}$$

$$n_{1s} = (1 - X_e)n_H \tag{13}$$

$$\beta^{(2)}(T_b) = \beta(T_b)e^{3\epsilon_0/4T_b k_B} \tag{14}$$

$$\beta(T_b) = \alpha^{(2)}(T_b)\left(\frac{m_e T_b k_B}{2\pi\hbar^2}\right)^{3/2} e^{-\epsilon_0/T_b k_B} \tag{15}$$

$$\alpha^{(2)}(T_b) = \frac{8}{\sqrt{3\pi}}\sigma_T c\sqrt{\frac{\epsilon_0}{T_b k_B}}\phi_2(T_b) \tag{16}$$

$$\phi_2(T_b) = 0.448\ln(\epsilon_0/T_b k_B), \tag{17}$$

are constants describing simple atomic transitions between the ground state of hydrogen (1s) and the second exited state (2s) (Winther 2020). Importantly, Peebles equation is also simply a first order approximation for X_e. A more thorough handling would be to include different atomic species as well as several more transitions. We will however stick with our two level hydrogen model. Note we have included all the necessary constants to translate the system of equation to the SI system.

The Peebles' equation is simply another linear ODE which we can simply solve using the `ODEsolver`-routine by Winther (2020) as discussed in sec. 2.3. Now that we have an expression for X_e we can as mentioned earlier easily find n_e and again use the `ODEsolver`-routine to find the optical depth *tau*.

The only remaining quantity we need to compute is the visibility function

$$\tilde{g}(x) = -\frac{\mathrm{d}\tau}{\mathrm{d}x} e^{-\tau}, \tag{18}$$

which quantities the probability density for a photon to scatter at a given log-scale factor x. It is a true probability density function (PDF), meaning it integrates to unity over all of the universes history.

2.3. *Implementation*

As mentioned previously the main goal of this paper is to compute X_e to find $\tau(x)$ and $\tilde{g}(x)$. The main strategy is to loop through values of x and at each step compute the solution of Saha's equation. If this solution is at some point below the tolerance $X_e = 0.99$ we switch to Peebles' equation. When in the Peebles regime we set up an ODE with one step for each (outer) loop iteration over x. The initial condition for each iteration is the value of X_e in the previous iteration. The ODE is than for each iteration stepped forward from the previous to the current value of X_e, which is subsequently added to an array. Alternatively one could have solved all of the Peebles regime in one go, than exit the x loop. However, we found the step wise method to be more intuitive. The solving of the ODE was done with the `ODEsolver`-routine by Winther (2020).

In the same loop over x we simultaneously compute n_e as a function of x. The resulting solutions for X_e and n_e were than splined using the `Spline`-routine by Winther (2020), in order to get a more continuos callable representation of the two quantities. Since both X_e and n_e vary a lot through the universes history, we made a spline of the logarithm of the quantities instead of the quantities themselves to prevent numerical errors.

Importantly there were two numerical subtleties when solving the Saha and Peebles equations. The first was that when solving the quadratic Saha equation, the case when the r.h.s. R of eq. (8) can result in something of the form $-R + R\sqrt{1+4/R} = -R + R = 0$, i.e. "large" - "large" $= 0$, because a computer lets $1 +$ "small" $= 1$. Then $X_e = 0$ even though it should be $X_e = 1$. This happens when R becomes large, i.e. at early times. To solve the problem we consider the solution

$$X_e = \frac{1}{2}(-R + \sqrt{R^2 + 4R}) = \frac{1}{2}(-R + R\sqrt{1 + 4/R}) \tag{19}$$

$$\approx \frac{1}{2}(-R + R(1 + 2/R)) = 1, \tag{20}$$

using a taylor expansion to first order, since $4/R \ll 1$ when $R \gg 1$. This yields the correct result $X_e = 1$ at early times. We thus simply include an `if`-test to check for this, in which case $X_e = 1$ and else we compute the solution according to the regular formula. We chose to use $4/R = 10^{-9}$ as the tolerance, under which we set $X_e = 1$.

The second subtlety is that in the Peebles equation we have expressions containing exponential functions with positive exponents that can be very large at late times. In particular we have $\exp(3\epsilon_0/4T_b k_B)$ in the expression for $\beta^{(0)}$ which can easily overflow. Fortunalty, there is a relatively easy solution; simply combine the expressions for $\beta^{(0)}$ and β directly. This way the exponential factor in $\beta^{(0)}$ becomes $\exp(-\epsilon_0/4T_b k_B)$, which in case of a large fraction $\epsilon_0/T_b k_B$ will simply underflow and give zero, which is alright in our case.

Now, having solved for the free electron density, finding τ and subsequently $\tilde{g}$ is easy. We simply set up an ODE for τ and solve it using the `ODEsolver`-routine (Winther 2020), all in one go. There is, however, one thing we have to handle. Since the `ODEsolver`-routine cannot solve the ODE backwards with initial condition $\tau(x=0) = 0$, and τ at early times is unknown. There is, however, a simple trick; simply use some random initial condition, and find $\tau(x=0)$ (in our case always the last array value of the solution with random initial condition for τ), then subtract $\tau(x=0)$ from all $\tau(x)$ values. This way we simply move the origin to correct for the wrong initial condition. We found that using an initial condition of $tau(x_{\mathrm{start}}) = 1000$ to yield satisfactory results. Where $x_{\mathrm{start}} = -13$ and $x_{\mathrm{end}} = 0$.

The values for $\tau(x)$ are than splined using the `Spline`-routine (Winther 2020). We found that extracting the first and second derivative of τ from its spline, resulted in some numerical noise oscillations close to the present age. We thus used the analytical expression for $\frac{\mathrm{d}\tau}{\mathrm{d}x}$ to make a spline of it directly, and than extract the second derivative of τ from the spline of the first derivative instead. This largely resolved the problem.

Computing the visibility function $\tilde{g}(x)$ is now just a matter of using the computed splines for τ and $\frac{\mathrm{d}\tau}{\mathrm{d}x}$. A spline is than also made for the visibility function, and

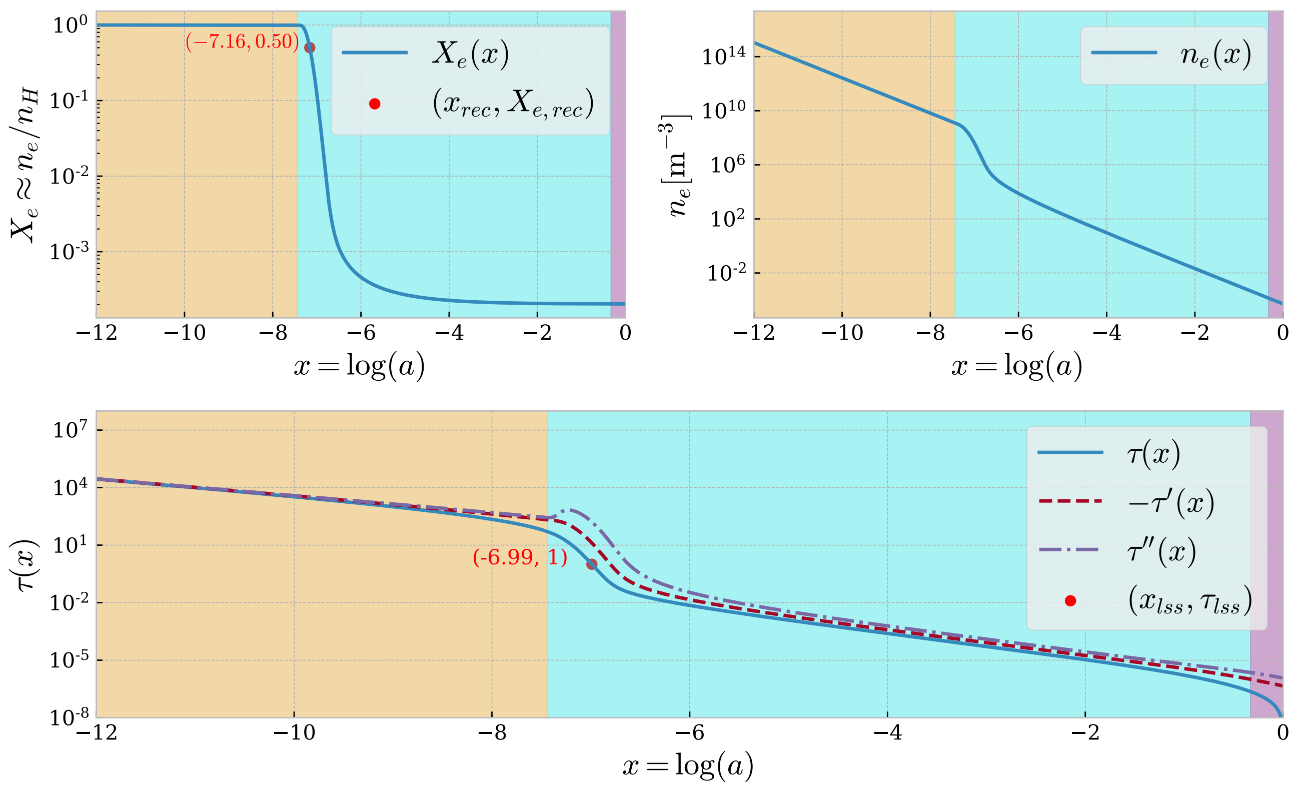

Figure 1. Upper left: Figure showing the free electron fraction X_e as a function of the log-scale factor x. **Upper right**: Figure showing the free electron density n_e as a function of the log-scale factor x. **Lower panel**: Figure showing the optical depth $\tau(x)$ of the universe due to Thomson scattering on free electrons only, as well at the derivative $\tau'(x)$ and second oder derivative $\tau''(x)$ w.r.t and as functions of the log-scale factor x. The surface of last scattering corresponding to $\tau = 1$ is marked by a red dot. **Note**: The background color in all the plots shows the epoch of dominance for reference. Yellow marked the era of radiation dominance, blue the epoch of matter domination and purple corresponds to the epoch of dark energy. The color domain is found by checking when the corresponding density parameter is dominant, however, in reality the transitions between each epoch should be smoother than shown.

the first and second derivatives are found through the spline.

Finally the results are printed to a data file and subsequently plots are produced using a Python script.

3. RESULTS/DISCUSSION

The results produced were computed with the same cosmological parameters used as in Stutzer (2020), originally given by Callin (2006). However, we have used some debug parameters given by Winther (2020); $\Omega_{b0} = 0.05$, $\Omega_{CDM0} = 0.45$, $\Omega_{\Lambda 0} = 0.5$ and $h = 0.7$ in order to cross-check whether our results were consistent with those of Winther (2020). The quantities found were computed from $x_{\rm start} = -13$ until $x_{\rm end} = 0$.

In Figure 1 one can see the resulting solution of the electron fraction $X_e(x)$, the electron density $n_e(x)$ as well as the optical depth $\tau(x)$ ass well as its derivatives, all as functions of the log-scale factor x.

When looking at the electron fraction Xe we see that it initialy behaves like a constant. This is the phase of the universes history where the temperatures are so high that almost all hydrogen will be instantly ionized, therefore yielding a electron fraction $X_e = 1$, as there is one electron for all protons (ionized hydrogen). Then shortly after matter-radiation equality (see color code in caption) the free electron fraction starts to drop passing $X_e = 0.5$ at $x \approx -7.16$ (see red dot) at which time there is double the amount of hydrogen compared to free electrons. This corresponds to when we have recombination, and corresponds to a redshift $z \approx 1285.7$. By now we are well within the regime of the Peebles solution. Once too far from equilibrium, the Saha solution will simply drop to zero in an exponential fashion. However, we see that X_e drops fast as more and more hydrogen is forming from free electrons and protons. But it does not drop totally down to zero, but instead stabilizes at $X_e \sim 10^{-4}$. Eventually the temperature drops sufficiently for the equilibrium to be broken, and recombination happen more than ionization reac-

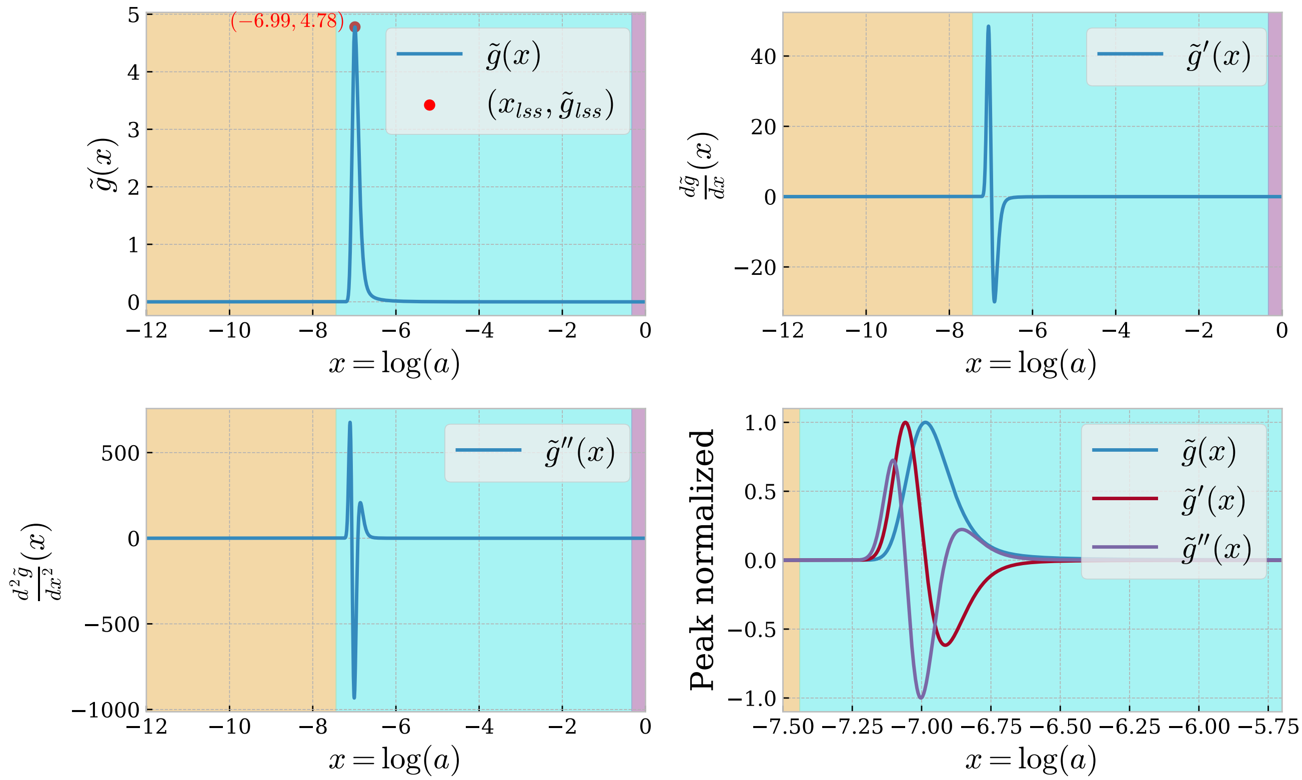

Figure 2. Upper left: Figure showing the un-normalized visibility function $\tilde{g}$ as a function of the log-scale factor x. The red dot markes the peak of $\tilde{g}$ and its x value corresponds to the log scale factor of the surface of last scattering. **Upper right**: Figure showing the un-normalized first order derivative of $\tilde{g}$ w.r.t. and as a function of the log-scale factor. **Lower left**: Figure showing the un-normalized second order derivative of $\tilde{g}$ w.r.t. and as a function of the log-scale factor. **Lower Right**: Figure showing the visibility function and its first two derivative together in one plot, where all functions are normalized to their respective extremum value (peak or valley). Also we have zoomed in somewhat to show more details.

tions. At some point the photons decouple from the reaction and freeze-out, after which they are in permanent equilibrium with themselves as the spatial distance between photons and electrons is to large for ionizations to happen. The remaining electrons and protons then establish a new equilibrium once the graph of X_e flattens out towards $X_e \sim 10^{-4}$.

The free electron density as seen in the left upper panel of Figure 1, also behaves as expected. We see that in the two regimes before and after around recombination, the graph behaves linearly. Since the electron density is proportional to the inverse of the scale factor a cubed, we should see n_e dropping with a linear slope of -3 in a log-log (base 10) plot. This is exactly what we see (keep in mind that the x-axis is in a natural log-scale). The linear regimes of n_e thus correspond to when X_e is stable at $X_e = 1$ and $X_e \sim 10^{-4}$ initially and at the end, and the bend in n_e correspondingly is due to the fall-off of the electron fraction due to an increasing recombination.

The optical depth also behaves as one would expect. We see that it starts out very large at $\tau(x = -12) \approx 10^4$ initially. If the optical depth is large, i.e. $\tau \gg 1$ we say that the medium at hand (the stuff in the universe) is optically thick or opaque. Thus initially the universe was very opaque, due to the large free electron density on which photons could (Thomson) scatter. Thus it also makes sense that the optical depth decreases accordingly to the electron density, i.e. almost linearly due to dilution by expanding space. Around $x \sim -7$ we also here see sign of recombination. As successively more electrons and protons bond to form hydrogen, the photons have no free electrons to scatter on and the temperature has dropped so that there are not sufficiently many high energy photons to reionization hydrogen. The transition from an opaque to a transparent universe is defined to be at $\tau = 1$, which happens at $x_{lss} = -6.99$ (see red dot in lower panel of Figure 1). After the period of recombination the optical depth again establishes a linear-like behavior, until the epoch of dark energy begins were it drops to zero very fast. Here the optical depth $\tau \ll 1$

and the universe is thus said to be transparent or optically thin.

The shape of the derivatives of τ resemble that of τ quite closely. Note especially that the first order derivative of τ behaves very similar to the electron density due to the direct proportionality. They both are very linear outside the era of recombination, and have a matching behavior in the epoch of reionization. The first derivative of the optical depth can roughly be interpreted as the ratio between the reaction rate of the recombination/ionization reaction to the expansion rate of the universe. Once this ration drops below 1, there are hardly any reactions happening anymore, due to the expansion of space between the reactants. The second order derivative also seems to behave reasonably well.

Lastly, in Figure 2 one can see the visibility function and its derivatives both un-normalized and normalized. The visibility function quantifying the probability density of a photon last scattering, is seen to peak at $x = -6.99$ being consistent with our finding of the time of transition between an opaque to a transparent universe at the same value for x. There are some small negligible differences when comparing the program print out of x_{lss} due to the finite grid size in x. The value of $x_{lss} = -6.99$ or redshift $z \approx 1080$ is what we would recall the surface of last scattering (lss). We can also see in the derivative of the visibility function that its two extrema points are different in height, emphasizing the same thing seen in the visibility function itself; its slope is larger on the left than the right side of the peak.

In order to check whether $\tilde{g}$ indeed acts like a true PDF, we integrated it numerically and found it to be within about seven digits of unity, justifying calling it a true PDF.

Note also that recombination an the surface of last scattering happen slightly after matter-radiation equality, something which we also expected. However, the color transitions in the plots.

All in all the visibility function and its derivatives seem to behave according to what is expected.

4. CONCLUSION

We have expanded our simulation of the large scale evolution of the universe to include the recombination history of the universe. Our final goal being the calculation of the optical depth and the visibility function of the universe as a function of time, we first had to compute the electron fraction and density. All the computed quantities were found to behave according to our expectations and reflect known physics. Thus we can conclude that our simulations successfully depict the recombination history within the limitations of the initial assumptions made.

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