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Fabrication of 10nm diameter Carbon nanopores

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Abstract

The addition of carbon to samples, during imaging, presents a barrier to accurate TEM analysis, the controlled deposition of hydrocarbons by a focused electron beam can be a useful technique for local nanometer-scale sculpting of material. Here we use hydrocarbon deposition to form nanopores from larger focused ion beam (FIB) holes in silicon nitride membranes. Using this method, we close 100-200nm diameter holes to diameters of 10nm and below, with deposition rates of 0.6nm per minute. I-V characteristics of electrolytic flow through these nanopores agree quantitatively with a one dimensional model at all examined salt concentrations.

Synthetic nanopores have gained considerable interest, for applications ranging from single molecule DNA sequencing(1) to studies of DNA-protein interactions(2), RNA folding kinetics(3, 4) and single-molecule force measurements(5, 6). Solid-state nanopores have several desirable properties, including tunability of surface chemistry and size, compatibility with electronic sensing systems, improved pore lifetime, mechanical stability and sizes comparable to the cross section of biomolecules.

While nanopores are a promising technology for single-molecule measurements, they remain difficult to create, often requiring very expensive and specialized instruments. A variety of approaches have been used to prepare synthetic nanopores. One such method is ion-beam sculpting, where relatively large FIB holes are closed down to 2-10 nm using a defocused argon ion beam(7). Other methods include electron beam-induced pore closing(8), electron beam stimulated decomposition and sputtering(9, 10), film embedding of carbon nanotubes(11), soft lithography(12), and chemical etching(13, 14). All of these techniques, while feasible, are experimentally challenging. Thus far, no single technique has come into routine use.

Once created, nanopores must be measured. The scale of these pores (2-10nm in diameter) requires extremely high-resolution measurement techniques, and is typically done by TEM. TEM measurement of pore size contributes substantially to fabrication times. An advantage of TEM-based fabrication techniques (8, 10, 15) is that creation and measurement steps can be combined, greatly shortening overall processing time. So far all TEM-based fabrication techniques require a field emission gun (FEG) to achieve the necessary electron density. The most straightforward of these, drilling holes in thin SiO₂ or Si₃N₄ membranes, requires a beam intensity of 10⁸e nm⁻² (9). In another TEM-based scheme, an electron beam of intensity 10⁷e nm⁻² is used to locally melt the membrane surrounding a ~20nm pore, leading to nanopore contraction driven by surface energy minimization.

While small nanopores are difficult to create, large pores (100-200nm diameter) are easy to fabricate using focused ion beam drilling (FIB). In this paper, we describe a method to make nanopores from larger FIB holes with starting diameters of 50-200nm, using a standard (non-FEG) TEM. Because this method doesn't require specialized equipment it is available to anyone with access to a standard TEM.

Our method is based on the familiar phenomenon of carbon contamination. Carbon contamination in transmission electron microscopy (TEM) is a well known phenomenon. During this process, hydrocarbons adsorbed on sample surfaces are polymerized and immobilized by a high-energy electron beam. Hydrocarbons present on TEM samples migrate into the electron beam, where they are crosslinked and immobilized. Carbon contamination scatters incident high-energy electrons⁽¹⁶⁾, can obscure measurement and is generally undesirable in TEM work. However, buildup of carbonaceous material is slow and localized to the electron beam, and thus a useful tool for nanometer-scale sculpting. Hydrocarbon contamination lithography was first proposed in 1976 by Boers⁽¹⁷⁾ has been recently used as a nanofabrication tool creating nanowires⁽¹⁸⁾, nanostructures^(19, 20) and sharp SPM tips^(21, 22).

A build up of a low-Z hydrocarbon layer during electron-beam exposure in scanning electron microscope has been previously used to fabricate nanometer-scale holes in nitride membranes (23).

Here, we use hydrocarbon contamination lithography to selectively and controllably add material for nanopore closure in transmission electron microscope. There are two advantages over method proposed by *Schenkel et al.* (23); our method posses higher accuracy and it allows monitoring of nanopore formation in real time while pores are ready for use in consequent experiments .

Our nanopores are fabricated in SPI silicon nitride TEM grids, or in silicon chips diced from custom wafers. These wafers were made as follows. First, low-pressure chemical vapor deposition (LPCVD) is used to grow a 200nm thick Si_3N_4 film on the surface of a Si wafer. (We have chosen Si_3N_4 over SiO_2 due to its superior mechanical

properties (10)). We exposed the silicon nitride membrane in $50\mu\text{m} \times 50\mu\text{m}$ windows using photolithography and standard KOH etching.

In the center of each window, we thinned the silicon nitride membrane to $\sim 20\text{nm}$ in a $1\mu\text{m} \times 1\mu\text{m}$ circular area using a focused ion beam FIB (FEI Strata 235 Dual Beam). The principle of a dual-beam instrument is described in more detail elsewhere(24). Milling time and ion beam current settings were optimized on a sacrificial sample in each FIB run. Finally, in the center of that region we drill a pore 50-150nm in diameter. To drill holes in this thinned area, and to achieve a sufficient small beam diameter, the experiments were carried out with the ion acceleration voltage and current set to 30 keV Ga^+ beam with an intensity of 10 pA in spot and a diameter of 10 nm (full width at half-maximum). In addition, the ion beam focus and astigmatism were carefully adjusted, and the beam quality was checked by drilling holes in the sacrificial membrane.

The Ga^+ ion beam allows ion beam assisted drilling, thinning and deposition, while electron beam allows in-situ characterization such as scanning electron microscopy and energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDXS). Hydrocarbon deposition and imaging of the nanopores was carried out in a JEOL 4000, equipped with a 2Kx2K Gatan CCD camera and Gatan TV camera. As the initial FIB holes shown on **Fig.1 (a)** and **(b)** are exposed to the focused electron beam (at room temperature and 1.5×10^{-7} torr) the carbon contamination slowly builds up. By moving the highly focused e-beam we could create pores with diameters of 10nm or less, as shown on **Fig.1 (c)** and **(d)**. **Fig.1 (e)** displays intermediate steps in the pore closing process. These real-time measurements of pore diameter give nanometer control over pore closing. The observed rate of carbon deposition was proportional to the sample thickness. Additional factors controlling the amount of carbon contamination include sample preparation steps, the adhesiveness of the sample to hydrocarbons, the vacuum level of the microscope, sample temperature, hydrocarbon contamination in the microscope, outgassing from o-rings and stage lubricant, contamination due to back streaming pump oil and electron probe current density(25). To further examine nanopore shape, we took TEM micrographs with the sample tilted at 30° **Fig1.(f)**. TEM

micrographs suggest an 'hour-glass' shaped nanopore. Initial thickness of thinned SiN is 15-30 nm which determines the nanopore channel length. The channel has an "hour-glass"-like shape, with a diameter ranging from 5 to 10nm in the narrowest section and 10-20nm at each end., as shown on the schematic in **Fig1.(f)**.

Carbon contamination is a combination of several effects. Hydrocarbon molecules are adsorbed onto the sample surface, either during sample preparation or inside the microscope(16). Molecular adsorption is governed by the relation $f \propto \sqrt{\frac{m}{T}} p$, where f is the flux of molecules adsorbed to the surface, m the mass of hydrocarbon molecules, p the partial pressure of the hydrocarbon and T the absolute temperature(16). Once adsorbed, these molecules diffuse across the surface due to thermal, electrical, or chemical gradients(16) (all of which are produced by electron beams). Primary and secondary electrons formed from beam-sample interactions near exposed areas excite and rupture common -CH, -COOH, -CNH₂, and other bonds, resulting in the release of non-volatile molecules and the formation of carbon double bonds. Finally, polymerization and immobilization of the hydrocarbons builds up on the surface(26).

The chemical gradient produced by this carbonaceous area is filled in by diffusion of hydrocarbons from outside the irradiated area. Diffusion is further enhanced by sample heating (due to the interaction of the electron beam with the sample) and sample charging resulting from emission of secondary electrons(16). Energy loss spectroscopy (EELS) experiments and elemental mapping were performed to determine the chemical composition of the fabricated nanopores. EELS is an established spectroscopic technique that provides both qualitative and quantitative chemical information from nanometer scale regions(27).

The results of the EELS measurements are shown in **Fig.2**. Panel **(a)** shows a 100KX TEM image of a nanopore; panels **(b),(c),(d)** and **(e)** show the four corresponding maps of nitrogen, carbon silicon and gallium. These elemental maps show clearly that the material forming the nanopore is carbonaceous **Fig. 2(b)**. In addition, the starting material, silicon nitride, along with the gallium ions incorporated during substrate

thinning are present on $1\mu\text{m} \times 1\mu\text{m}$ center area, but largely absent from the inner pore. Energy filtered elemental maps were acquired in the JEOL 2010 TEM equipped with a Gatan Tridiem imaging filter, with 200kV electrons operating in conventional TEM imaging mode. The three-window method(27) (two pre-edge and one post-edge) was used to model and remove background to give optimum edge signal for each element. The windows used for the N, C, Si and Ga maps were: 30eV, 20eV, 50eV and 50eV, respectively with acquisition times of 10s, 10s, 30s and 30s. To demonstrate the functionality of the fabricated nanopores we performed electrophoretic ion transport measurements. A silicon chip with a single nanopore was fixed horizontally in a poly(dimethylsiloxane) chamber located in a Faraday cage. The chamber design is compatible with our optical system described elsewhere(6). Both fluid chambers were connected to the external measuring circuit using Pt electrodes. The electrode in the top fluid chamber was connected to the head stage of an Axopatch 200B amplifier operating in the voltage clamp mode while the bottom electrode was grounded. We measured DC current through a single nanopore as a function of the applied potential. We took a series of current-voltage measurements at KCl concentrations ranging from 0.05-1 M and pH7.5.

The current-voltage characteristics of these nanopores **Fig. 3** at all salt concentration were highly nonlinear. The nonlinearity of ionic current in nanofluidics systems is known to result from asymmetric nanopore shape and/or charge distribution. From EELS measurements we know that our nanopores are made from hydrocarbons suggesting that our pores might be highly hydrophobic and negatively charged, and in that sense very similar to biological pores(28) and channels(29). Recent theoretical(30) and experimental studies (31) suggest an existence of surface charge which depends on the pore material.

At neutral and basic pH, the carboxylate groups in hydrocarbon nanopores are deprotonated, resulting in an excess negative surface charge and finally an internal electrostatic potential. It has been observed(14) and calculated(30) that pore shape dictates the profile of internal electrostatic potential. For example in conical pores this profile looks like an asymmetric "ratchet" tooth(14) and results in an asymmetric, diode-

like current–voltage characteristic. In contrast, our current-voltage characteristics, while nonlinear, are symmetric at all salt concentrations suggesting cylindrical shape of fabricated nanopores.

A model of electrolyte transport properties developed for asymmetric (non-conical) charged pores (30) also gives satisfactory fits of our data **Fig. 3(a)**, implying that nonlinear I-V characteristics are likely due to the existence of internal electrostatic potential. The model, described in detail elsewhere(30), is based on the reduction of the three-dimensional Smoluchowski equation(32) into one dimensional equation of Fick Jackobs type. We have also calculated an experimental values for the conductance as an average over the voltage range ($-1V \leq V \leq 1$) at pH 7.5. The ionic conductance inside the nanopore linearly increased with the electrolyte concentration **Fig.3(b)**.

To conclude, we have shown that controlled deposition of hydrocarbons can be used to make nanopores, using standard, widely-available FIB and TEM technology. Our technique provides three main advantages over current nanopore fabrication methods. First, the slow deposition rates of carbon (0.6nm/minute) permit a high degree of control over nanopore size and location. Second, it doesn't require special equipment. Finally, because fabrication is performed in a TEM, this method permits simultaneous size measurement of the nanopores. We show that the resulting pores exhibit interesting nonlinear I-V characteristics. The fabricated nanopores should be useful as components of nanofluidic sieving and molecular sensing devices.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. (a)-(d) Transmission electron microscopy (JEOL 4000) images of two FIB holes that have been closed from a starting diameter of 100-200 nm down to 10-20 nm. Before (top row) and after (bottom row) carbon deposition. FIB holes 100-200 nm in diameter were imaged and exposed to a high energy (400keV) beam for carbon deposition. Panel **(e)** shows a time series of the carbon deposition process. **(f)** Cross-section schematic of fabricated nanopores and TEM micrograph of 30°tilted nanopore.

Figure 2. (a) TEM image of carbon nanopore. **(b)** Elemental nitrogen, **(c)** carbon, **(d)** silicon, and **(e)** gallium EELS maps of the pore. Pores are fabricated in silicon nitride membranes. The membrane is thinned using a focused beam of gallium ions, some of which are incorporated into the membrane, as seen in panel **(e)**. Finally, the pore is sculpted in a TEM. The material added is clearly carbonaceous, as can be seen in panel **(c)**.

Figure 3. (a) I-V curves for a 10nm diameter carbon nanopore. **(b)** Conductance as a function of KCl concentration at pH 7.5 for same carbon nanopore.





