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### SPACER STRUCTURE FOR SEMICONDUCTOR DEVICE AND METHOD FOR FORMING THE SAME

#### Abstract

The present disclosure describes a semiconductor structure and a method for forming the same. The method can include forming a fin structure over a substrate. The fin structure can include a channel layer and a sacrificial layer. The method can further include forming a first recess structure in a first portion of the fin structure, forming a second recess structure in the sacrificial layer of a second portion of the fin structure, forming a dielectric layer in the first and second recess structures, and performing an oxygen-free cyclic etching process to etch the dielectric layer to expose the channel layer of the second portion of the fin structure. The oxygen-free cyclic etching process can include two etching processes to selectively etch the dielectric layer over the channel layer.

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## Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION [0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. Non-provisional Patent Application No. 18/149,130, titled “Spacer Structure for Semiconductor Device and Method for Forming the Same,” filed on Jan. 2, 2023, which is a continuation of U.S. Non-provisional patent application Ser. No. 17/143,698, titled “Spacer Structure for Semiconductor Device and Method for Forming the Same,” filed on Jan. 7, 2021, which claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 63/052,243, titled “Inner Spacer for Semiconductor Device,” filed on Jul. 15, 2020, all of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entireties.

### BACKGROUND

[0002] Advances in semiconductor technology has increased the demand for semiconductor devices with higher storage capacity, faster processing systems, higher performance, and lower costs. To meet these demands, the semiconductor industry continues to scale down the dimensions of semiconductor devices, such as nano-sheet FETs. Such scaling down has increased the complexity of semiconductor manufacturing processes.

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## Description

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0003] Aspects of this disclosure are best understood from the following detailed description when read with the accompanying figures.

[0004] FIG. 1 is an isometric view of a semiconductor device, according to some embodiments.

[0005] FIG. 2 is a cross-sectional view of a semiconductor device, according to some embodiments.

[0006] FIG. 3 is a flow diagram of a method for fabricating a semiconductor device, according to some embodiments.

[0007] FIG. 4 is an isometric view of a semiconductor device at a stage of its fabrication process, according to some embodiments.

[0008] FIGS. 5-8 are cross-sectional views of a semiconductor device at various stages of its fabrication process, according to some embodiments.

[0009] FIGS. 9 and 10 illustrate various scenarios of an etching process for fabrication of a semiconductor device, according to some embodiments.

[0010] FIGS. 11-14 are cross-sectional views of a semiconductor device at various stages of its fabrication process, according to some embodiments.

[0011] Illustrative embodiments will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings. In the drawings, like reference numerals generally indicate identical, functionally similar, and/or structurally similar elements.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0012] It is noted that references in the specification to “one embodiment,” “an embodiment,” “an example embodiment,” “exemplary,” etc., indicate that the embodiment described may include a particular feature, structure, or characteristic, but every embodiment may not necessarily include the particular feature, structure, or characteristic. Moreover, such phrases do not necessarily refer to the same embodiment. Further, when a particular feature, structure or characteristic is described in connection with an embodiment, it would be within the knowledge of one skilled in the art to effect such feature, structure or characteristic in connection with other embodiments whether or not explicitly described.

[0013] It is to be understood that the phraseology or terminology herein is for the purpose of description and not of limitation, such that the terminology or phraseology of the present specification is to be interpreted by those skilled in relevant art(s) in light of the teachings herein.

[0014] Spatially relative terms, such as “beneath,” “below,” “lower,” “above,” “upper,” and the like may be used herein for ease of description to describe one element or feature's relationship to another element(s) or feature(s) as illustrated in the figures. The spatially relative terms are intended to encompass different orientations of the device in use or operation in addition to the orientation depicted in the figures. The apparatus may be otherwise oriented (rotated 90 degrees or at other orientations) and the spatially relative descriptors used herein may likewise be interpreted accordingly.

[0015] In some embodiments, the terms “about” and “substantially” can indicate a value of a given quantity that varies within 5% of the value (e.g.,  $\pm 1\%$ ,  $\pm 2\%$ ,  $\pm 3\%$ ,  $\pm 4\%$ ,  $\pm 5\%$  of the value). These values are merely examples and are not intended to be limiting. The terms “about” and “substantially” can refer to a percentage of the values as interpreted by those skilled in relevant art(s) in light of the teachings herein.

[0016] As used herein, the term “vertical” means nominally perpendicular to the surface of a substrate.

[0017] Fins associated with fin field effect transistors (finFETs) or gate-all-around (GAA) FETs can be patterned by any suitable method. For example, the fins can be patterned using one or more photolithography processes, including a double-patterning process or a multi-patterning process. Double-patterning and multi-patterning processes can combine photolithography and self-aligned processes, allowing patterns to be created that have, for example, pitches smaller than what is otherwise obtainable using a single, direct photolithography process. For example, a sacrificial layer is formed over a substrate and patterned using a photolithography process. Spacers are formed alongside the patterned sacrificial layer using a self-aligned process. The sacrificial layer is then removed, and the remaining spacers can then be used to pattern the fins.

[0018] Technology advances in the semiconductor industry drive the pursuit of integrated circuits (ICs) having higher device density, higher performance, and lower cost. In the course of the IC evolution, nano-sheet transistors can replace planar field effect transistor (FET) and fin field-effect transistor (finFET) to achieve ICs with higher device densities. Nano-sheet transistors can use a gate-all-around (GAA) gate structure to surround each nano-sheet channel layer to effectively reconcile short channel effects. Nano-sheet transistors require an inner spacer to physically separate the nano-sheet transistor's source-drain (S/D) regions from the nano-sheet transistor's GAA gate structure. The process of forming the inner spacer can include an inner spacer trimming process that removes an inner spacer material between the S/D region and the nano-sheet channel layer. The inner spacer trimming process may not be a wet etching process, because the wet etching process may not provide a sufficient wafer-scale etching uniformity for achieving the inner spacer with wafer-scale thickness uniformity. The inner spacer trimming process can be a dry etching

process with an inner-spacer-dry-etchant to etch the inner spacer material. To protect the nano-sheet channel layer from being damaged by the dry etching process, the dry etching process can further include an oxygen radical to reduce an adsorption of the inner-spacer-dry-etchant on the nano-sheet channel layer. However, the oxygen-contained etchant can also reduce the adsorption of the inner-spacer-dry-etchant on the inner spacer material. The reduction of the adsorption of the inner-spacer-dry-etchant on the inner spacer material can degrade the inner spacer trimming process's etching rate and the inner spacer trimming process's etching uniformity, thus degrading the IC manufacturing's yield and throughput.

[0019] To address the aforementioned challenges, the present disclosure is directed to a fabrication method of an inner spacer for a gate-all-around field effect transistor (GAA FET). The process of forming the inner spacer can include forming a recess structure in a substrate and forming a dielectric layer in the recess structure. The process of forming the inner spacer can further include performing an inner spacer dry etching process to remove the dielectric layer to expose the recess structure's side surface. The inner spacer dry etching process can be oxygen-free dry etching process (e.g., the dry etching processes do not apply any oxygen-contained etchants) to avoid the aforementioned challenges of inner spacer trimming process susceptible to the reduced etching rate and reduced etching uniformity. Further, the inner spacer dry etching process can be a cyclic dry etching process. Each cycle of the cyclic dry etching process can include a first radical etching process to etch the dielectric layer with a first etchant that includes a first halogen element. For example, the first etchant can be a fluorine radical that can adsorb onto and react with the dielectric material to etch the dielectric material. The first radical etching process can further include a hydrogen-contained etchant, such as a hydrogen radical, to increase the etching rate of etching the dielectric layer.

[0020] The cyclic dry etching process can include a second radical etching process to etch the dielectric layer with a second etchant that includes a second halogen element. For example, the second etchant can be a chlorine radical that can facilitate the reaction between the dielectric layer and portions of the first etchants previously adsorbed on the dielectric layer's surface to etch the dielectric material. Therefore, the second radical etching process can etch the dielectric layer with a compatible (e.g., substantially equal) etching rate as the first radical etching process. The second etchant can further adsorb on the recess structure's side surface to form an interfacial layer thereon. The interfacial layer can protect the recess structure's side surface from being etched by the second radical etching process. Further, the interfacial layer can protect the recess structure's side surface from being etched by the first radical etching processes of subsequent cycles of the cyclic dry etching process. Therefore, the overall inner spacer dry etching process can have an enhanced etching rate of etching the dielectric material and an reduced etching rate of etching the recess structure's side surface. A benefit of the present disclosure, among others, is to increase the etching rate and etching selectivity of the inner spacer trimming process (e.g., the inner spacer dry etching process), thus improving the IC manufacturing's yield and throughput.

[0021] A semiconductor device **100** having multiple FETs **101** formed over a substrate **102** is described with reference to FIGS. **1** and **2**, according to some embodiments. FIG. **1** illustrates an isometric view of semiconductor device **100**, according to some embodiments. FIG. **2** illustrates a cross-sectional (e.g., along the x-z plane) view of semiconductor device **100** along line B-B of FIG. **1**, according to some embodiments. The discussion of elements in FIGS. **1** and **2** with the same annotations applies to each other, unless mentioned otherwise. Semiconductor device **100** can be included in a microprocessor, memory cell, or other integrated circuit (IC). Also, each FET **101** shown in FIGS. **1** and **2** can be a GAA FET, according to some embodiments.

[0022] Referring to FIG. **1**, substrate **102** can be a semiconductor material, such as silicon. In some embodiments, substrate **102** can include a crystalline silicon substrate (e.g., wafer). In some embodiments, substrate **102** can include (i) an elementary semiconductor, such as silicon (Si) or germanium (Ge); (ii) a compound semiconductor including silicon carbide (SiC), gallium arsenide

(GaAs), gallium phosphide (GaP), indium phosphide (InP), indium arsenide (InAs), and/or indium antimonide (InSb); (iii) an alloy semiconductor including silicon germanium carbide (SiGeC), silicon germanium (SiGe), gallium arsenic phosphide (GaAsP), gallium indium phosphide (InGaP), gallium indium arsenide (InGaAs), gallium indium arsenic phosphide (InGaAsP), aluminum indium arsenide (InAlAs), and/or aluminum gallium arsenide (AlGaAs); or (iv) a combination thereof. Further, substrate **102** can be doped depending on design requirements (e.g., p-type substrate or n-type substrate). In some embodiments, substrate **102** can be doped with p-type dopants (e.g., boron (B), indium (In), aluminum (Al), or gallium (Ga)) or n-type dopants (e.g., phosphorus (P) or arsenic (As)).

[0023] FET **101** can include a fin structure **108** extending along an x-direction, a gate structure **110** traversing through fin structure **108** along a y-direction, and S/D regions **124** formed over portions of fin structure **108**. Although FIG. **1** shows fin structure **108** accommodating two FETs **101**, any number of FETs **101** can be disposed along fin structure **108**. In some embodiments, FET **101** can include multiple fin structures **108** extending along a first horizontal direction (e.g., in the x-direction) and gate structure **110** traversing through the multiple fin structures **108** along a second horizontal direction (e.g., in the y-direction).

[0024] Fin structure **108** can include a buffer region **120** formed over substrate **102**. Fin structure **108** can further include one or more channel regions **122** formed over buffer region **120**. Each channel region **122** can be wrapped by gate structure **110** to function as FET **101**'s channel. For example, a top surface, side surfaces, and a bottom surface of each channel region **122** can be surrounded and in physical contact with gate structure **110**. Buffer region **120** and channel region **122** can be made of materials similar to (e.g., lattice mismatch within 5%) substrate **102**. In some embodiments, each of buffer region **120** and channel region **122** can be made of Si or SiGe. Each of buffer region **120** and channel region **122** can be un-doped, doped with p-type dopants, doped with n-type dopants, or doped with intrinsic dopants. In some embodiments, buffer region **120** and channel regions **122** can be both doped with p-type dopants or doped with n-type dopants.

[0025] Gate structure **110** can be a multilayered structure (not shown in FIG. **1**) that wraps around each channel region **122** to modulate FET **101**. Gate structure **110** can have a length  $L_{sub.110}$  representing FET **101**'s channel length. In some embodiments, length  $L_{sub.110}$  can be less than about 50 nm, less than about 40 nm, less than about 30 nm, less than about 20 nm, or less than about 15 nm. If length  $L_{sub.110}$  is above these upper limits, semiconductor device **100** may not meet the fin pitch requirement determined by the respective technology node (e.g., fin pitch may be required to be less than about 60 nm for a 22 nm technology node). Gate structure **110** can include a gate dielectric layer (not shown in FIG. **1**) and a gate electrode (not shown in FIG. **1**) disposed on the gate dielectric layer. The gate dielectric layer can include any suitable dielectric material with any suitable thickness that can provide channel modulation for FET **101**. In some embodiments, the gate dielectric layer can be made of silicon oxide or a high-k dielectric material (e.g., hafnium oxide or aluminum oxide). In some embodiments, the gate dielectric layer can have a thickness ranging from about 1 nm to about 5 nm. Based on the disclosure herein, other materials and thicknesses for the gate dielectric layer are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure. The gate electrode can function as a gate terminal for FET **101**. The gate electrode can include any suitable conductive material that provides a suitable work function to modulate FET **101**. In some embodiments, the gate electrode can be made of titanium nitride, tantalum nitride, tungsten nitride, titanium, aluminum, copper, tungsten, tantalum, copper, or nickel. Based on the disclosure herein, other materials for the gate electrode are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0026] S/D regions **124** can be formed over opposite sides (e.g., along x-direction) of each channel region **122** and gate structure **110**. S/D regions **124** can be in contact with channel region **122**'s side surface **122S** to function as FET **101**'s source and drain terminals. S/D regions **124** can have any suitable lateral (e.g., in the y-direction) width  $W_{sub.124}$  such as from about 20 nm to about 200 nm. S/D regions **124** can be made of an epitaxially-grown semiconductor material similar to (e.g.,

lattice mismatch within 5%) channel region **122**. In some embodiments, S/D regions **124** can be made of Si, Ge, SiGe, InGaAs, or GaAs. S/D regions **124** can be doped with p-type dopants, n-type dopants, or intrinsic dopants. In some embodiments, S/D region **124** can have a different doping type from channel region **122**.

[0027] Semiconductor device **100** can further include a gate spacer **104** formed between gate structure **110** and S/D region **124**. In some embodiments, gate spacer **104** can be further formed over fin structure **108**'s side surface. Gate spacer **104** can be made of any suitable dielectric material. In some embodiments, gate spacer **104** can be made of silicon oxide, silicon nitride, or a low-k material with a dielectric constant less than about 3.9. In some embodiments, gate spacer **104** can have a suitable thickness  $t_{sub.104}$  from about 5 nm to about 15 nm or from about 5 nm to about 10 nm. If thickness  $t_{sub.104}$  is above these upper limits, FET **101**'s speed may be degraded due to a high channel resistance. If thickness  $t_{sub.104}$  is below these lower limits, FET **101**'s speed may be degraded due to a high gate-to-source/drain parasitic capacitance. Based on the disclosure herein, other materials and thicknesses for gate spacer **104** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0028] Semiconductor device **100** can further include shallow trench isolation (STI) regions **138** to provide electrical isolation between fin structures **108**. Also, STI regions **138** can provide electrical isolation between FET **101** and neighboring active and passive elements (not shown in FIG. 1) integrated with or deposited on substrate **102**. STI regions **138** can include one or more layers of dielectric material, such as a nitride layer, an oxide layer disposed on the nitride layer, and an insulating layer disposed on the nitride layer. In some embodiments, the insulating layer can include silicon oxide, silicon nitride, silicon oxynitride, fluorine-doped silicate glass (FSG), a low-k dielectric material, and/or other suitable insulating materials. Based on the disclosure herein, other dielectric materials for STI region **138** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0029] Semiconductor device **100** can further include an interlayer dielectric (ILD) layer **130** to provide electrical isolation to structural elements it surrounds or covers, such as gate structure **110** and S/D regions **124**. In some embodiments, gate spacer **104** can be formed between gate structure **110** and ILD layer **130**. ILD layer **130** can include any suitable dielectric material to provide electrical insulation, such as silicon oxide, silicon dioxide, silicon oxycarbide, silicon oxynitride, silicon oxy-carbon nitride, and silicon carbonitride. ILD layer **130** can have any suitable thickness, such as from about 50 nm to about 200 nm, to provide electrical insulation. Based on the disclosure herein, other insulating materials and thicknesses for ILD layer **130** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0030] Referring to FIG. 2, semiconductor device **100** can further include an inner spacer structure **160** formed protruding into fin structure **108**. Inner spacer structure **160** can separate gate structure **110** from S/D region **124**. For example, inner spacer structure **160** can be formed at gate structure **110**'s opposite sides along FET **101**'s channel direction (e.g., along the x-direction) to separate gate structure **110** from S/D region **124**. In some embodiments, inner spacer structure **160** can be formed between two vertically (e.g., in the z-direction) adjacent channel regions **122**. Inner spacer structure **160** can further have a front surface **162F** proximate to gate structure **110**. In some embodiments, front surface **162F** can be substantially coplanar with gate structure **110**. In some embodiments, front surface **162F** can be a substantially planar surface or a curved surface. Inner spacer structure **160** can further have a back surface **162B** proximate to S/D region **124**. In some embodiments, back surface **162B** can be substantially coplanar with S/D region **124**. In some embodiments, back surface **162B** can be a substantially planar surface or a curved surface. In some embodiments, back surface **162B** can be an indented surface with respect to inner spacer structure **160**'s vertical (e.g., in the z-direction) adjacent channel region **122**'s side surface **122S**. Inner spacer structure **160** can be made of any suitable insulating material, such as a low-k dielectric material, to electrically separate gate structure **110** from S/D region **124**. In some embodiments, inner spacer structure **160** can be made of silicon nitride, silicon oxynitride (SiON), silicon oxycarbide (SiOC), silicon

carbonitride (SiCN), silicon oxycarbonitride (SiOCN), and silicon oxynitridecarbide (SiONC). Based on the disclosure herein, other materials for inner spacer structure **160** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0031] FIG. **3** is a flow diagram of a method **300** for fabricating semiconductor device **100**, according to some embodiments. For illustrative purposes, the operations illustrated in FIG. **3** will be described with reference to the example fabrication process for fabricating semiconductor device **100** as illustrated in FIGS. **1** and **2**. FIG. **4** illustrates an isometric view of semiconductor device **100** at a stage of its fabrication, according to some embodiments. FIGS. **5-8** and **11-14** illustrate cross-sectional views along line B-B of structure of FIG. **4** at various stages of its fabrication, according to some embodiments. FIGS. **9** and **10** illustrate various scenarios of an etching process to form inner spacer structure **160** in method **300**, according to some embodiments. Operations can be performed in a different order or not performed depending on specific applications. Method **300** may not produce a complete semiconductor device **100**. Accordingly, it is understood that additional processes can be provided before, during, and/or after method **300**, and that some other processes may be briefly described herein. Further, the discussion of elements in FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **4-14** with the same annotations applies to each other, unless mentioned otherwise.

[0032] Referring to FIG. **3**, in operation **305**, a recess structure is formed in a fin structure. For example, a recess structure **536** (shown in FIG. **5**) can be formed in fin structure **108** (shown in FIG. **4**) with reference to FIGS. **4** and **5**. The process of forming recess structure **536** can include (i) forming fin structures **108** (shown in FIG. **4**) over substrate **102**; (ii) forming STI region **138** (shown in FIG. **4**) over the etched substrate **102** using a deposition process and an etch back process; (iii) forming sacrificial gate structures **410** (shown in FIG. **4**) with length  $L_{\text{sub.110}}$  over fin structures **108**; and (iv) removing fin structures **108** through sacrificial gate structures **410** to form recess structure **536**.

[0033] Referring to FIG. **4**, the process of forming fin structures **108** can include (i) providing substrate **102**; (ii) epitaxially growing channel regions **122** and sacrificial layers **322** over substrate **102**; and (iii) etching channel regions **122**, sacrificial layers **322**, and substrate **102** through a patterned mask layer (not shown in FIG. **4**) using an etching process.

[0034] Sacrificial layer **322** can be made of materials different from channel region **122** and similar to (e.g., lattice mismatch within 5%) substrate **102**. In some embodiments, sacrificial layer **322** can be made of SiGe, and channel region **122** can be made of Si. In some embodiments, sacrificial layer **322** and channel region **122** can be made of SiGe with different atomic percentage of Ge from each other. Channel region **122** and sacrificial layer **322** can have suitable thicknesses  $t_{\text{sub.422}}$  and  $t_{\text{sub.322}}$ , respectively. In some embodiments, each of thicknesses  $t_{\text{sub.422}}$  and  $t_{\text{sub.322}}$  can be from about 5 nm to about 10 nm. Channel region **122** and sacrificial layer **322** can be epitaxially grown using any suitable epitaxial growth process, such as a chemical vapor deposition (CVD) process, a low pressure CVD (LPCVD) process, a rapid thermal CVD (RTCVD) process, a metal-organic CVD (MOCVD) process, an atomic layer CVD (ALCVD) process, an ultrahigh vacuum CVD (UHV CVD) process, a reduced pressure CVD (RPCVD) process, a molecular beam epitaxy (MBE) process, a cyclic deposition-etch (CDE) process, and a selective epitaxial growth (SEG) process. Based on the disclosure herein, other materials, thicknesses, and epitaxial growth processes for channel region **122** and sacrificial layer **322** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0035] The etching process for removing channel region **122**, sacrificial layer **322**, and substrate **102** can include a dry etching process or a wet etching process to define fin structure **108** with any suitable width  $W_{\text{sub.108}}$ , such as from about 5 nm to about 50 nm. In some embodiments, the dry etching process can include using any suitable etchant, such as an oxygen-containing gas, a fluorine-containing gas, a chlorine-containing gas, and a bromine-containing gas, and the wet etching process can include etching in any suitable wet etchant, such as diluted hydrofluoric acid, potassium hydroxide solution, ammonia, and nitric acid. Based on the disclosure herein, other

widths and etching processes for fin structure **108** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure. [0036] The deposition process for forming STI region **138** can include any suitable growth process, such as a physical vapor deposition (PVD) process, a CVD process, a high-density-plasma (HDP) CVD process, a flowable CVD (FCVD) process, and an atomic layer deposition (ALD) process. The etch back process for forming STI region **138** can include a dry etching process, a wet etching process, or a polishing process, such as chemical vapor deposition (CMP) process. Based on the disclosure herein, other processes for forming STI region **138** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0037] The process of forming sacrificial gate structure **410** can include (i) blanket depositing a dielectric layer **406** with a suitable thickness, such as from about 1 nm to about 5 nm, over fin structures **108** using a suitable deposition process, such as a CVD process, a PVD process, and an ALD process; (ii) blanket depositing a polysilicon layer (not shown in FIG. **4**) and a hard mask layer (not shown in FIG. **4**) over dielectric layer **406** using a suitable deposition process, such as a CVD process, a PVD process, and an ALD process; (iii) removing dielectric layer **406**, the polysilicon layer and the hard mask layer through a patterned mask layer (not shown in FIG. **4**) using an etching process; and (iv) forming gate spacers **104** with a suitable thickness  $t_{sub.104}$ , such as from about 5 nm to about 15 nm, over the polysilicon layer's side surfaces and/or over fin structure **108**'s side surfaces using a suitable deposition process and an etching process. Based on the disclosure herein, other processes for forming gate structures **410** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0038] Referring to FIG. **5**, after forming sacrificial gate structure **410**, recess structure **536** can be formed by removing channel regions **122**, sacrificial layers **322**, and substrate **102** through sacrificial gate structures **410** and gate spacers **104** using an etching process. The etching process can include a dry etching process or a wet etching process. In some embodiments, the etching process can be a time-etching process. In some embodiments, the dry etching process can include using any suitable etchant, such as an oxygen-containing gas, a fluorine-containing gas, a chlorine-containing gas, and a bromine-containing gas, and the wet etching process can include etching in any suitable wet etchant, such as diluted hydrofluoric acid, potassium hydroxide solution, ammonia, and nitric acid. As shown in FIG. **5**, the resulting recess structure **536** can expose fin structure **108**'s side surface, such as exposing sacrificial layer **322**'s side surface **322S** and exposing channel region **122**'s side surface **122S**. Further, the resulting recess structure **536** can expose gate spacers **104**'s side surfaces. Further, the resulting recess structure can define a suitable channel region **122**'s length  $L_{sub.522}$ , such as from about 10 nm to about 50 nm. In some embodiments, length  $L_{sub.522}$  can be substantially equal to the sum of length  $L_{sub.110}$  and twice of thickness  $t_{sub.104}$ . In some embodiments, an upper channel region **122**'s length  $L_{sub.522}$  (e.g., length  $L_{sub.522A}$ ) can be substantially equal to a lower channel region **122**'s length  $L_{sub.522}$  (e.g., length  $L_{sub.522B}$ ). In some embodiments, a standard deviation of the upper channel region **122**'s length  $L_{sub.522}$  (e.g., length  $L_{sub.522A}$ ) and the lower channel region **122**'s length  $L_{sub.522}$  (e.g., length  $L_{sub.522B}$ ) can be less than about 1 nm.

[0039] Referring to FIG. **3**, in operation **310**, a dielectric layer is formed in the recess structure. For example, dielectric layer **762** (shown in FIG. **7**) can be formed in fin structure **108** of FIG. **5**. The process of forming dielectric layer **762** can include forming recess structures **636** (shown in FIG. **6**) in FIG. **5**'s sacrificial layers **322** with a suitable etching depth  $S_{sub.636}$ , such as from about 2 nm to about 10 nm, using a selective etching process that can selectively etch sacrificial layer **322** from channel region **122**. In some embodiments, etching depth  $S_{sub.636}$  can be less than or substantially equal to gate spacer **104**'s thickness  $t_{sub.104}$ . In some embodiments, the selective etching process can form a curved side surface **322S** exposed by recess structure **636**. The process of forming dielectric layer **762** can further include blanket depositing dielectric layer **762** in recess structure **436** and in recess structures **636** using a deposition process, such as a CVD process, a PVD process, and an ALD process. The deposited dielectric layer **762** can cover fin structure **108**'s side



surface, such as covering sacrificial layer 322's side surface 322S and covering channel region 122's side surface 122S. In some embodiments, the deposited dielectric layer 762 can be a substantially conformal dielectric layer covering fin structure 108's top and side surfaces. For example, dielectric layer 762 can have a thickness  $H_{\text{sub.762}}$  over sacrificial gate structure 410 and a thickness  $t_{\text{sub.762}}$  over channel region 122's side surface 122S, where thickness  $H_{\text{sub.762}}$  can be substantially equal to thickness  $t_{\text{sub.762}}$ . In some embodiments, the deposited dielectric layer 762 can substantially fill recess structure 636. In some embodiments, the deposited dielectric layer 762 can have two opposite side surfaces horizontally (e.g., in the x-direction) separated from one another in recess structure 536.

[0040] Referring to FIG. 3, in operation 315, a cyclic etching process is performed to remove the dielectric layer. For example, as shown in FIG. 8, a portion of dielectric layer 762 (e.g., from FIG. 7) that is over channel region 122's side surface 122S can be removed to define inner spacer structure 160 by performing the cyclic etching process (shown in FIGS. 9 and 10) with reference to FIGS. 8-10. The cyclic etching process can be an oxygen-free dry etching process to define inner spacer structure 160 by selectively etching dielectric layer 762 of FIG. 7 over channel region 122. In some embodiments, the cyclic etching process does not apply oxygen-contained etchants (e.g., etchants' chemical formula that does not include oxygen) to etch dielectric layer 762. In some embodiments, the cyclic etching process can include one or more cycles of a radical etching process that can laterally and selectively etch dielectric layer 762 over channel region 122's surface 122S to define inner spacer structure 160. In some embodiments, the cyclic etching process can etch dielectric layer 762 at a first etching rate and etch channel region 122 at a second etching rate, where a ratio of the first etching rate to the second etching rate can be from about 3 to about 50, from about 5 to about 50, from about 5 to about 40, from about 5 to about 30, or from about 5 to about 20. If the ratio is below the above-noted lower limits, the cyclic etching process may damage channel region 122, thus reducing the yield of semiconductor device 100. If the ratio is beyond the above-noted upper limits, the cyclic etching process may consume more process gases, thus increasing a manufacturing cost of semiconductor device 100. In some embodiments, the above-noted lower and upper limits are determined based on the activation discrepancies (caused at least by the choice of processing gas species; discussed below with reference to FIGS. 9 and 10) in the cyclic etching process. In some embodiments, since the cyclic etching process can selectively etch dielectric layer 762 over channel region 122, the resulting channel region 122's thickness  $t_{\text{sub.122}}$  after the cyclic etching process can be substantially equal to thickness  $t_{\text{sub.422}}$  defined at operation 305 (shown in FIG. 5). In some embodiments, since the cyclic etching process can selectively etch dielectric layer 762 over channel region 122, the resulting channel layer 122's length  $L_{\text{sub.122}}$  after the cyclic etching process can be substantially equal to length  $L_{\text{sub.522}}$  defined at operation 305 (shown in FIG. 5). In some embodiments, after the cyclic etching process, an upper channel region 122's length  $L_{\text{sub.122}}$  (e.g., length  $L_{\text{sub.122A}}$ ) can be substantially equal to a lower channel region 122's length  $L_{\text{sub.122}}$  (e.g., length  $L_{\text{sub.122B}}$ ). In some embodiments, after the cyclic etching process, a standard deviation of the upper channel region 122's length  $L_{\text{sub.122}}$  (e.g., length  $L_{\text{sub.122A}}$ ) and the lower channel region 122's length  $L_{\text{sub.122}}$  (e.g., length  $L_{\text{sub.122B}}$ ) can be less than about 1 nm.

[0041] Referring to FIG. 9, each cycle of the cyclic etching process can include a first dry etching process. The process of performing the first dry etching process can include (i) providing a first processing gas that contains a first halogen element; and (ii) generating particle beams 910R (e.g., radicals or ions) by performing an excitation process, a disassociation process, and/or an ionization process on the first processing gas. In some embodiments, the first processing gas can include nitrogen trifluoride ( $\text{NF}_{\text{sub.3}}$ ), fluorine gas ( $\text{F}_{\text{sub.2}}$ ), carbon tetrafluoride ( $\text{CF}_{\text{sub.4}}$ ), or fluoroform ( $\text{CHF}_{\text{sub.3}}$ ), where the respective first halogen element of the first processing gas can be a fluorine element (F) and the respective particle beams 910R can contain fluorine-based radicals and/or fluorine-based plasmas. In some embodiments, particle beams 910R can be

substantially made of radicals (e.g., does not contain ions).

[0042] Particle beams **910R** can adsorb on dielectric layer **762** to form an interfacial layer **962** over dielectric layer **762**. For example, as shown in FIG. 9's scenario **902**, particle beams **910R** can adsorb on dielectric layer **762**'s silicon sites to form bonding Si-**910** (e.g., Si—F bonding) in interfacial layer **962**, where element **910** can represent the first halogen element (e.g., fluorine element, F) of the first processing gas. Particle beams **910R** can further adsorb on dielectric layer **762**'s element A's sites to form bonding A-**910** (e.g., N—F bonding) in interfacial layer **962**. In some embodiments, element A in dielectric **762** can include a nitrogen element, a carbon element, or an oxygen element. In some embodiments, dielectric layer **762** can be a low-k dielectric material (e.g., SiCN) that contains a nitrogen element and particle beams **910R** can be fluorine-based radicals, where the respective bonding Si-**910** can be a Si—F bonding and the respective bonding A-**910** can be a N—F bonding. The subsequent incoming particle beams **910R** during the first etching process can further react with bonding Si-**910** to form a volatile byproduct **971**. Volatile byproduct **971** can then be evaporated from dielectric layer **762**'s surface, thus reducing dielectric layer **762**'s volume (e.g., dielectric layer **762** can be etched by the first dry etching process under scenario **902**). In some embodiments, particle beams **910R** can be fluorine-based radicals, where the respective volatile byproduct **971** can be silicon fluoride (SiF<sub>4</sub>).

[0043] In some embodiments, the process of performing the first dry etching process of each cycle of the cyclic etching process can further include (i) providing another processing gas that contains element hydrogen (H); and (ii) generating particle beams **912R** (e.g., hydrogen-contained radicals or hydrogen-contained plasmas) by performing an excitation process, a dislocation process, and/or an ionization process on the other processing gas. In some embodiments, the other processing gas that contains element hydrogen can include hydrogen gas (H<sub>2</sub>), phosphine (PH<sub>3</sub>), ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>), or methane (CH<sub>4</sub>). As shown in FIG. 9's scenario **902**, particle beams **912R** can interact with A-**910** bonding (e.g., N—F bonding) to migrate (e.g., represented by arrow **901**) element **910** (e.g., F element) from element A sites (e.g., nitrogen sites) to adjacent silicon sites (e.g., the adjacent Si-**910** bonding). The migrated elements **910** (e.g., F element) can therefore react with bonding Si-**910** (e.g., Si—F bonding) to form volatile byproduct **971**, thus enhancing the first dry etching process's etching rate of etching dielectric layer **762**. In some embodiments, as shown in FIG. 9's scenario **904**, particle beams **912R** can adsorb on dielectric layer **762**'s element A's sites to form bonding A-H (e.g., N—H bonding) in interfacial layer **962**. By reacting element A's sites with particle beams **912R**, the reaction rate and/or the adsorption rate of particle beams **910R** with dielectric layer **762**'s silicon site can be increased to form volatile byproduct **971**, thus enhancing the first dry etching process's etching rate of etch dielectric layer **762**.

[0044] In some embodiments, the first dry etching process of each cycle of the cyclic etching process may slightly etch channel region **122**. For example, as shown in FIG. 9's scenario **906**, particle beams **910R** may adsorb on channel region **122**'s silicon sites by forming bonding Si-**910** (e.g., Si—F bonding) in interfacial layer **922** over channel region **122**. The subsequent incoming particle beams **910R** (e.g., F radicals) may further react with bonding Si-**910** (e.g., Si—F bonding) to form volatile byproduct **971** to etch channel region **122**. In some embodiments, as shown in FIG. 9's scenario **908**, particle beams **912R** (e.g., H radicals) may adsorb on channel region **122**'s silicon sites by forming bonding Si—H bonding in interfacial layer **922** over channel region **122**. The subsequent generated particle beams **912R** may further react with Si—H bonding to form volatile SiH<sub>4</sub> to etch channel region **122**. Comparing scenarios **902** and **904** (e.g., etching dielectric layer **762**) to scenarios **906** and **908** (e.g., etching channel region **122**), particle beams **912R** can boost the adsorption rate of the element **910** (e.g., the first fluorine element, such as F, from the first processing gas) on dielectric layers **762**'s silicon site. Accordingly, the first dry etching process can etch dielectric layer **762** at a greater etching rate than etching channel region **122**. In some embodiments, an activation energy discrepancy between scenarios **902/904** and scenarios **906/908** can be less than about 0.1 eV, such that the first dry etching process can etch dielectric layer **762** at

an etching rate greater than or substantially equal to an etching rate of etching channel region **122**. In some embodiments, a ratio of an etching rate of etching dielectric layer **762** via the first dry etching process to an etching rate of etching channel region **122** via the first dry etching process can be from about 0.5 to about 5 or from about 1 to about 3. If the ratio is below the above-noted lower limits, the first dry etching process may cause extra damages on channel region **122**, thus reducing the yield of semiconductor device **100**. If the ratio is beyond the above-noted upper limits, the first dry etching process may consume more process gases, thus increasing a manufacturing cost of semiconductor device **100**. In some embodiments, the above-noted upper and lower limits are determined by the above-noted activation energy's discrepancy between scenarios **902/904** and scenarios **906/908**.

[0045] Referring to FIG. **10**, each cycle of the cyclic etching process can further include a second dry etching process subsequently followed by the first dry etching process. The process of performing the second dry etching process can include (i) providing a second processing gas that contains a second halogen element; and (ii) generating particle beams **1010R** (e.g., radicals or plasmas) by performing an excitation process, a disassociation process, and/or an ionization process on the second processing gas. In some embodiments, particle beams **1010R** can be substantially made of radicals (e.g., does not contain ions). The second halogen element associated with the second dry etching process can be different from the first halogen element associated with the first dry etching process. In some embodiments, the second halogen element's atomic mass can be greater than the first halogen element's atomic mass. For example, the second halogen element associated with the second dry etching process can be a chlorine element (Cl), and the first halogen element associated with the first dry etching process can be a fluorine element (F). The second processing gas that contains the second halogen element can be free from containing the first halogen element (e.g., the second processing gas does not contain the first halogen element). For example, the first halogen element associated with the first dry etching process can be a fluorine element (F), where the second processing gas can be fluorine-free (e.g., the second processing gas's chemical formula does not contain fluorine element). In some embodiments, the second processing gas can include chlorine gas (Cl.sub.2), silicon tetrachloride (SiCl.sub.4), or boron trichloride (BCl.sub.3), where the second halogen element of the second processing gas can be a chlorine element (Cl) and the respective particle beams **1010R** can contain chlorine-based radicals and/or chlorine-based plasmas. As shown in FIG. **10**'s scenario **1002**, particle beams **1010R** (e.g., Cl radicals) can react with dielectric layer **762**'s bonding A-**910** (e.g., N—F bonding) formed by the first dry etching process to migrate (e.g., represented by arrow **1001**) element **910** (F elements; the first halogen element from element A sites (e.g., nitrogen sites) to adjacent silicon sites (e.g., the adjacent Si—F bonding). The migrated elements **910** (F elements) can therefore react with bonding Si-**910** (Si—F bonding) to form volatile byproduct **971** (e.g., SiF.sub.4), thus causing the etching of dielectric layer **762** during the second dry etching process. In some embodiments, particle beams **1010R** (e.g., Cl radicals) can be adsorbed on dielectric layer **762** to form Si-**1010** bonding (Si—Cl bonding; not shown in FIG. **10**'s scenario **1002**) or A-**1010** bonding (N—Cl bonding; not shown in FIG. **10**), where the subsequent generated particle beams **1010R** during the second etching process can further react with bonding Si-**1010** and bonding A-**1010** with a sufficient low activation energy (e.g., less than about 0.5 eV or less than about 0.1 eV) to cause the etching of dielectric layer **762**.

[0046] Further, the second dry etching process can have a negligible etching rate of etching channel region **122**. For example, as shown in FIG. **10**'s scenario **1004**, particle beams **1010R** may adsorb on channel region **122**'s silicon sites or react with Si-**910** (e.g., Si—F bonding formed by the first dry etching process). The adsorption of particle beams **1010R** on channel region **122** can form bonding Si-**1010** (e.g., Si—Cl bonding) in interfacial layer **922** over channel region **122**. The subsequent generated particle beams **1010R** may further react with bonding Si-**1010** with an activation energy greater than scenario **1002**'s activation energy. In some embodiments, scenario **1004**'s activation energy can be greater than scenario **1002**'s activation energy by at least about 0.1

eV, such as from about 0.1 eV to about 0.5 eV. Accordingly, the second dry etching process can selectively etch dielectric layer **762** (shown in scenario **1002**) over channel region **122** (shown in scenario **1004**). For example, a ratio of an etching rate of etching dielectric layer **762** via the second dry etching process to an etching rate of etching channel region **122** via the second dry etching process can be from about 5 to about 50, from about 5 to about 40, from about 5 to about 30, or from about 5 to about 20. If the ratio is below the above-noted lower limits, the second dry etching process may cause extra damages on channel region **122**, thus reducing the yield of semiconductor device **100**. If the ratio is beyond the above-noted upper limits, the second dry etching process may consume more process gases, thus increasing a manufacturing cost of semiconductor device **100**. In some embodiments, the above-noted upper and lower limits are determined by the above-noted activation energy's discrepancy between scenarios **1002** and **1004**.

[0047] Further, the second dry etching process can provide a greater etching selectivity to etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122** than to the first dry etching process. Since the activation energy difference (e.g., less than about 0.1 eV) between scenarios **902/904** and scenarios **906/908** can be less than that (e.g., greater than about 0.1 eV) between scenario **1002** and scenario **1004**, the second dry etching process can provide a greater etching selectivity to etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122** than to the first dry etching process. In some embodiments, a ratio of the second dry etching process's etching selectivity (e.g., a ratio of an etching rate of etching dielectric layer **762** using the second dry etching process to an etching rate of etching channel region **122** using the second dry etching process) to the first dry etching process's etching selectivity (e.g., a ratio of an etching rate of etching dielectric layer **762** using the first dry etching process to an etching rate of etching channel region **122** using the first dry etching process) can be from about 1 to about 20, from about 2 to about 20, from about 2 to about 15, from about 2 to about 10, or from about 2 to about 5. If the ratio is below the above-noted lower limits, the first dry etching process may cause extra damages on channel region **122**, thus reducing the yield of semiconductor device **100**. If the ratio is beyond the above-noted upper limits, the second dry etching process may consume more process gases, thus increasing a manufacturing cost of semiconductor device **100**. In some embodiments, the above-noted upper and lower limits are determined by (i) the activation energy's discrepancy between scenarios **902/904** and scenarios **906/908** and (ii) the activation energy's discrepancy between scenario **1002** and scenario **1004**.

[0048] In some embodiments, since the activation energy difference between scenarios **902/904** and scenarios **906/908** can be less than that between scenario **1002** and scenario **1004**, the second dry etching process can provide a lower etching rate to etch channel region **122** than the first dry etching process. In some embodiments, a ratio of an etching rate of etching channel region **122** via the second dry etching process to an etching rate of etching channel region **122** via the first dry etching process can be from about 0.05 to about 1, from about 0.05 to about 0.8, from about 0.05 to about 0.6, from about 0.05 to about 0.4, from about 0.05 to about 0.2, or from about 0.05 to about 0.1. If the ratio is below the above-noted lower limits, the first dry etching process may cause extra damages on channel region **122**, thus reducing the yield of semiconductor device **100**. If the ratio is beyond the above-noted upper limits, the second dry etching process may cause extra damages on channel region **122**, thus reducing the yield of semiconductor device **100**. In some embodiments, the above-noted upper and lower limits are determined by (i) the activation energy's discrepancy between scenarios **902/904** and scenarios **906/908** and (ii) the activation energy's discrepancy between scenario **1002** and scenario **1004**.

[0049] In some embodiments, since the activation energy difference between scenario **902** and scenario **1002** can be substantially equal to each other, the first and second dry etching processes can etch dielectric layer **762** with substantially equal etching rates to one another.

[0050] In some embodiments, since the second dry etching process's etching selectivity can be greater than the first dry etching process's etching selectivity, it is desirable to provide less radio frequency (RF) power for the first dry etching process than for the second dry etching process to

increase an overall etching selectivity of the cyclic etching process to etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122**. In some embodiments, the process of generating particle beams **910R** and **1010R** for the first and second dry etching processes can include providing first and second RF powers, respectively, where a ratio of the first RF power to the second RF power can be from about 0.05 to about 1, from about 0.05 to about 0.8, from about 0.05 to about 0.6, from about 0.05 to about 0.4, or from about 0.05 to about 0.2. If the ratio of the first RF power to the second RF power is above these upper limits, the overall cyclic etching process may provide an insufficient etching selectivity to etch dielectric layer **762** from channel region **122**, because the first dry etching process may have an inferior etching selectivity to the second dry etching process as previously discussed. If the ratio of the first RF power to the second RF power is below the above-noted lower limit, the first dry etching process may not have sufficient energy to form particle beams **910R** and/or **912R**.

[0051] In some embodiments, since the second dry etching process's etching selectivity can be greater than the first dry etching process's etching selectivity, it is desirable to perform a lower etching time duration for the first dry etching process than for the second dry etching process to increase an overall etching selectivity of the cyclic etching process to etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122**. In some embodiments, the first and second dry etching processes can be performed for a first and second etching time durations, respectively, where a ratio of the first etching time duration to the second etching time duration can be from about 0.05 to about 1, from about 0.05 to about 0.8, from about 0.05 to about 0.6, from about 0.05 to about 0.4, or from about 0.05 to about 0.2. If the ratio of the first time duration to the second time duration is above these upper limits, the overall cyclic etching process may provide an insufficient etching selectivity to etch dielectric layer **762** from channel region **122**, because the first dry etching process may have an inferior etching selectivity to the second dry etching process as previously discussed. If the ratio of the first time duration to the second time duration is below the above-noted lower limit, the first dry etching process may not have sufficient time duration to form particle beams **910R** and/or **912R**.

[0052] In some embodiments, since the second dry etching process's etching selectivity can be greater than the first dry etching process's etching selectivity, it is desirable to provide the first processing gas with a reduced flow rate for the first dry etching process and provide the second processing gas with an increased flow rate for the second dry etching process to increase an overall etching selectivity of the cyclic etching process to etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122**. In some embodiments, the processes of performing the first and second dry etching processes can include providing the first and second processing gases with a first and second flow rates, respectively, where a ratio of the first flow rate to the second flow rate can be from about 0.05 to about 1, from about 0.05 to about 0.8, from about 0.05 to about 0.6, from about 0.05 to about 0.4, or from about 0.05 to about 0.2. If the ratio of the first flow rate to the second flow rate is above these upper limits, the overall cyclic etching process may provide an insufficient etching selectivity to etch dielectric layer **762** from channel region **122**, because the first dry etching process may have an inferior etching selectivity to the second dry etching process as previously discussed. If the ratio of the first flow rate to the second flow rate is below the above-noted lower limit, the first dry etching process may not have sufficient processing gas to form particle beams **910R** and/or **912R**.

[0053] In some embodiments, since the second dry etching process's etching selectivity can be greater than the first dry etching process's etching selectivity, it is desirable to provide the first processing gas with a reduced dispensing time duration for the first dry etching process and provide the second processing gas with an increased dispensing time duration for the second dry etching process to increase an overall etching selectivity of the cyclic etching process to etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122**. In some embodiments, the processes of performing the first and second dry etching processes can include providing the first and second processing gases with a first and second dispensing time durations, respectively, where a ratio of the first dispensing time

duration to the second dispensing time duration can be from about 0.05 to about 1, from about 0.05 to about 0.8, from about 0.05 to about 0.6, from about 0.05 to about 0.4, or from about 0.05 to about 0.2. If the ratio of the first dispensing time duration to the second dispensing time duration is above these upper limits, the overall cyclic etching process may provide an insufficient etching selectivity to etch dielectric layer **762** from channel region **122**, because the first dry etching process may have an inferior etching selectivity to the second dry etching process as previously discussed. If the ratio of the first dispensing time duration to the second dispensing time duration is below the above-noted lower limit, the first dry etching process may not have sufficient processing gas to form particle beams **910R** and/or **912R**.

[0054] In some embodiments, the first processing gas that contains the first halogen element can be free from containing the second halogen element (e.g., the first processing gas does not contain the second halogen element). For example, the second halogen element associated with the second dry etching process can be a chlorine element (Cl), where the first processing gas can be chlorine-free (e.g., the first processing gas's chemical formula does not contain chlorine).

[0055] After performing the second dry etching process, the cyclic etching process can perform the next cycle's first dry etching process to etch dielectric layer **762** and form bonding A-**910** at interfacial layer **962** as previously discussed in FIG. **9**, and subsequently perform the next cycle's second dry etching process to migrate the element A to selectively etch dielectric layer **762** over channel region **122** as previously discussed in FIG. **10**.

[0056] In some embodiments, the cyclic etching process for defining inner spacer structure **160** can be an atomic layer etching process ("ALE mode"). In the ALE mode, the first dry etching process can form interfacial layers **962** and **922** as self-limited surface layers that (i) do not react with incoming particle beams **910R** and **912R**, and (ii) prevents the underlying dielectric layer **762** and channel region **122** from reacting with incoming particle beams **910R** and **912R**. Further, in the ALE mode, the second dry etching process can selectively etch interfacial layer **962** over the underlying dielectric layer **762** and/or channel region **122**. In some embodiments, in the ALE mode, since interfacial layer **962** can be a self-limited surface layer, interfacial layer **962** can have a substantially constant thickness  $t_{\text{sub.962}}$ , such as from about 0.1 nm to about 1.0 nm and from about 0.1 nm to about 0.5 nm, regardless the time duration of the first etching process. Similarly, in the ALE mode, since interfacial layer **922** can be a self-limited surface layer, interfacial layer **922** can have a substantially constant thicknesses  $t_{\text{sub.922}}$ , such as from about 0.1 nm to about 1.0 nm and from about 0.1 nm to about 0.5 nm, regardless of the time duration of the first etching process. In some embodiments, in the ALE mode, each cycle of the cyclic etching process can etch a substantially equal thickness (e.g., substantially equal to thickness  $t_{\text{sub.962}}$ ) of dielectric layer **762**.

[0057] Referring to FIG. **3**, in operation **320**, a source/drain (S/D) region is formed in the recess structure. For example, as shown in FIG. **11**, S/D region **124** can be formed in recess structures **536** and over inner spacer structures **160**. The process of forming S/D region **124** can include epitaxially growing S/D region **124** in the structure of FIG. **8** using an epitaxial growth process, such as a CVD process, a LPCVD process, a RTCVD process, a MOCVD process, an ALCVD process, a UHVCVD process, a RPCVD process, an MBE process, a CDE process, and an SEG process. The epitaxial growth process can be performed using suitable precursors, such as silane ( $\text{SiH}_{\text{sub.4}}$ ), disilane ( $\text{Si}_{\text{sub.2}}\text{H}_{\text{sub.6}}$ ), dichlorosilane (DCS), and germane ( $\text{GeH}_{\text{sub.4}}$ ). The epitaxial growth process can further include doping S/D region **124** using suitable dopant precursors, such as diborane ( $\text{B}_{\text{sub.2}}\text{H}_{\text{sub.6}}$ ), boron trifluoride ( $\text{BF}_{\text{sub.3}}$ ), phosphine ( $\text{PH}_{\text{sub.3}}$ ), and arsine ( $\text{AsH}_{\text{sub.3}}$ ). Accordingly, the resulting S/D region **124** can be grown over and in contact with channel regions **122** under sacrificial gate structure **410** and gate spacers **104**. The resulting S/D region **124** can be further grown over and in contact with inner spacer structures **160** that are vertically (e.g., in the z-direction) sandwiched by two vertical (e.g., in the z-direction) channel regions **122**. Based on the disclosure herein, other epitaxial growth processes for forming

S/D region **124** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0058] Referring to FIG. 3, in operation **325**, a metal gate structure is formed over the fin structure. For example, gate structure **110** (shown in FIG. 2) can be formed over fin structure **108**. The process of forming gate structure **110** can include (i) forming ILD layer **130** (shown in FIG. 12) coplanarized with sacrificial gate structures **410** of FIG. 11 using a suitable deposition process, such as a PVD process and a CVD process, and a suitable etch back process, such as a chemical mechanical polishing (CMP) process; (ii) removing sacrificial layer **348** to form recess structures **1336** (shown in FIG. 13) to expose dielectric layer **406** using an etching process; and (iii) removing dielectric layer **406** to expose sacrificial layers **322** using an etching process. In some embodiments, the etching process for forming recess structure **1336** can include a dry etching process that uses chlorine, fluorine or bromine as gas etchants. In some embodiments, the etching process for forming recess structure **1336** can include a wet etching process that uses an ammonium hydroxide (NH<sub>4</sub>OH), sodium hydroxide (NaOH), or potassium hydroxide (KOH) as wet etchants. In some embodiments, the etching process for removing dielectric layer **306** can include a dry etching process that uses chlorine, fluorine or bromine as gas etchants. In some embodiments, the etching process for removing dielectric layer **306** can include a wet etching process that uses an hydrogen fluoride (HF) as wet etchants.

[0059] The process of forming gate structure **110** can further include (i) removing sacrificial layers **322** of FIG. 13 to form recess structures **1401** (shown in FIG. 14) and using a plasma etching process or a radical etching process; and filling a gate dielectric layer (not shown in FIG. 2) and a gate electrode (not shown in FIG. 2) in the recess structures **1401** of FIG. 14 using a suitable deposition process, such as an ALD process and a CVD process, and a suitable etch back process, such as a CMP process. Based on the disclosure herein, other processes for forming gate structure **110** are within the spirit and scope of this disclosure.

[0060] The present disclosure provides an exemplary transistor inner spacer structure and a method for forming the same. The method of forming the inner spacer structure can include depositing a dielectric layer over a fin structure's side surface and performing a cyclic dry etching process to selectively etch the dielectric layer over the fin structure. The cyclic dry etching process can be an oxygen-free radical etching process. Further, each cycle of the cyclic etching process can include a first radical etching process and a second radical etching process. The first radical etching process can apply a first halogen radical, such as a F radical, to etch the dielectric layer. The first radical etching process may adsorb the first halogen radical on the dielectric surface to form an interfacial layer. The second radical etching process can apply a second halogen radical, such as a Cl radical, to react with the interfacial layer to further etch the dielectric layer. The first and/or the second radical etching processes can selectively etch the dielectric layer over the fin structure. Further, the first and the second radical etching processes can be performed without breaking the vacuum in between. A benefit of the present disclosure, among others, is to provide an oxygen-free dry etching method to form the inner spacer structure with an improved thickness uniformity and a higher etching rate, thus improving the semiconductor device's reliability and throughput.

[0061] In some embodiments, a method can include forming a fin structure over a substrate. The fin structure can include a first channel layer and a sacrificial layer. The method can further include forming a first recess structure in a first portion of the fin structure, forming a second recess structure in the sacrificial layer of a second portion of the fin structure, forming a dielectric layer in the first and second recess structures, and performing an oxygen-free cyclic etching process to etch the dielectric layer to expose the channel layer of the second portion of the fin structure. The process of performing the oxygen-free cyclic etching process can include performing a first etching process to selectively etch the dielectric layer over the channel layer of the second portion of the fin structure with a first etching selectivity, and performing a second etching process to selectively etch the dielectric layer over the channel layer of the second portion of fin structure with a second etching selectivity greater than the first etching selectivity.

[0062] In some embodiments, a method can include forming a fin structure over a substrate, forming a recess structure in the fin structure, forming a dielectric layer over the recess structure, and performing an oxygen-free cyclic etching process to etch the dielectric layer. The process of performing the oxygen-free cyclic etching process can include performing a first etching process with a first etchant to remove a first portion of the dielectric layer and performing a second etching process with a second etchant to remove a second portion of the dielectric layer. The first etchant can include a first halogen element. The second etchant can include a second halogen element different from the first halogen element.

[0063] In some embodiments, a method can include forming a gate structure over a first portion of a substrate, forming a recess structure over a second portion of the substrate, forming a dielectric layer in the recess structure and over the second portion of the substrate, performing a cyclic etching process to etch the dielectric layer to expose the second portion of the substrate, and forming a source/drain (S/D) contact structure in the recess structure and over the dielectric layer. The process of performing the cyclic etching process can include performing a first etching process to remove a first portion of the dielectric layer, and performing a second etching process to remove a second portion of the dielectric layer. The process of performing the first etching process can include etching the first portion of the substrate at a first etching rate. The process of performing the second etching process can include etching the first portion of the substrate with a second etching rate less than the first etching rate.

[0064] The foregoing disclosure outlines features of several embodiments so that those skilled in the art may better understand the aspects of the present disclosure. Those skilled in the art should appreciate that they may readily use the present disclosure as a basis for designing or modifying other processes and structures for carrying out the same purposes and/or achieving the same advantages of the embodiments introduced herein. Those skilled in the art should also realize that such equivalent constructions do not depart from the spirit and scope of the present disclosure, and that they may make various changes, substitutions, and alterations herein without departing from the spirit and scope of the present disclosure.

## Claims

1. A method, comprising: forming a channel layer on a substrate; forming a dielectric layer on a side surface and a bottom surface of the channel layer; and etching the dielectric layer on the side surface of the channel layer to form an inner spacer structure under the channel layer, wherein etching the dielectric layer comprises: forming, on the dielectric layer, an interfacial layer comprising a first halogen element; and removing the interfacial layer using radicals comprising a second halogen element.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein forming the interfacial layer comprises using an oxygen-free radical to convert a portion of the dielectric layer into the interfacial layer.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the radicals are oxygen-free.
4. The method of claim 1, wherein an atomic mass of the second halogen element is greater than an atomic mass of the first halogen element.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein etching the dielectric layer further comprises forming an other interfacial layer on the channel layer.
6. The method of claim 1, wherein the interfacial layer further comprises a nitrogen element, a carbon element, or an oxygen element.
7. The method of claim 1, wherein etching the dielectric layer further comprises providing a hydrogen-contained etchant to enhance an etching rate of the dielectric layer.
8. A method, comprising: forming a sacrificial layer on a substrate; forming a channel layer on the sacrificial layer; removing a portion of the sacrificial to form a recess under the channel layer; depositing a dielectric layer over side surfaces of the channel layer and the sacrificial layer; and



forming an inner spacer in the recess, wherein forming the inner spacer comprises: converting a portion of the dielectric layer into an interfacial layer; and selectively etching the interfacial layer over the channel layer.

**9.** The method of claim 8, wherein selectively etching the interfacial layer comprises etching the interfacial layer at a first etching rate and etching the channel layer at a second etching rate, and wherein a ratio of the first etching rate to the second etching rate is between about 5 and about 50.

**10.** The method of claim 8, wherein selectively etching the interfacial layer comprises providing an oxygen-free radical to remove the interfacial layer.

**11.** The method of claim 8, wherein: converting a portion of the dielectric layer into an interfacial layer comprises providing a first processing gas to interact with a surface of the dielectric layer to form the interfacial layer; and selectively etching the interfacial layer comprises providing a second processing gas to convert the interfacial layer into a volatile byproduct.

**12.** The method of claim 11, wherein the first and second processing gases comprises first and second halogen elements, and wherein an atomic mass of the first halogen element is less than an atomic mass of the second halogen element.

**13.** The method of claim 8, wherein forming the inner spacer further comprises providing a hydrogen-contained etchant to enhance an etching rate of the dielectric layer.

**14.** The method of claim 8, wherein forming the inner spacer further comprises converting a portion of the channel layer into another interfacial layer.

**15.** A method, comprising: forming a channel layer on a substrate; forming a recess under the channel layer; depositing a dielectric layer in the recess and over a side surface of the channel layer; and performing a cyclic etching process, wherein performing the cyclic etching process comprises: providing a first processing gas to form an interfacial layer on the dielectric layer; and providing a second processing gas to remove the interfacial layer.

**16.** The method of claim 15, wherein performing the cyclic etching process further comprises repeatedly and alternately providing the first and second processing gases.

**17.** The method of claim 15, wherein providing the first processing gas comprises providing an oxygen-free radical on a surface of the dielectric layer to convert a portion of the dielectric layer into the interfacial layer.

**18.** The method of claim 15, wherein the first and second processing gases comprise first and second halogen elements, respectively.

**19.** The method of claim 18, wherein an atomic mass of the second halogen element is greater than an atomic mass of the first halogen element.

**20.** The method of claim 15, wherein performing the cyclic etching process further comprises etching the dielectric layer at a first etching rate and etching the channel layer at a second etching rate, and wherein the first etching rate is greater than the second etching rate.

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