

# In Situ Imaging of Catalytic Reactions on Tungsten Oxide Nanowires Connects Surface–Ligand Redox Chemistry with Photocatalytic Activity

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Cite This: *Nano Lett.* 2022, 22, 4694–4701



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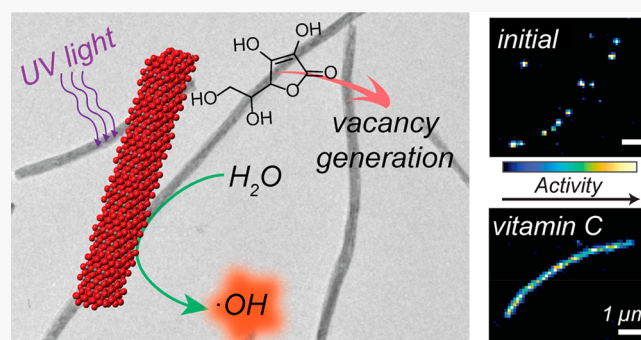
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**ABSTRACT:** Semiconductor nanocrystals are promising candidates for generating chemical feedstocks through photocatalysis. Understanding the role of ligands used to prepare colloidal nanocrystals in catalysis is challenging due to the complexity and heterogeneity of nanocrystal surfaces. We use *in situ* single-molecule fluorescence imaging to map the spatial distribution of active regions along individual tungsten oxide nanowires before and after functionalizing them with ascorbic acid. Rather than blocking active sites, we observed a significant enhancement in activity for photocatalytic water oxidation after treatment with ascorbic acid. While the initial nanowires contain inactive regions dispersed along their length, the functionalized nanowires show high uniformity in their photocatalytic activity. Spatial colocalization of the active regions with their surface chemical properties shows that oxidation of ascorbic acid during photocatalysis generates new oxygen vacancies along the nanowire surface. We demonstrate that controlling surface–ligand redox chemistry during photocatalysis can enhance the active site concentration on nanocrystal catalysts.

**KEYWORDS:** single-molecule localization microscopy, surface functionalization, nanowires, oxygen vacancies, photocatalysis



Colloidal semiconductor nanocrystals are actively being studied as photocatalysts for fuel production and environmental remediation.<sup>1–20</sup> The small dimensions of nanocrystals efficiently suppress the bulk recombination of photoexcited charge carriers due to the short diffusion distances required to reach the surface.<sup>10,21–23</sup> However, the fate of photoexcited charges once they reach the surface, that is, whether they recombine or are extracted to initiate useful redox reactions, is highly sensitive to the structure of the surface. Organic ligands that bind to atoms on the nanocrystal surface are commonly used to control the size and shape of colloidal metal and semiconductor nanocrystals.<sup>4,24–27</sup> Residual ligands that block access to the particle surface can poison the nanocatalyst.<sup>1–4,28</sup> However, recent studies have shown that organic ligands can tune the activity and selectivity of nanocatalysts by regulating competitive adsorption of substrate molecules and inhibitors to surface sites, changing the electronic structure at the surface, and/or acting as redox shuttles to facilitate interfacial charge transfer.<sup>4–6,28–42</sup> Although controlling surface–ligand interactions is critical in the design of nanocatalysts, conventional measurements of catalytic activity only provide ensemble-averaged structure–activity trends. The complexity of nanocrystal surfaces makes it

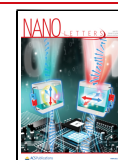
challenging to determine the local environment of active sites and the role of ligands in controlling catalytic activity.

Single-molecule localization microscopy can overcome the limitations of ensemble-averaging to identify both inter- and intraparticle heterogeneity in the reactivity of nanostructured catalysts.<sup>43–66</sup> This super-resolution optical technique uses fluorogenic probes that are chemically activated into their fluorescence state to monitor catalytic turnover events *in situ* at the single-molecule and single-particle scales. However, a limitation of single-molecule imaging is that the fluorogenic probes used to visualize reaction events do not directly report on the chemical properties that lead to nanoscale variations in activity. To overcome this limitation, we have used the spatial colocalization of two complementary fluorogenic probes to elucidate the nature of active sites in semiconductor photocatalysts.<sup>61,62</sup> We previously applied this technique to tungsten

**Received:** February 17, 2022

**Revised:** June 2, 2022

**Published:** June 8, 2022

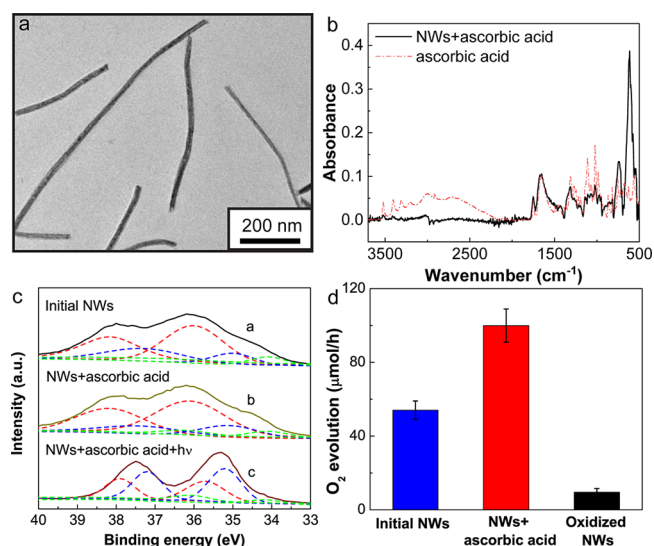


oxide,  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires which is a promising photocatalyst for water oxidation,<sup>10,14–20</sup> to show that the nanowires possess nanoscale segments of active regions separated by inactive regions along their lengths.<sup>62</sup> Through the colocalization of two independent fluorogenic probes, one activated by hydroxyl radicals ( $\bullet OH$ ) and the other activated by surface Lewis acidic sites (i.e., tungsten ions exposed by oxygen vacancies), we revealed that clusters of oxygen vacancies are distributed nonuniformly along the  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires and serve as active sites for the photocatalytic generation of  $\bullet OH$  radicals. Thus, it is the regions containing low concentrations of oxygen vacancies in each nanowire that limit the photocatalytic activity of this material.

Here, we use *in situ* single-molecule imaging to elucidate the activity change mediated by surface functionalization of a metal oxide photocatalyst. We compare the spatial distribution of active regions in  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires before and after functionalizing them with ascorbic acid, which is a common ligand used in nanoparticle synthesis.<sup>27,67,68</sup> Rather than block the surface of the nanowires, we find that ascorbic acid is oxidized *in situ* during photocatalysis to generate new active sites (i.e., oxygen vacancies). Unlike the as-synthesized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires, single-molecule imaging shows a highly uniform distribution of active regions in the functionalized nanowires, which enhances their photocatalytic activity at both the ensemble level (oxygen evolution rates of 100  $\mu\text{mol/h}$  for the functionalized nanowires versus 54  $\mu\text{mol/h}$  for the as-synthesized ones) and single-molecule level (per nanowire rate constants of 442  $\mu\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  for the functionalized nanowires vs 248  $\mu\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  for the as-synthesized ones).

Tungsten oxide nanowires were synthesized via a hydrothermal method as described previously.<sup>62</sup> The nanowires possess the monoclinic  $W_{18}O_{49}$  phase as evidenced by X-ray diffraction (Figure S1). They have an average diameter of  $11 \pm 3$  nm (average  $\pm$  first standard deviation), lengths of several microns, and grow along the [010] direction (Figure 1a and Figure S2). X-ray photoelectron spectra (XPS) show that tungsten ions in the nanowires possess a mixture of the +6, +5, and +4 oxidation states (Figure 1c).<sup>14,19,20,69</sup> The lower oxidation states of tungsten are charge compensated by oxygen vacancies. XPS in the region for O 1s electrons show a peak corresponding to oxygen within the tungsten oxide nanowires along with a shoulder peak at higher binding energy (Figure S3). This shoulder peak is typically attributed to oxygen-containing species that bind to metal ions exposed by surface oxygen vacancies.<sup>17,19,69</sup> Further evidence of oxygen vacancies comes from the absorption spectrum of the nanowires (Figure S4). Absorption at wavelengths below 450 nm corresponds to band gap absorption, while a broad feature starting at 600 nm and going into the near-infrared results from free-carrier absorption due to the mixture of oxidation states for tungsten and surface oxygen vacancies.<sup>14,15,17,19,20</sup> Oxidation of the  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires to fill the oxygen vacancies removes the free-carrier absorption (Figure S4) and leads to tungsten ions in predominantly the +6 oxidation state as evidenced by XPS.<sup>14,62</sup>

We next functionalized the as-synthesized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires with ascorbic acid (see Section 4 of the Supporting Information for details). Infrared (IR) spectra of the functionalized nanowires show characteristic peaks corresponding to ascorbic acid between 1000 and 1800  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  as well as metal–oxygen stretches between 500 and 1000  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (see Figure 1b and Figure S5). XPS did not show a significant



**Figure 1.** (a) Transmission electron microscopy image of the as-synthesized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires. (b) Infrared absorbance spectrum of neat ascorbic acid (dotted, red trace) and a difference spectrum of the infrared absorbance of ascorbic acid-functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires and the as-synthesized nanowires (solid, black trace). (c) XPS in the binding energy region for W 4f electrons of the as-synthesized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires (a, black trace) and ascorbic acid-functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires before (b, dark-yellow trace) and after (c, red-brown trace) 5 min of laser irradiation. The dashed red, blue, and green lines for each spectrum show its deconvolution into contributions from  $W^{6+}$ ,  $W^{5+}$ , and  $W^{4+}$ , respectively. (d) Ensemble production rates for photocatalytic oxygen evolution using the as-synthesized nanowires (blue, left bar), ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowires (red, middle bar), and oxidized nanowires (black, right bar).

change in the distribution of oxidation states for tungsten after functionalizing the nanowires with ascorbic acid (Figure 1c). Additional characterization of the surface charge and concentration of acid sites on the nanowires before and after functionalization (Table S2 and Sections 11 and 12) and discussion of the binding of ascorbic acid (Section 20) are provided in the Supporting Information.

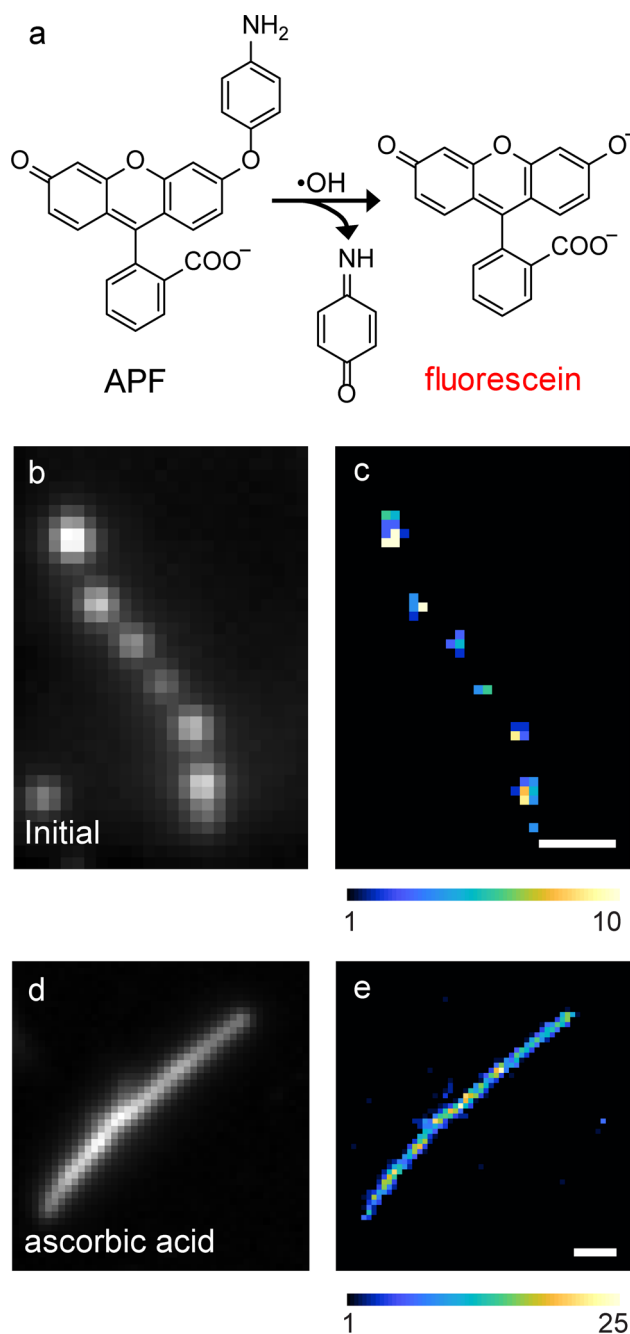
Ensemble measurements showed that functionalization with ascorbic acid enhances the activity of the  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires for photocatalytic water oxidation. The as-synthesized nanowires exhibited an  $\text{O}_2$  evolution rate of 54  $\mu\text{mol/h}$  (Figure 1d). Because of binding of ascorbic acid to the surface of the nanowires, we initially expected a drop in photocatalytic activity after surface functionalization, as we previously observed for  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires coated with polyvinylpyrrolidone.<sup>62</sup> Surprisingly, the  $\text{O}_2$  evolution rate for the ascorbic acid-functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires increased to 100  $\mu\text{mol/h}$  (Figure 1d). Hydroxyl radical generation was quantified using fluorescence spectroscopy through the photocatalytic conversion of coumarin to 7-hydroxycoumarin (Figure S7).<sup>70</sup> The ascorbic acid-functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires also exhibited a higher production rate for  $\bullet OH$  radicals, which is an intermediate in the photocatalytic oxidation of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  to  $\text{O}_2$ . On the other hand, oxidized nanowires in which oxygen vacancies were removed showed a significant drop in their production rate for  $\text{O}_2$  (9  $\mu\text{mol/h}$ , Figure 1d), consistent with prior work showing that oxygen vacancies increase the photocatalytic activity of metal oxide semiconductors.<sup>14–16,19,20,62,71</sup> Thus, we sought to understand how ascorbic acid-functionalization changes the concentration and

distribution of oxygen vacancies along the surface of the nanowires.

We used total internal reflection fluorescence (TIRF) microscopy to perform *in situ* imaging of catalytic reactions on the surface of the nanowires at the single-molecule level (see Supporting Information Sections 15 and 16 for details). We used 3'-(*p*-aminophenyl) fluorescein (APF) as a fluorogenic probe to detect the photocatalytic generation of  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals (Figure 2a and Figure S9).<sup>72</sup> A solution containing APF and potassium iodate as a sacrificial oxidant was dropped onto a microscope coverslip with deposited nanowires. A 405 nm laser was used to excite the  $\text{W}_{18}\text{O}_{49}$  nanowires, and a 488 nm laser was used to excite the fluorescent product (i.e., fluorescein). Only probe molecules activated at the catalyst surface produce sharp intensity bursts using TIRF imaging, while freely diffusing fluorescent molecules in solution lead to a weak fluorescent background. The turn-off of each fluorescence intensity burst is due to the desorption of the activated probe from the catalyst surface. The localization precision of fluorescence bursts is 26 nm for APF (Figure S10). We fitted the point spread functions of all detected bursts over 2500 frames (i.e., 2.05 min using a 50 ms exposure time, see Supporting Information Sections 17 and 18 for details) (Figure 2b,d) and constructed activity maps for the photocatalytic  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation along individual nanowires (Figure 2c,e).

Representative activity maps of  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation for an as-synthesized nanowire and an ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowire are shown in Figure 2c,e. The activity maps plot the number of reaction events detected within  $120 \times 120$  nm bins. Isolated active regions are observed for the as-synthesized nanowires as we previously reported<sup>62</sup> (see Figure 2c and Figure S14 for activity maps of the as-synthesized nanowires). Notably, the activity maps were completely altered after functionalization with ascorbic acid. Instead of isolated active regions, the functionalized nanowire shown in Figure 2e is active for  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation along its entire length. This change in activity was observed for all 20 nanowires imaged after functionalization (see Figure S15 additional activity maps of functionalized nanowires). The photon numbers and the on-times of fluorescence bursts do not change significantly after functionalization (see Figures S10–S13), indicating the activation of the nanowires is not an imaging artifact. Furthermore, adding a solution containing APF and ascorbic acid to a bare coverslip did not produce fluorescence bursts.

To further investigate the chemical properties of active regions along the nanowire surface, we sequentially imaged the same  $\text{W}_{18}\text{O}_{49}$  nanowires using the two different probe molecules, APF for the photocatalytic generation of  $\bullet\text{OH}$  and furfuryl alcohol (FA) to image the distribution of Lewis acid sites (Figure 3). By spatially correlating the activity for these two independent reactions,<sup>62</sup> we establish a link between the photocatalytically active regions along a nanowire and its spatial distribution of oxygen vacancies. While both Brønsted and Lewis acids can catalyze the condensation of FA to form highly fluorescent oligomers (Figure S16),<sup>43,44,62</sup> surface hydroxyl groups (i.e., Brønsted acid sites) of tungsten oxide are deprotonated when imaging activation of FA at pH 7.4 (supported by the negative zeta potential measured for the nanowires, see Table S2).<sup>73</sup> Therefore, we attribute the activation of this probe to tungsten ions exposed by oxygen vacancies, which act as Lewis acid sites. When imaging the

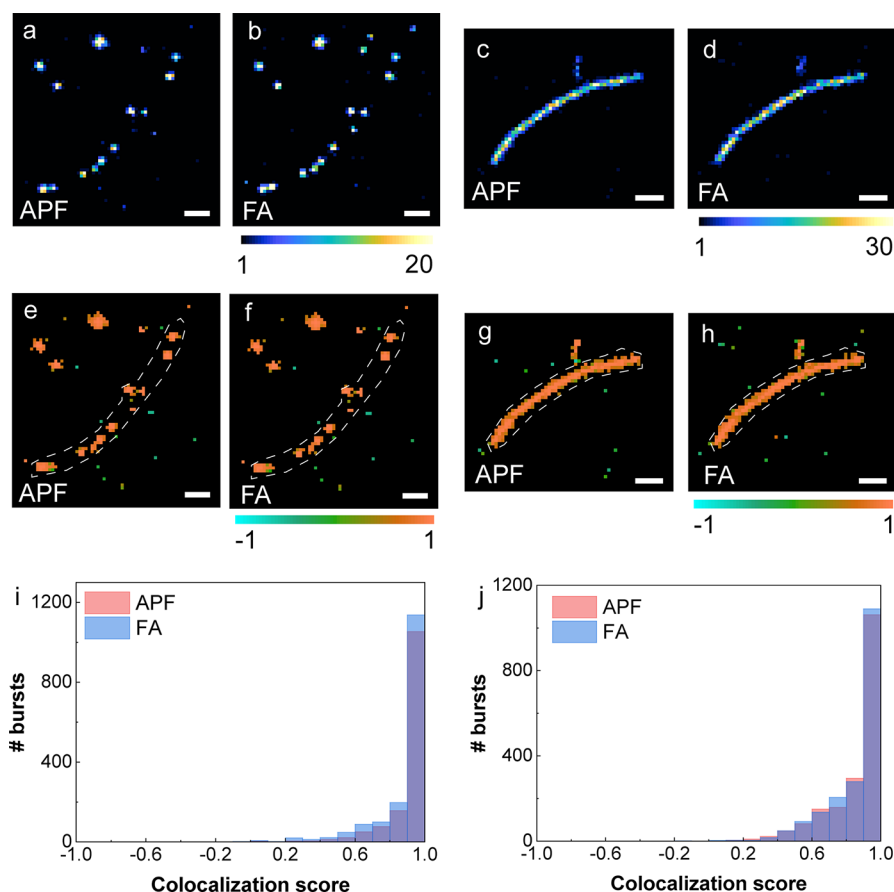


**Figure 2.** Single-molecule imaging of photocatalytic  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation on individual  $\text{W}_{18}\text{O}_{49}$  nanowires. (a) Oxidation of APF by photocatalytically generated  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals forms the highly fluorescent fluorescein. (b,d) Diffraction-limited fluorescence images of (b) a representative, as-synthesized nanowire and (d) an ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowire. (c,e) Super-resolution activity maps of the same (c) as-synthesized nanowire and (e) ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowire. Color scale: number of fluorescence bursts detected per bin ( $120 \times 120$  nm<sup>2</sup>). Scale bars: 1  $\mu\text{m}$ .

distribution of acid sites with FA, only a 561 nm laser (with a photon energy lower than the band gap of tungsten oxide) was used to excite the fluorescent oligomers. The localization precision of the fluorescence bursts is 24 nm for FA (Figure S11).

We used a coordinate-based colocalization (CBC) algorithm to quantify the degree of spatial colocalization between fluorescence bursts from each of the two probe mole-





**Figure 3.** Spatial colocalization of photocatalytic  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation and Lewis acid sites for both a representative, as-synthesized  $\text{W}_{18}\text{O}_{49}$  nanowire and an ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowire. Super-resolution activity maps of the two nanowires using (a,c) APF to detect  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals and (b,d) furfuryl alcohol (FA) to identify Lewis acid sites via the condensation of FA. Color scale: number of fluorescence bursts detected per bin ( $120 \times 120 \text{ nm}^2$ ). Coordinate-based colocalization (CBC) maps for fluorescence bursts using (e,g) APF and (f,h) FA. Color scale: median colocalization score in each bin ranging from  $-1$  for anticorrelated to  $+1$  for perfectly correlated. Scale bars:  $1 \mu\text{m}$ . (i,j) Distribution of CBC scores for APF (red) and FA (blue) bursts showing a high degree of spatial correlation for the two reactions in both nanowires.

cules.<sup>61,62,74</sup> Each fluorescence burst in the two data sets is assigned a CBC score:  $+1$  for a high degree of colocalization between the two probes and  $-1$  if only one of the probes was detected in a specific region. (Details of the CBC algorithm and the procedure used to register the data sets obtained using the two fluorogenic probes are provided in [Supporting Information Section 19](#).) **Figure 3** shows representative CBC analysis on different  $\text{W}_{18}\text{O}_{49}$  nanowires before and after ascorbic acid-functionalization. Orange regions in the colocalization maps in panels e, f, g, and h of **Figure 3** represent areas of the nanowires that are active for both the photocatalytic generation of  $\bullet\text{OH}$  and the acid-catalyzed condensation of FA. As we have previously reported for as-synthesized  $\text{W}_{18}\text{O}_{49}$  nanowires,<sup>62</sup> the activity maps for both  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation and FA condensation show isolated active regions separated by inactive segments along the nanowire (**Figure 3a,b**). CBC analysis (**Figure 3e,f,i**) reveals that the same nanoscale regions are active for both reactions. As oxygen vacancies can catalyze these two independent transformations, their high degree of spatial correlation indicates that the distribution of oxygen vacancies is nonuniform along the nanowires and that regions with a high concentration of vacancies serve as the active sites for photocatalysis. We also observed a high degree of colocalization for the ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowires, as quantified by CBC analysis

(**Figure 3j**). However, the functionalized nanowires no longer possessed inactive regions and displayed activity for both  $\bullet\text{OH}$  generation (**Figure 3c,g**) and FA condensation (**Figure 3d,h**) along their entire length. The changes in super-resolution activity maps indicate that both the concentration of oxygen vacancies had increased, and their distribution had become more uniform along the functionalized nanowires (see [Figures S14 and S15](#) for additional examples of colocalization analysis for both the as-synthesized and functionalized nanowires). Furthermore, while we observed a significant increase in the number of active regions, these regions possessed a similar distribution of specific activities (i.e., the number of fluorescence bursts detected per  $\mu\text{m}\cdot\text{min}$ ) compared to the initial nanowires (**Figure S22**). These results suggest that oxygen vacancies are introduced in regions that were initially inactive due to a low concentration of this defect.

We next characterized the compositional changes that occur in the ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowires during photocatalysis. Vibrational modes corresponding to ascorbic acid in the IR spectrum of the functionalized nanowires disappeared after irradiation (**Figure S6**). The functionalized nanowires exhibited an increase in absorption at near-infrared wavelengths after irradiation, consistent with an increase in the concentration of oxygen vacancies (**Figure S4**). For nanowires suspended in a solution of ascorbic acid and irradiated with a

xenon lamp, nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectra showed a progressive decrease in the concentration of ascorbic acid with irradiation time (Figure S17). These observations indicate the removal of adsorbed ascorbic acid during photocatalysis. Films of functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires were also irradiated simultaneously with 405 and 488 nm lasers under the same conditions used for single-molecule imaging (see Section 8 of the Supporting Information for details). A decrease in the relative contribution of  $W^{6+}$  in the W 4f core level was observed only after irradiation (Figure 1c), indicating a reduction in the oxidation state of tungsten ions. Simultaneously, the shoulder peak in the O 1s spectrum increased after irradiation, consistent with the creation of new oxygen vacancies in the functionalized sample (Figure S3). In comparison, the as-synthesized nanowires do not undergo significant changes as evidenced by XPS when irradiated under the same conditions.<sup>62</sup> To confirm that photogenerated oxygen vacancies are indeed necessary to enhance the photocatalytic activity of the nanowires, we also performed single-molecule imaging of oxidized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires with and without ascorbic acid. While no activity was detected on the bare oxidized nanowires (that contain a very low concentration of oxygen vacancies), we observed moderate activity for  $\bullet OH$  generation after the oxidized nanowires were functionalized with ascorbic acid (see discussion below, Table S3, and Figures S18 and S19). These control experiments solidify the role of ascorbic acid in activating the nanowires by increasing the concentration of oxygen vacancies *in situ* during photocatalysis.

To quantify the enhancement in photocatalytic activity after ascorbic acid functionalization, we measured the concentration dependence of APF conversion at the single-molecule level (Figure 4). A series of different concentrations of APF (5–60

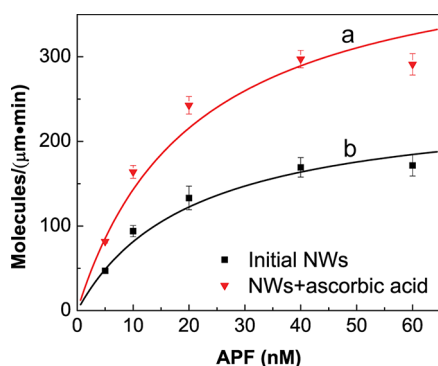
model in which the adsorption of APF is fast relative to its oxidation to fluorescein<sup>46,47,49,54,56</sup>

$$\nu = \frac{\gamma_{\text{eff}} K_{\text{ad}} [\text{APF}]}{1 + K_{\text{ad}} [\text{APF}]} \quad (1)$$

where  $\nu$  is the specific activity of detected product molecules for individual nanowires,  $K_{\text{ad}}$  is the equilibrium constant for adsorption of APF on the surface of a  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowire, and  $\gamma_{\text{eff}}$  is the effective per-nanowire rate constant for  $\bullet OH$  generation under the assumptions described above. For each concentration of APF, an average specific activity was determined by imaging 20 different nanowires. Figure 4 shows that for both the as-synthesized and ascorbic acid-functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires,  $\nu$  first increases and then saturates as  $[\text{APF}]$  increases, supporting the Langmuir–Hinshelwood model. We fitted the concentration dependence of  $\nu$  to eq 1. The rate constant for  $\bullet OH$  generation,  $\gamma_{\text{eff}}$ , increased from  $248 \pm 19 \mu\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  (standard error) for the as-synthesized nanowires to  $442 \pm 42 \mu\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  for the ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowires. Oxidized nanowires were completely inactive, but they could be reactivated through functionalization to produce a  $\gamma_{\text{eff}}$  of  $107 \pm 13 \mu\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  (Figure S18). While the values of  $\gamma_{\text{eff}}$  were sensitive to these surface treatments, the values of  $K_{\text{ad}}$  were similar before ( $0.049 \pm 0.008 \text{ nM}^{-1}$ ) and after functionalization ( $0.048 \pm 0.012 \text{ nM}^{-1}$ ) (see Table S3 for the reaction constants after different surface treatments).

We next analyzed the on-times for fluorescence bursts,  $\tau_{\text{on}}$ , which characterize the time each activated probe (i.e., fluorescein) remains adsorbed on the nanowire surface (Figure S20). As we did not observe a significant concentration dependence for  $\tau_{\text{on}}$ , we assign the interparticle-averaged value of the inverse on-time,  $\langle \tau_{\text{on}}^{-1} \rangle$ , to the rate constant for self-dissociation of fluorescein from the nanowire,  $k_d$ .<sup>46,47,54,63</sup> Similar to  $K_{\text{ad}}$ , the value of  $k_d$  did not change significantly after functionalization (both at  $0.048 \text{ ms}^{-1}$ , Table S3). The consistency of  $K_{\text{ad}}$  and  $k_d$  for both samples indicates a similar chemical environment for the active regions of the nanowire surface. Therefore, we attribute the increase in  $\gamma_{\text{eff}}$  to more active sites generated along the functionalized nanowires during photocatalysis.

On the basis of the increase in photocatalytic activity, along with the different spatial distributions of active sites imaged at the single-particle level, we propose that the ascorbic acid ligands play the following role during photocatalysis. As a sacrificial reductant, surface-adsorbed ascorbic acid molecules can be oxidized by photogenerated holes in the valence band of the  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires.<sup>75,76</sup> The remaining photogenerated electrons in the conduction band then reduce tungsten ions exposed at the surface of the nanowires. This redox process requires the creation of new oxygen vacancies to maintain charge balance, which serve as new active sites for photocatalytic  $\bullet OH$  generation. As the ligands decompose during the reaction (based on IR and NMR spectra, see Figures S6 and S17), they no longer block access to the surface of the nanowires. This mechanism explains the significant boost of the photocatalytic activity as well as the high degree of colocalization between APF and FA activity maps. We hypothesized other electron-donating ligands could activate the  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires.<sup>77,78</sup> Indeed, we observed that citrate-functionalized  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires also produce the same



**Figure 4.** Concentration dependence of the specific activity for photocatalytic  $\bullet OH$  generation at the single-molecule level for the initial nanowires (trace b, black squares) and ascorbic acid-functionalized nanowires (trace a, red triangles). The solid lines are fits to the Langmuir–Hinshelwood model (eq 1). Each data point represents the average of 20 nanowires, and the error bars show the standard deviation in specific activity for the 20 nanowires.

nM) was used to image the activity for  $\bullet OH$  generation. The conversion rate of the surface-adsorbed probe into its activated form can be approximated as first order with its bulk concentration  $[\text{APF}]$  when the  $\bullet OH$  concentration is much higher than  $[\text{APF}]$  and assuming that  $[\bullet OH]$  remains constant during the reaction (due to the high concentrations of photoexcited carriers and  $H_2O$ ).<sup>47,49</sup> This concentration dependence is often described by the Langmuir–Hinshelwood

changes in single-molecule activity maps as observed for ascorbic acid (Figure S19, Figure S21, and Table S3).

In summary, using *in situ*, single-molecule fluorescence microscopy in combination with ensemble surface characterization, we developed new insights into the role of surface-adsorbed organic ligands during semiconductor photocatalysis. Reductive ligands, such as ascorbic acid, generate new oxygen vacancies in a metal oxide semiconductor during photocatalysis and activate the catalyst for oxidation. While sterically bulky organic ligands are often needed to maintain colloidal stability, they can also block access to the nanocrystal surface. We show that redox-active ligands can generate new active sites *in situ* on the nanocrystal surface during photocatalysis. Therefore, mixed monolayers that combine inert, long-chain surfactants with redox-active ligands that boost activity may provide a strategy to both maintain colloidal stability during photocatalysis and create a high number of active sites.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### SI Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.nanolett.2c00674>.

Additional experimental details on the materials used in these experiments, structural characterization of the  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires, sample preparation and instrumentation for single-molecule fluorescence microscopy, analysis and processing of super-resolution images, and colocalization analysis; additional discussion of the binding of ascorbic acid to the nanowires and its degradation during photocatalysis; additional figures providing characterization of  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires by XRD, high-resolution TEM, XPS, absorption spectroscopy, and FT-IR spectroscopy; ensemble fluorescence spectra for the activation of APF and coumarin; ensemble photocatalytic activities for water oxidation using different samples of  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires; quantitative characterization of APF and furfuryl alcohol fluorescence bursts on  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires during single-molecule imaging; super-resolution activity maps and colocalization analysis of additional nanowires; reaction scheme for the activation of furfuryl alcohol; NMR spectroscopy of irradiated solutions containing  $W_{18}O_{49}$  nanowires and ascorbic acid; single-molecule imaging and concentration dependence showing the recovery in photocatalytic activity for oxidized nanowires after functionalization; concentration dependence of the on-times for fluorescence bursts using APF; concentration dependence of specific activity for functionalized nanowires; distribution of the specific activity for different bins before and after functionalization; tables providing the conditions used for ensemble fluorescence spectroscopy, the surface properties of different nanowire samples, and reaction constants obtained from single-molecule imaging (PDF)

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## Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## ■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) under Grant CHE-1753344 to B.S. and under Grant ECCS-1653777 to M.D.L. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy and high-resolution transmission electron microscopy were performed at the Institute of Materials Science and Engineering at Washington University. Transmission electron microscopy and zeta potential measurements were performed at the Nano Research and Environmental Facility at Washington University. X-ray diffraction was performed in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Washington University. The authors thank Z. Wang for performing the zeta potential experiments and H. Li for assistance with transmission electron microscopy.

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