

# Role of Pressure in the Growth of Hexagonal Boron Nitride Thin Films from Ammonia-Borane

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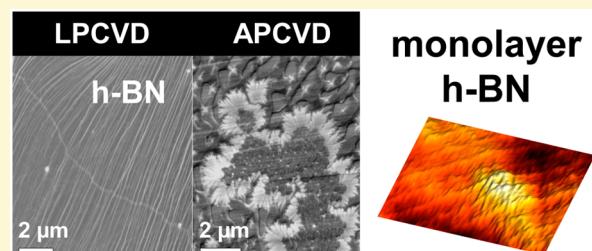
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## Supporting Information

**ABSTRACT:** We analyze the optical, chemical, and electrical properties of chemical vapor deposition (CVD) grown hexagonal boron nitride (h-BN) using the precursor ammonia-borane ( $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$ ) as a function of Ar/ $\text{H}_2$  background pressure ( $P_{\text{TOT}}$ ). Films grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} \leq 2.0$  Torr are uniform in thickness, highly crystalline, and consist solely of h-BN. At larger  $P_{\text{TOT}}$ , with constant precursor flow, the growth rate increases, but the resulting h-BN is more amorphous, disordered, and  $\text{sp}^3$ -bonded. We attribute these changes in h-BN grown at high pressure to incomplete thermolysis of the  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$  precursor from a passivated Cu catalyst. A similar increase in h-BN growth rate and amorphization is observed even at low  $P_{\text{TOT}}$  if the  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$  partial pressure is initially greater than the background pressure  $P_{\text{TOT}}$  at the beginning of growth. h-BN growth using the  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$  precursor reproducibly can give large-area, crystalline h-BN thin films, provided that the total pressure is under 2.0 Torr and the precursor flux is well-controlled.



## INTRODUCTION

Hexagonal boron nitride (h-BN) is an insulating, two-dimensional (2D) equivalent of graphene. Films of h-BN have been used as insulating spacers,<sup>1</sup> encapsulants,<sup>2</sup> substrates for electronic devices,<sup>3,4</sup> corrosion and oxidation-resistant coatings,<sup>5,6</sup> and surfaces for growth of other 2D nanomaterials, such as graphene<sup>7</sup> and WS<sub>2</sub>.<sup>8</sup> Most of these studies employed small-area ( $\sim 100 \mu\text{m}^2$ ) h-BN pieces exfoliated from sintered h-BN crystals,<sup>9</sup> limiting technological use of h-BN films. Additionally, unlike graphene, h-BN is difficult to prepare in monolayer form by exfoliation. The electronegativity difference between B and N and the reduced resonance stabilization relative to graphene results in electrostatic attractions between layers and in-plane. Consequently, it is more challenging to control h-BN grain size and layer number. Furthermore,

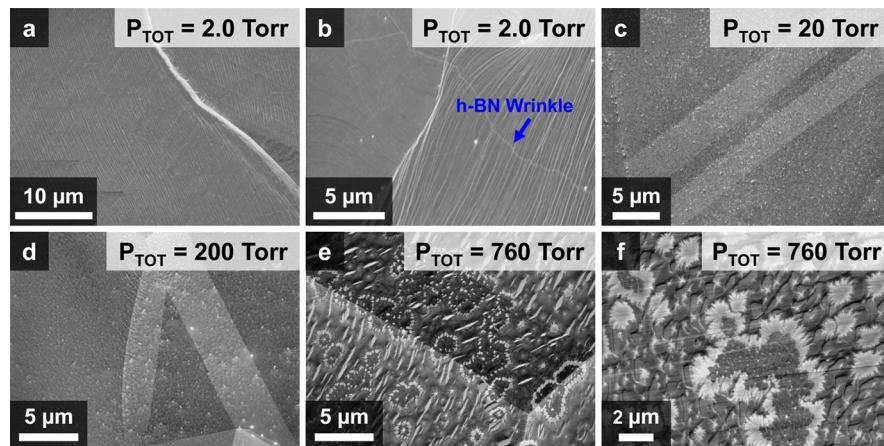
partially ionic B–N bonds can form between neighboring BN layers, serving to “spot-weld” such layers together.<sup>10</sup>

Several groups have sought to overcome these limitations by using chemical vapor deposition (CVD) to grow large-area, monolayer h-BN films.<sup>11–22</sup> CVD growth of h-BN has been accomplished using various precursors (e.g., ammonia borane, borazine, and diborane) on transition metal substrates (e.g., Cu, Ni,<sup>23</sup> Fe,<sup>24</sup> Ru,<sup>25,26</sup> etc.). Of these h-BN growth substrates, we focus on Cu, as Cu has a high catalytic activity,<sup>27</sup> is inexpensive, and is the typical growth substrate<sup>28</sup> for conventional graphene CVD. Regarding h-BN growth precursors, volatile borazine,  $\text{B}_3\text{N}_3\text{H}_6$ , isoelectronic with benzene, is far from an ideal choice,

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**Figure 1.** Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) imaging of h-BN on Cu at different pressures. Low-pressure h-BN growth (a) at a large-scale and (b) at a small-scale, revealing a planar h-BN film with protrusions from Cu step flow<sup>66</sup> and h-BN wrinkles. (c) Higher pressure growth, showing a loss of the Cu hillock morphology and an increase in charging. (d) Medium-pressure growth, with similar morphology as (c). Atmospheric pressure h-BN growth at a large-scale (e) and a small-scale (f), with polymeric features evident. These features suggest a breakdown in Cu-mediated catalysis.

as borazine is hazardous and decomposes quickly even at room temperature. While borazine can pyrolyze and dehydrogenate<sup>23,25,29,30</sup> to generate h-BN films,<sup>13,17,19,20,22,31</sup> partial dehydrogenation is common,<sup>30</sup> resulting in oligomeric BN compounds and aperiodic h-BN grain boundaries.<sup>13,17</sup> Finally, thin films of h-BN can also be grown from mixtures of diborane ( $\text{B}_2\text{H}_6$ ) and ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ),<sup>21</sup> with the drawback that diborane is toxic and pyrophoric.

In contrast to borazine and diborane, the molecule ammonia-borane ( $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$ ) is inexpensive, air stable, and has sufficient volatility to serve as a CVD precursor for h-BN thin films.<sup>12,15,16,18,21,32–38</sup> High purity ammonia-borane shows no decomposition over two months at room temperature,<sup>39</sup> and its vapor pressure has been estimated to be  $\sim 10^{-4}$  Torr at room temperature.<sup>40,41</sup> Heating ammonia-borane generates hydrogen and volatile B- and N-containing species that enable h-BN growth; the generated species include monomeric aminoborane ( $\text{H}_2\text{N}=\text{BH}_2$ ), borazine, and small amounts of diborane.<sup>34,42</sup> However, the growth of h-BN from ammonia-borane, typically carried out in the presence of  $\text{H}_2$ , gives variable results depending on the growth temperature,<sup>43</sup> substrate roughness,<sup>44,45</sup> substrate structure,<sup>46</sup> position of the growth substrate relative to the precursor source,<sup>35,36,43</sup> and precursor flux.<sup>12,16</sup> To date, it is unknown how growth pressure affects CVD h-BN growth on Cu using ammonia-borane. One can grow h-BN with large ( $\sim 35 \mu\text{m}^2$ ) grain sizes under atmospheric pressure CVD conditions, provided that the precursor flux is kept very low, an electropolished Cu surface is used, and the substrate temperature is kept higher than 1000 °C.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, little mechanistic information is available about the CVD growth of h-BN from ammonia-borane, especially at different growth pressures, although a report suggests that ammonia-borane derived growths on Cu proceed by surface catalysis.<sup>16</sup>

Here, we examine conditions under which crystalline films of h-BN can be grown from ammonia-borane and  $\text{H}_2$  by CVD. We find that low pressure CVD (LPCVD) gives uniform, planar h-BN films, as ascertained by scanning electron microscopy (SEM), atomic force microscopy (AFM), X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS), Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy, Raman spectroscopy, and scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) and spectroscopy (STS). While holding the precursor temperature and carrier gas flows

constant, increasing the growth pressure significantly alters the properties of the h-BN films, producing thicker, more disordered films with nonplanar,  $\text{sp}^3$  components. Further, higher precursor flux conditions in LPCVD growth give thicker, nanocrystalline h-BN films, showing the importance of the ratio of precursor to  $\text{H}_2$  in h-BN CVD growth. As demonstrated for graphene growth,<sup>47–50</sup> CVD growth of h-BN is sensitive to the Ar/ $\text{H}_2$  background pressure.

## ■ EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

**Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD) of Hexagonal Boron Nitride (h-BN) on Cu Foil.** Growth experiments were conducted in a retrofitted Atomate CVD furnace (see Figure S1). Care was taken to eliminate adventitious carbon sources from the growth chamber, otherwise h-BNC<sup>69</sup> or defective G/h-BN heterostructures resulted; the presence of these impurity phases was detected by Raman spectroscopy. The substrates were 0.001 in thick (0.0254 mm) 99.8% purity Cu foils (Alfa Aesar), which were rinsed before use with a 10:1  $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{HCl}$  solution as previously described<sup>51–53</sup> and annealed for 2 h under Ar/ $\text{H}_2$  (500 sccm Ar/100 sccm  $\text{H}_2$ ) at 1000 °C. Basic copper (BC) of similar purity<sup>54</sup> was used a Cu substrate for some growths; we designated these substrates accordingly. The annealing step increased the Cu grain size and lowered the number of BN nucleation sites.<sup>44,45</sup> The precursor  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$  (Aldrich) was transferred under  $\text{N}_2$  into a stainless steel ampule, minimizing water exposure of the hygroscopic  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$ . Occasionally, a different  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{B}_3\text{H}$  supplier was used (Boron Specialties) with similar results. To transport the precursor into the furnace, the ampule was heated to  $\sim 95$  °C, and volatilized material was swept into the furnace by a 4:1 Ar/ $\text{H}_2$  carrier. The h-BN films were grown at 1000 °C in an Ar/ $\text{H}_2$  background at the different pressures indicated. After 25 min of film growth, the samples were cooled at  $\sim 20 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$  under Ar at a flow rate of 500 sccm. See the Supporting Information for further discussion of the conditions that result in a high mass (HM) flux for the precursor temperatures used. For further characterization, the h-BN films were transferred from the Cu substrate to 90 nm  $\text{SiO}_2/\text{Si}$  wafers using methodologies detailed elsewhere.<sup>53,55</sup>

**Sample Annealing after Transfer.** Post-transfer annealing of the samples to remove polymer residues from the poly(methyl methacrylate) or polycarbonate transfer handles also used the same furnace as h-BN growth, using a quartz tube dedicated to sample annealing. Attempts to anneal transferred h-BN films under conditions similar to those used for annealing graphene, namely, 1 h in Ar/ $\text{H}_2$  at 400 °C, led to pitting and etching of the films, as has been reported.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, post-transfer sample anneals were carried out in air at 550

°C as described by others;<sup>56</sup> h-BN is known to be oxidation resistant under these conditions.<sup>6,57</sup>

**Lithographic Patterning.** To obtain lithographically patterned h-BN samples, we defined a square array in the h-BN film by UV photolithography, using a conventional TEM grid as a mask and an O<sub>2</sub> plasma to etch. Polymethylglutarimide (PMGI; MicroChem) was spun at 3500 rpm for 30 s and cured at 165 °C for 5 min. Shipley 1813 photoresist (MicroChem) was spun on top of the cured PMGI at 5000 rpm for 30 s. The photoresist was soft baked at 110 °C for 70 s, flood exposed to UV (i-line, 365 nm) through a TEM grid for 4 s on a Karl-Suss aligner, and developed for 50 s in MF-319 (MicroChem). Using the patterned photoresist as a mask, we etched the samples in an O<sub>2</sub> plasma for 1 min under 20 sccm of O<sub>2</sub> at 100 mTorr throttle pressure and ~90 W power. After the O<sub>2</sub> etch, the samples were soaked in hot (~50 °C) remover PG (nominally *n*-methylpyrrolidone) for 20 min.

**Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM).** The h-BN films were examined immediately after growth on the Cu foil by an FEI environmental SEM operating at 5 kV. All images were taken using an ultrahigh-definition mode, which increases the dwell time and the beam current. We maintained similar values for the brightness and contrast during image collection, so that the images in Figure 1 can be compared.

**Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM).** Most AFM images were collected in tapping mode with ~300 kHz Si cantilevers on a Bruker AFM with a Dimension IV controller. Scan rates were slower than 2 Hz, and sampling was at least 512 samples per line by 512 lines; most of the scans were 1024 × 1024 images. Images with low noise and stable phase were selected for analysis. Images were destreaked, plane fit, and analyzed using Gwyddion.<sup>58</sup> Root mean square (RMS) roughness values were determined using Gwyddion and by means of an algorithm written in MATLAB. Autocorrelation values were also determined and fit in Gwyddion. Some AFM images were taken on an Asylum Research MFP-3D AFM in tapping mode using ~300 kHz resonant frequency Si cantilevers (NSG30 AFM tips from NT-MDT).

**X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS).** A Kratos ULTRA XPS with a monochromatic K $\alpha$  Al X-ray line was used to collect data. We fitted all subpeaks with Shirley backgrounds and Gaussian–Lorentzian (GL) mixing. The amount of GL character was optimized (i.e., not fixed) in our fits, so as to lower the chi-squared value and be representative of the true chemical state of the subpeak in question. To prevent sample charging, samples were mounted on a conducting stage using conductive tape or a metal clamp and were exposed to a flood gun during data collection. All core levels were charge corrected to the adventitious sp<sup>2</sup>/sp<sup>3</sup> C 1s peak at 284.8 eV.

**Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) Spectroscopy.** FTIR spectra of the h-BN films while still on the Cu foil growth substrate were collected on a Thermo Nicolet NEXUS 670 FTIR with a Smart iTR attenuated total reflectance (ATR) sampling accessory with a ZnSe window. All spectra were acquired in air. Before measuring an h-BN spectrum, an air background with no sample on the ZnSe window was collected and used. Each spectrum was the sum of 256 scans at least 2 wavenumber resolution.

**Raman Spectroscopy.** Raman spectra were acquired on a Horiba LabRAM HR 3D-capable imaging system at 532 nm. Data were collected with an 1800 lines/mm grating, a 100× (0.8 NA) objective, and a power level below ~10 mW. The Raman cross-section<sup>59</sup> of h-BN is low at 532 nm and, to improve signal-to-noise ratio and avoid the fluorescent background of the Cu foil, the Raman spectra measurements were performed on h-BN films that had been transferred to SiO<sub>2</sub>/Si substrates. Raman mapping data were acquired around the E<sub>2g</sub> band position (~1370 cm<sup>-1</sup>)<sup>60,61</sup> using a minimum array of 100 Raman point spectra at ~5 μm point spacing. Each spectrum consisted of an average of four to six individual measurements made at the same location, each with a 45 to 60 s acquisition time. The E<sub>2g</sub> mode and the higher order (~1450 cm<sup>-1</sup>) Si third order TO phonon mode (3TO) mode intrinsic to the SiO<sub>2</sub>/Si substrate were each fit with a single Lorentzian function using a Levenberg–Marquardt fitting algorithm in Fityk.<sup>62</sup>

**Scanning Tunneling Microscopy (STM).** Our experiments employed a home-built, room-temperature ultrahigh vacuum scanning

tunneling microscope (UHV-STM)<sup>63</sup> with a base pressure of ~3 × 10<sup>-11</sup> Torr and electrochemically etched W and PtIr tips. Some of the tips were sharpened using field-directed sputter sharpening.<sup>64</sup> We scanned the samples in constant-current mode, in which the feedback electronics controlled the tip height to maintain a current set point, while rastering the tip across the surface. The STM tip was grounded through a current amplifier, and the tunneling bias was applied to the sample. For the constant-spacing scanning tunneling spectroscopy (STS) measurements, the tip was stopped at predetermined locations, the tip feedback was turned off, and the tip–sample bias was swept through the specified range while recording the tunneling current.

**Ultraviolet–Visible (UV–vis) Absorption Spectroscopy.** A Shimadzu UV-1650 PC instrument was used to collect UV–vis transmission spectra at an incidence angle of approximately ~60°. h-BN films were transferred onto UV-transparent quartz slides (SPI, part number 01020-AB). The transmission spectra were acquired with respect to a blank quartz slide reference.

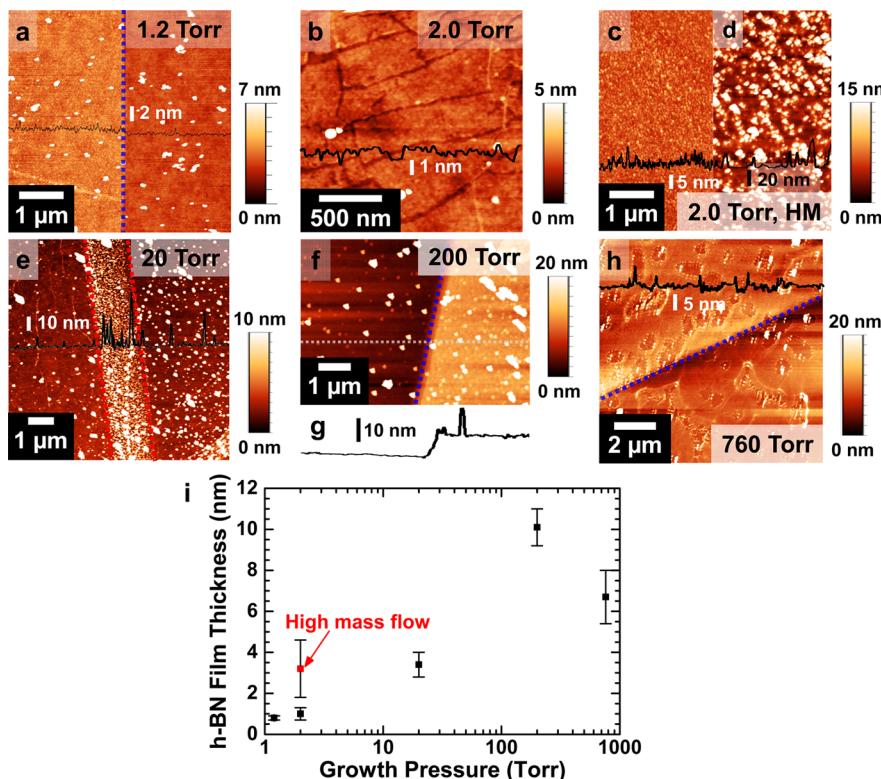
## ■ RESULTS

We have grown thin films of h-BN by CVD on polycrystalline Cu foils at ~1000 °C. Our growths last for 25 min in the presence of H<sub>2</sub> using the precursor ammonia-borane. Although temperatures above ~1170 °C are required to produce crystalline h-BN from ammonia-borane in the solid state,<sup>34,42</sup> metal catalysts can reduce this threshold to the ~1000 °C temperatures used in our experiments.<sup>26,65</sup>

The precursor reservoir is kept at ~95 °C during deposition runs. At this temperature ammonia-borane decomposes slowly to generate primarily H<sub>2</sub> and monomeric aminoborane, with negligible (i.e., undetected by mass spectrometry) amounts of borazine and diborane.<sup>34,42</sup> Typically, upon opening the valve to the precursor to begin growth, the pressure in the chamber increases slightly by ~0.05 Torr; this pressure spike dissipates over about ~1 min. For some of the deposition runs, especially if the reservoir temperature is ~100 °C, the pressure increase upon opening the valve to the reservoir is somewhat higher (up to several Torr), undoubtedly due to buildup of H<sub>2</sub> and ammonia-borane decomposition products in the reservoir. We refer to these higher ammonia-borane partial pressure spikes as high mass (HM) flow conditions (see Supporting Information for further discussion).

A 4:1 mixture of Ar:H<sub>2</sub>, with flow rates of either 400:100 standard cubic centimeters per minute (sccm) or 200:50 sccm, is used as a carrier gas to transport the precursor to the growth chamber. Three pressure regimes were investigated: (1) low pressure CVD conditions (LPCVD), for which the total Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure, P<sub>TOT</sub>, is 2 Torr (P<sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub> = 0.4 Torr) or less; (2) medium pressure conditions, with either P<sub>TOT</sub> = 20 Torr (P<sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub> = 4 Torr) or P<sub>TOT</sub> = 200 Torr (P<sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub> = 40 Torr); and (3) atmospheric CVD conditions (APCVD), for which P<sub>TOT</sub> = 760 Torr (P<sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub> = 152 Torr). We estimate the P<sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub>/P<sub>H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub></sub> ratio over the growth surface is ~50 for our LPCVD conditions. The P<sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub>/P<sub>H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub></sub> ratio increases for higher P<sub>TOT</sub> values and decreases for HM flow conditions.

Figure 1a shows a large-area SEM image of an h-BN film grown on Cu under LPCVD conditions. The closely spaced (~0.025 μm) striations running at approximately a ~20° angle from vertical in the image indicate the step flow direction of the underlying Cu surface. These steps, which result from the mismatch in thermal expansion coefficients between h-BN and Cu, form only if the overlayer is planar and has a well-ordered crystalline structure.<sup>66</sup> The faint striations running diagonally from upper right to lower left are attributed to thermally



**Figure 2.** Changes in h-BN film morphology due to precursor mass flow and growth pressure. (a) Atomic force microscopy (AFM) images of transferred and lithographically patterned (blue line) h-BN on SiO<sub>2</sub> growth at low pressure (1.2 Torr). (b) Low pressure (2.0 Torr) h-BN growth with improved precursor mass flow control showing smoother morphology. (c, d) AFM images of transferred h-BN on SiO<sub>2</sub> grown at low pressure (2.0 Torr) but with a high mass (HM) flow of H<sub>3</sub>N-BH<sub>3</sub>. The HM condition gives a more nanocrystalline h-BN film, as seen in the overlaid height profile. (e) Medium pressure (20 Torr) h-BN growth with heightened H<sub>3</sub>N-BH<sub>3</sub> catalysis on a former Cu annealing twin. AFM image (f) and height profile (g) for lithographically patterned (blue line) h-BN grown at medium pressure (200 Torr). Patterned large-area (h) AFM image for h-BN grown at atmospheric pressure (760 Torr). The APCVD grown film is highly inhomogeneous and rough, with polymeric depressions corresponding to the features seen in SEM. (i) h-BN film thickness versus growth pressure, showing thin h-BN films at LPCVD.

induced wrinkles in the h-BN overlayer.<sup>13,16,32,36,67</sup> Figure 1b is a smaller-area SEM image of another region of the same LPCVD grown h-BN sample. The prominent feature that approximately bisects the image vertically is a Cu grain boundary. Here, an h-BN wrinkle crosses the Cu grain boundary; similar behavior has been seen for graphene.<sup>28</sup>

When growth is conducted at medium pressures ( $\geq 20$  Torr) of background gas, the Cu step flow features and h-BN wrinkles are absent and the surface appears morphologically rough (Figure 1c). There is also a high density of nanoparticles in the image. Similar results are obtained at a growth pressure of 200 Torr (Figure 1d); the surface is rough, and Cu step flow features are absent. Under APCVD conditions, the h-BN film is nonplanar and exhibits disordered surface features in both the larger-area (Figure 1e) and smaller-area (Figure 1f) SEM images. There are no previous reports of such disordered surface features for APCVD grown h-BN. The lack of obvious Cu step flow features and h-BN wrinkles suggests that this film is thicker than those grown under LPCVD conditions. For additional SEM images of partially grown, submonolayer h-BN, LPCVD, and APCVD grown h-BN, see Figures S3 and S4.

Figure 2 shows AFM images of the h-BN films as a function of the Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure ( $P_{\text{TOT}}$ ), along with height profiles across a film boundary generated by lithographic etching. Figure 2a shows an h-BN film grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 1.2$  Torr (LPCVD regime); the film edge is indicated by the dashed, blue line. The film thickness of  $0.8 \pm 0.1$  nm

corresponds well to 1 to 2 h-BN layers,<sup>9,10</sup> and the root-mean-square (RMS) roughness is 0.58 nm. The larger RMS roughness relative to the film thickness likely stems from entrapped water and polymeric contaminants introduced in the h-BN film transfer.<sup>53</sup> When a film grown under similar LPCVD conditions ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 2.0$  Torr) is annealed in Ar/H<sub>2</sub> at 400 °C, the film becomes smoother (0.45 nm RMS roughness) and etch tracks are formed (Figure 2b). The step height of the film after annealing is  $1.0 \pm 0.3$  nm.

Figure 2c and 2d shows AFM topographs of two different films also grown under LPCVD conditions (2.0 Torr), except that there was a higher than normal flux from the reservoir during growth (HM conditions). The higher flux was a consequence of keeping the reservoir at  $\sim 100$  °C versus 95 °C; at the higher temperature, the precursor evolves up to 100 times more H<sub>2</sub> and volatile B- and N-containing species (see Supporting Information for further discussion). The resulting h-BN films are both thicker ( $3.2 \pm 1.4$  nm) and rougher (1.51 nm RMS roughness) than those grown under LPCVD conditions when the precursor reservoir is not overheated. When grown at intermediate background pressures of Ar/H<sub>2</sub> gas ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 20$  Torr) but at normal flux from the reservoir, the films are also thick ( $3.4 \pm 0.6$  nm) and rough (3.20 nm RMS roughness). These values resemble those for the sample grown at 2.0 Torr under HM conditions, underscoring the importance of controlling the precursor flux during growth.

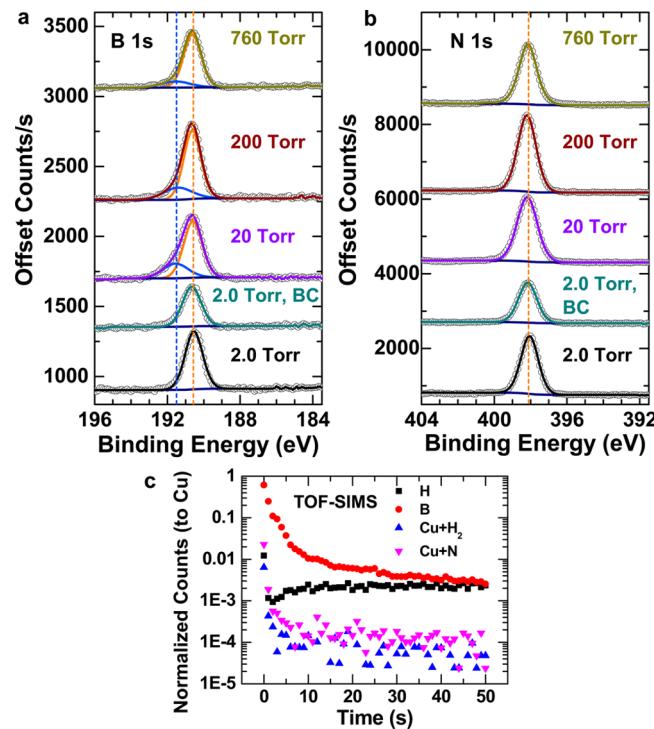
For intermediate growth pressures ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 20$  Torr), the h-BN thin films template Cu substrate morphology, as apparent from the former Cu annealing twin shown in the topograph of **Figure 2e**. Vicinal Cu surfaces are known to lead to more defective, thicker graphene growth,<sup>54</sup> potentially explaining the enhanced h-BN growth on the twin. At higher growth pressures ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 200$  Torr), the film in **Figure 2f** and **2g** has a step height of  $10.1 \pm 0.9$  nm (1.53 nm RMS roughness), with large protrusions from transfer induced PMMA residuals.<sup>53</sup> Under APCVD conditions (**Figure 2h**), the h-BN films are rougher still (1.64 nm RMS roughness) and possess inhomogeneous depressions with contours corresponding to the morphology seen in the SEM images (**Figure 1e** and **1f**).

The h-BN film thickness for different growth pressures shown in **Figure 2i** indicate that the film thickness—and thus the growth rate—increases monotonically with increasing Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure, except at the very highest (APCVD) pressures. The unexpected decrease in film thickness for h-BN grown under APCVD conditions seen in **Figure 2h** could result from a slowed chemical reaction between the O<sub>2</sub> etching plasma and the APCVD grown h-BN thin film. Lowered O<sub>2</sub> plasma activity is consistent with a different structural (i.e., disordered) and chemical (i.e., higher N content) character for the APCVD versus LPCVD films, as detailed below. Regardless, analysis of Cu substrate photoelectron attenuation (see **Supporting Information**) from the h-BN overlayer allows us to estimate the APCVD film thickness at  $17.8 \pm 1.1$  nm.

**Figure 3a** and **3b** shows XPS data in the B 1s and N 1s core level regions, respectively, for h-BN samples grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 2.0, 20, 200$ , and 760 Torr. The **Supporting Information** gives XPS data for a film grown at 1.2 Torr LPCVD and an additional film grown at 760 Torr (**Figure S6**). **Table 1** summarizes the peak binding energies and fwhm values. The principal B 1s feature has a binding energy (BE) of  $\sim 190.5$  eV, characteristic of bulk BN (both hexagonal and cubic phases).<sup>68</sup> The plots contain XPS data for h-BN films grown at 2.0 Torr on Cu foil from two different vendors, Alfa Aesar and Basic Copper (BC).<sup>54</sup> The data for both films possess similar line shapes and peak position BEs. For all the films, a broad  $\pi$  plasmon loss occurs at  $\sim 199.5$  eV,<sup>68,69</sup> demonstrating that the films are hexagonal and not cubic in phase.

For films grown at Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressures above 2.0 Torr, there is an additional B 1s feature at  $\sim 191.1$  to 191.6 eV, as determined by the deconvolution of the core level spectra. This feature is characteristic of sp<sup>3</sup> B centers, such as those found in sp<sup>3</sup> rich amorphous BN films<sup>69</sup> and in polyaminoborane (BE = 191.1 eV).<sup>70</sup> The fwhm of this sp<sup>3</sup> B component increases as the background pressure increases, with the largest values measured under APCVD conditions (**Tables 1** and **S5–S7**). The main N 1s XPS feature has a BE of  $\sim 398$  eV, which is also characteristic of h-BN.<sup>68</sup> The N 1s features shown in **Figure 3b** do not significantly broaden or shift in BE as the growth pressure increases. However, some APCVD h-BN thin films have a higher BE subpeak in the N 1s core level (see **Figure S6**), corresponding to sp<sup>3</sup> N (see **Figure S6**).<sup>69</sup> While the films consist mostly of sp<sup>2</sup> h-BN, at higher growth pressures they possess a small sp<sup>3</sup> component.

As the Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure increases, the B:N stoichiometry of the films—as determined from the total areas of the B 1s and N 1s core levels—decreases from 1:1.0 ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 2.0$  Torr) to 1:0.81 ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 200$  Torr). At  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 760$  Torr, the B:N stoichiometry returns to a 1:1 ratio. The spectra suggest that the films consist of 1:1 h-BN that is increasingly mixed



**Figure 3.** Chemical information for different h-BN growth pressure set points. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) core level data with respect to growth pressure for the B 1s (a) and N 1s (b) photoelectron (PE) lines. All growths give hexagonally structured BN, as confirmed by the main B sp<sup>2</sup> peak (orange) in the B 1s PE line. The BC label indicates Cu growth foil from Basic Copper, a different Cu source. For B 1s, a secondary sp<sup>3</sup> B peak (blue) appears and widens with increasing growth pressure, indicative of polymeric components. (c) Time-of-flight secondary ion mass spectroscopy (TOF-SIMS) depth profiling for low-pressure h-BN (2.0 Torr), demonstrating subsurface B diffusion in the Cu.

with a B-rich sp<sup>3</sup> component at background pressures up to 200 Torr. If we examine only the area under the sp<sup>2</sup> components for the B 1s and N 1s core levels, the h-BN films grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} \leq 200$  Torr are stoichiometric (namely, a 1:1 ratio of the areas of the B and N sp<sup>2</sup> components). Conversely, the APCVD h-BN film in **Figure 3a** and **3b** has a sp<sup>2</sup>:B:N stoichiometry of 1:1:2.22, implying that the APCVD grown h-BN is in a different chemical state. Thus, higher Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressures lead to the generation of disordered surface features (**Figure 1e**, **1f**, and **2h**) and change the chemical state in the h-BN thin films.

Depth profiles generated from time-of-flight secondary ion mass spectroscopy (TOF-SIMS) data as a function of sputtering time suggest that B, but not N, diffuses into the Cu substrate during growth of an h-BN film at a Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure of 2.0 Torr (**Figure 3c**). We track the nitrogen in the Cu subsurface by the Cu+N mass spectra in **Figure 3c**, since elemental nitrogen is challenging to observe in Cs<sup>+</sup> based TOF-SIMS profiling. The Cu+N mass spectra are significantly weaker than the B mass spectra, and they track the subsurface H<sub>2</sub>. These observations suggest that the N does not diffuse into the Cu substrate. The results are not surprising, especially at a growth temperature of 1000 °C. Whereas B is soluble in copper, N is not,<sup>71,72</sup> although there may be some diffusion of N atoms into Cu grain boundaries, as seen for Ni and Co foils.<sup>73</sup> Subsurface B during h-BN synthesis is expected, as reported for borazine-derived growth<sup>74</sup> of h-BN films. Thus,

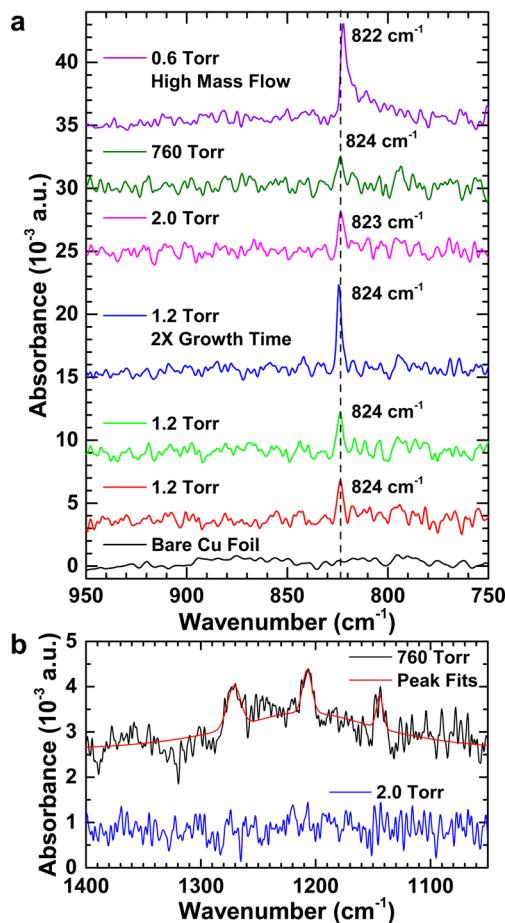
**Table 1.** Summary of Fitted XPS Data for Different h-BN Growths<sup>a</sup>

growth pressure (Torr)	sp <sup>2</sup> B		sp <sup>3</sup> B		sp <sup>2</sup> N		stoichiometry <i>y</i> , BN <sub><i>y</i></sub>
	BE (eV)	fwhm Γ (eV)	BE (eV)	fwhm Γ (eV)	BE (eV)	fwhm Γ (eV)	
1.2	190.7	1.27	absent	absent	398.3	1.24	1.02
2.0	190.5	1.14	absent	absent	398.1	1.15	0.95
2.0, BC	190.7	1.22	absent	absent	398.1	1.20	1.04
20	190.6	1.15	191.3	1.86	398.2	1.31	0.89
200	190.6	1.00	191.1	1.40	398.2	1.19	0.81
760	190.6	1.16	191.5	2.01	398.2	1.20	1.03
760	190.6	1.11	191.6	2.00	398.1	1.17	0.88

<sup>a</sup>The binding energy (BE) and full width at half maxima (FWHM) for peak fits to XPS data are from Figure 2. Here, BC is the label for h-BN growth on Cu foil from Basic Copper,<sup>54</sup> rather than from Alfa Aesar.

low pressure, ammonia-borane derived h-BN syntheses proceed by both bulk precipitation and surface catalysis. Further, these findings are consistent the recent observation of bulk precipitation for CVD h-BN growth on Ni and Co foils.<sup>73,75</sup>

Figure 4a shows FTIR spectra for h-BN films grown under a variety of conditions; a spectrum of the bare Cu foil is also



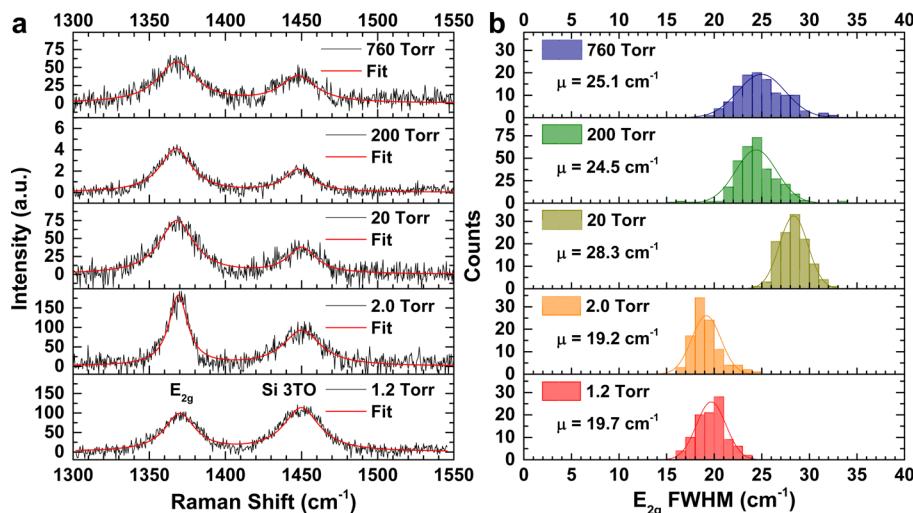
**Figure 4.** Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) of h-BN grown at different pressures. (a) Spectra for h-BN grown at different pressure in the region near the LO  $A_{2u}$  mode of h-BN.<sup>60</sup> Spectra offset for clarity. All of the h-BN growths show a peak near  $\sim 824 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The low intensity and peak at  $\sim 794 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  suggest a disordered film for APCVD h-BN. (b) High wavenumber spectra for APCVD and LPCVD (2 Torr) h-BN films. The APCVD growth shows a higher baseline versus the LPCVD case. Several small peaks appear about  $\sim 1200 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , demonstrating incomplete  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$  breakdown products.<sup>34</sup>

presented. The h-BN samples all have a peak near  $\sim 824 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  for the  $A_{2u}$  out-of-plane h-BN vibration.<sup>20,60,76</sup> The ATR accessory used does not permit observation of the  $E_{1u}$  in-plane vibrational mode of h-BN near  $\sim 1367 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ .<sup>60,76</sup> The intensity of the  $A_{2u}$  peak is similar for the LPCVD h-BN samples grown 1.2 and 2.0 Torr, but the  $A_{2u}$  peak intensity increases, indicating thicker films, if the growth time is doubled to 50 min or the growth is conducted under HM flow conditions. A thicker h-BN film would lead to increased signal intensity.

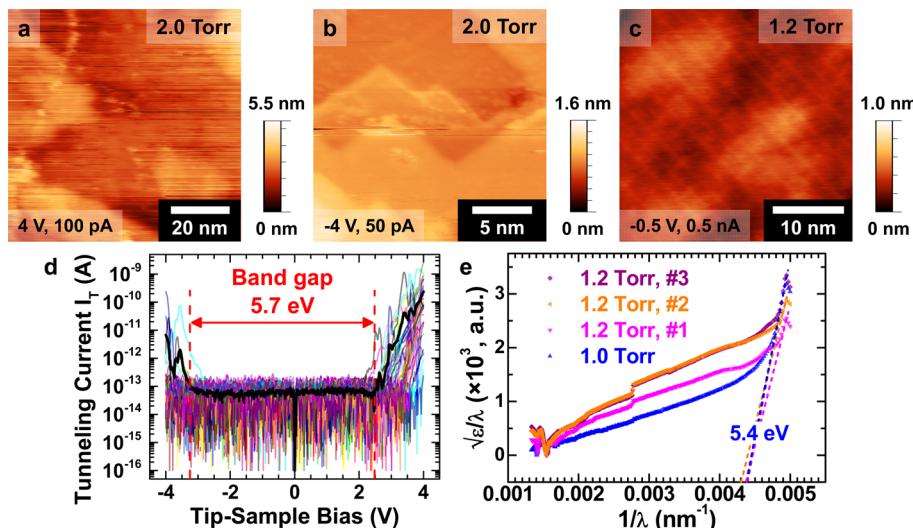
The intensity of the  $\sim 823 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  peak for the h-BN film grown at 760 Torr is slightly smaller than that seen for the LPCVD samples, which is unexpected given that AFM measurements show that this sample is thicker than the LPCVD samples (Figure 2). The altered morphological and chemical structure of the APCVD grown film may be responsible for this effect. Although weak, there is a feature near  $794 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  that is characteristic of disordered h-BN films.<sup>34</sup> In Figure 4b, the spectrum for the APCVD grown film also shows three distinct peaks at  $\sim 1144$ ,  $\sim 1207$ , and  $\sim 1271 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  on top of a broad baseline. Byproducts generated by thermolysis of the  $\text{H}_3\text{N}-\text{BH}_3$  precursor possess peaks in this range.<sup>34,77</sup> These peaks corroborate the disordered, polymeric surface morphology (Figure 1 and 2) and the sp<sup>3</sup> B and N chemical components (Figure 3) seen in the APCVD h-BN thin films.

Figure 5a shows Raman spectra for h-BN films grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 1.2, 2.0, 20, 200$ , and 760 Torr. The spectra show both the h-BN  $E_{2g}$  band<sup>60,61</sup> (which for bulk samples appears at  $\sim 1366 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) and the Si 3TO mode<sup>78</sup> at  $\sim 1450 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The intensity of the Si 3TO mode from the substrate decreases as the growth pressure increases; this correlates with the increased h-BN film thickness (Figure 2i). As the h-BN films become thicker, the  $E_{2g}$  mode frequency decreases from  $1370.2 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  for  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 1.2$  Torr to  $1368.6 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  for  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 200$  Torr. Moreover, the  $E_{2g}$  frequency is essentially unchanged for thicker growths ( $1369.1 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  at  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 760$  Torr); see the histogram plots in Figure S9. The  $E_{2g}$  frequencies of the thickest films are higher (i.e., less bulk-like) than expected,<sup>61</sup> likely reflecting either a change in the chemical structure or regions of inhomogeneous strain in the high pressure grown films.<sup>33,79</sup>

The full width at half-maximum (fwhm) of the  $E_{2g}$  band is less sensitive to strain and is a good measure of h-BN crystallite ordering.<sup>80</sup> The spectra reveal that the fwhm of the  $E_{2g}$  mode, as fitted to a single Lorentzian, increases with growth pressure (Figure 5b). The fwhm values of  $19.7 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 1.2$  Torr) and  $19.2 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 2.0$  Torr) are similar to those reported for monolayer and bilayer h-BN films exfoliated from sintered crystals.<sup>61</sup> Conversely, the fwhm values of  $28.3 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 20$



**Figure 5.** Raman spectroscopy of transferred h-BN grown at different pressures. (a) Representative point Raman spectra from h-BN growths, fitted by Lorentzians. The  $E_{2g}$  mode of h-BN at  $\sim 1370\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and the Si 3TO mode at  $\sim 1450\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are apparent. (b) Histograms for the  $E_{2g}$  band full-width at half-maximum (fwhm) using Raman mapping data from the h-BN growths. Higher growth pressure films show a larger fwhm, indicative of disorder.<sup>80</sup>



**Figure 6.** Electrical and optical data for h-BN films. (a, b) Scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) topographs for thin h-BN grown under LPCVD (2 Torr) conditions. The wide band gap of the grown h-BN necessitates using large tip–sample biases ( $\pm 4\text{ V}$ ) to scan the surface. Cu step edges, namely, the angular features, are also evident. (c) A STM topograph of lower pressure h-BN growth ( $\sim 1.2\text{ Torr}$ ). This monolayer h-BN film is thin enough to scan at smaller tip–sample biases. (d) Scanning tunneling spectroscopy (STS) data on the same low-pressure sample in (a, b), showing a wide electronic band gap characteristic of h-BN. (e) Optical band gap extraction from low pressure ( $P = 1.0$  and  $1.2\text{ Torr}$ ) CVD h-BN films showing band gaps near  $5.4\text{ eV}$ .

Torr), 24.5 ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 200\text{ Torr}$ ), and  $25.1\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 760\text{ Torr}$ ) indicate that the h-BN films lose long-range order and become defective<sup>80</sup> when grown at high Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressures.

Since the h-BN thin films are grown on Cu, scanning tunneling microscopy and spectroscopy (STM/S) is a straightforward way to measure their electronic band gaps. Figure 6a and 6b shows STM topographs of thin h-BN films on Cu grown under LPCVD conditions at 2.0 Torr. The STM image in Figure 6a is relatively streaky, and these h-BN films required high tip–sample bias conditions for stable scanning. There is no evidence of Moiré interference patterns between the h-BN film and the Cu substrate; instead, the only features evident are the Cu substrate terraces. These terrace steps in Figure 6b are likely related to an h-BN induced reconstruction

of the Cu surfaces.<sup>66</sup> Still, the roughened Cu morphology<sup>54</sup> can produce h-BN grain boundaries, which in turn will have more armchair edges<sup>81</sup> from the obtuse angles of Figure 6b. The need for these bias conditions, the lack of finer Cu substrate detail through the h-BN, and the missing Moiré superstructures indicate that this film is thin, but certainly more than one layer thick (i.e., 2 to 3 layers). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the AFM step height data (Figure 2i, Figure S5) and also suggest that the film possesses a wide band gap.

By contrast, the STM topograph of h-BN grown at 1.2 Torr (Figure 6c) shows a linear pattern from the Cu substrate. This linear pattern has a period of  $\sim 2\text{ nm}$ , similar to the pattern observed for graphene on Cu(111) after oxygen intercalation.<sup>82</sup> Unlike the sample in Figure 6a and 6b, scanning is stable at tip–sample biases well within the h-BN band gap. Therefore,

this sample is most likely an h-BN monolayer on the Cu foil substrate. The plot in Figure 6d displays the tunneling current ( $I$ ) versus the tip–sample bias ( $V$ ) for individual STS spectra recorded at different locations on the h-BN film grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 2.0$  Torr shown in Figure 6a; the solid black line indicates the average spectrum. The average band gap of  $\sim 5.7$  eV is consistent with that of bulk h-BN.<sup>9,21</sup>

To verify that the band gap measured on the nanometer scale is also characteristic of the entire film, we also characterize the films by ultraviolet–visible (UV–vis) absorption spectroscopy. The plot displayed in Figure 6e shows UV–vis absorption spectra for h-BN films grown at  $P_{\text{TOT}} = 1.0$  and 1.2 Torr after transfer to UV-transparent quartz. Analysis of the UV–vis absorption spectra by the Tauc method<sup>12,15,20,21,83</sup> shows that the LPCVD h-BN films have optical band gaps between 5.3 and 5.5 eV, which is within the expected range for h-BN<sup>9,21</sup> and close to electronic band gaps measured by STS. A two point probe transport measurement of an h-BN film grown under LPCVD conditions further confirms that the films are not conducting (see Figure S11). Our combined STS and UV–vis absorption spectroscopic measurements ultimately support the conclusion that the LPCVD h-BN films have the electronic signature of crystalline h-BN.

## ■ DISCUSSION

For the CVD of h-BN from ammonia-borane on Cu at 1000 °C in the presence of a 4:1 Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background gas, we have found the following: at Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressures of 20 Torr ( $P_{\text{H}_2} = 4$  Torr) or above, the growth rate increases with pressure, but the films contain larger and larger amounts of a sp<sup>3</sup> component that is similar to amorphous BN or polyaminoborane (PAB). The faster growth rate is consistent with previous studies of the CVD of graphene, showing that H<sub>2</sub> serves as a cocatalyst<sup>49</sup> and that the growth depends on the H<sub>2</sub> to precursor ratio.<sup>49,50</sup> However, the results are in contrast to previous findings that H<sub>2</sub> etches spurious h-BN nucleation<sup>22</sup> and removes polymeric PAB and polyiminoborane (PIB) species,<sup>84</sup> as we observe h-BN, PAB, and PIB compounds in h-BN films grown at high Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure. We can reconcile the contrasting observations by proposing that, at the higher H<sub>2</sub> pressures, the faster h-BN growth rates cause the Cu foil to become quickly covered, so that its catalytic activity is suppressed. As a result, the precursor does not completely decompose on top of the already deposited h-BN layers. In the absence of a catalyst, growth of h-BN from H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub> requires very high temperatures ( $\sim 1500$  °C).<sup>34</sup> Incomplete decomposition of the H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub> precursor<sup>34,77</sup> explains several of the properties of the h-BN samples grown at a Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure of 760 Torr: the amorphous, disordered surface morphology, the sp<sup>3</sup> components observed in the XPS data, and the extra, polymeric peaks in the FTIR spectra.

Previously, Bhaviripudi et al. showed that the growth of CVD graphene on Cu is demarcated into three growth regimes: surface reaction (catalysis), mixed growth, and mass transport.<sup>47</sup> In these growth regimes, the total pressure  $P_{\text{TOT}}$  determined whether graphene growth proceeded by catalysis or otherwise. For h-BN growths on Cu at  $P_{\text{TOT}} > 20$  Torr (medium pressure CVD to APCVD), we note an increase in the surface growth rate  $K_s$  and a significant decrease in the mass transfer coefficient  $h_g$ . The decrease in mass transfer coefficient  $h_g$  occurs because the coefficient is inversely proportional to  $P_{\text{TOT}}$ :  $h_g \propto P_{\text{TOT}}^{-1}\delta^{-1}$ , where  $\delta$  is the boundary layer thickness,

weakly dependent on  $P_{\text{TOT}}$ .<sup>47</sup> Under these conditions,  $h_g \ll K_s$ , making the mass transport flux dominant over surface reactions, ultimately eliminating the high temperature catalytic decomposition of ammonia-borane. LPCVD h-BN growth conditions increase  $h_g$ , promoting surface catalysis ( $h_g \gg K_s$ ), growing sp<sup>2</sup> h-BN, and removing spurious PAB and PIB. Remnant borane derivatives and substrate N in-diffusion can drive local B and N gradients, influencing the shape of growing h-BN nuclei into atypical morphologies, as a recent theoretical report predicted.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, it is important to control the temperature of the precursor reservoir, because the rate of decomposition of H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub> to H<sub>2</sub>, monomeric aminoborane, borazine, and other (mostly nonvolatile) products is quite temperature sensitive.<sup>34,42,77,86</sup> An overheated ammonia-borane precursor can lead to polymerization of the precursor, generate adventitious H<sub>2</sub>, and increase the partial pressure of the precursor relative to the Ar/H<sub>2</sub> background pressure. In this HM flow growth scenario, the increased flux of H<sub>2</sub>, monomeric aminoborane, and other volatile compounds will drive a thicker, nanocrystalline h-BN morphology, circumventing the catalytic activity of the Cu substrate at high temperature.

## ■ CONCLUSION

The growth of large-area h-BN on Cu by CVD depends critically on the background Ar/H<sub>2</sub> pressure ( $P_{\text{TOT}}$ ). Uniform, planar thin h-BN grows under LPCVD conditions ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 2$  Torr), whereas medium pressure ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 200$  Torr) and APCVD growth conditions ( $P_{\text{TOT}} = 760$  Torr) afford thicker films with a mixture of h-BN and partially decomposed, sp<sup>3</sup> like H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub> species. Under medium pressure and APCVD conditions, the faster growth rate leads to rougher, less crystalline films. Under APCVD conditions, amorphous, polymeric features form, which we attribute to incomplete thermolysis of the H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub> precursor due to passivation of the Cu catalyst. Moreover, growth under HM conditions shows that the growth rate depends critically on the H<sub>2</sub> to H<sub>3</sub>N–BH<sub>3</sub> flux ratio, even under LPCVD growth conditions. Our LPCVD growths produce h-BN thin films comparable in electronic and optical quality to those recently observed for h-BN grown on sapphire.<sup>87</sup> By contrast, our APCVD growths are similar in variability to those reported in the literature.<sup>21,44</sup> To grow high-performance h-BN nanomaterials demands a clear understanding of h-BN CVD growth mechanisms. As a result, h-BN growth protocols will better control layer number, chemical heterogeneity, and crystallinity, enabling the fabrication of large area, electronic and encapsulatory h-BN heterostructures.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### S Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: [10.1021/acs.chemmater.6b00396](https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.chemmater.6b00396).

Additional discussion of the high mass flow (HM) growth conditions, an image of the furnace setup, characterization of the h-BN films including AFM contours of the film step heights, a table summarizing the RMS roughness data for the AFM images, further XPS data and details of the peak fits for the different growth pressures, Raman histograms of the E<sub>2g</sub> peak position for different growth pressures, and a comparison of the Raman data from LPCVD grown h-BN films with

normal precursor flux and under HM growth conditions  
([PDF](#))

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### Notes

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