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Agency, Identity, and Writing: Perspectives from First-Generation Students of Color in Their First Year of College

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This paper highlights the perspectives of first-generation students of color in their first year of college, and the ways in which they exercised agency in their writing. Framed by definitions of agency as mediated action that creates meaning, the paper reports on qualitative data collected from a summer writing program for first-generation students and students of color, and from writing samples and follow-up interviews with six students who participated in the summer program. Findings suggest that students in their first year of college leveraged their social and discoursal identities to offer new ways of understanding an issue. They also wrote using a translingual approach, integrating different discourses and forms of knowledge, and challenging views of academic writing as monolithic. The findings also suggest the link between awareness and action, meaning that what and how students wrote were informed by their awareness of writing and awareness of themselves as writers and cultural beings. The study's findings have implications for advancing more nuanced views of agency and academic literacies, and redesigning writing instruction at the high school and college level.

Secondary and university educators have voiced concerns about students entering college with little practice in advanced academic writing (Addison & McGee, 2010; Fox, 2015; Jeffery & Wilcox, 2014). Students can struggle with constructing knowledge claims (Wilcox et al., 2015), taking a stance vis-à-vis sources (Soliday, 2011), or seeing themselves as people with knowledge and authority (Ivanič, 1998). Notwithstanding the heightened focus on the writing abilities of college-going students, I take a different approach in this paper. I highlight the perspectives on writing from first-generation[1] students of color in their first year of college, and the ways in which they expressed agency as relative newcomers to higher education. I theorize agency later in the paper, but for now I posit that student writers "carve out a semi-independent domain of practice within the constraints placed on them by those in power" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 119) and are "productive agents already" (Cooper, 2011, p. 443).

The concept of agency in writing needs to be made more central, especially in studies that involve students who hold marginalized identities and are seen as "struggling" writers. I explore two questions in this paper: How do first-generation students of color in their first year of college express agency as writers?; What

activates or enables their actions as writers? Framing these questions are some principles about writing and writers. First, writing is not just a set of skills and conventions, but a practice with social and ideological dimensions, which shape the content and discourses of the written text (Lea & Street, 2006). Second, first-generation students of color are resourceful and intentional. While often coming from high schools that emphasized formulaic approaches to writing (e.g., five-paragraph essays), they bring insightful questions and ideas about writing, and make writing assignments meaningful to them.

I also want to make a note about labels. I refer to study participants as first-generation students of color, while recognizing their differences in race, gender, social class, nationality, sexuality, and religion. Although labels rhetorically construct student identities and elide intergroup heterogeneity (Spack, 1997), I use *first-generation students of color* as a way to name the social identities that were important to the study participants. The label also signals that first-generation students of color as a *group* face challenges in private, predominantly white schools—challenges rooted in racism and economic inequality (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Wallace & Bell, 1999). I describe the university setting of my study as a predominantly white institution or PWI[2]. Again, I do so while recognizing that PWIs differ in their orientations and approaches to writing instruction and to supporting students from historically underrepresented groups. In keeping with the tradition of qualitative inquiry, I aim to illustrate how a small but diverse group of first-year students enacted agency in their writing, with the hope that the research findings resonate with readers who research and teach writing in private, predominantly white institutions like mine.

First-generation students of color in their first year of college constitute an important group to highlight. Because they have recently completed high school and just entered college—a transition that introduces new frameworks and expectations for writing and places them in "liminal spaces" (Williams, 2017) or "thresholds" (Sommers & Saltz, 2004)—a focus on this group can be theoretically and practically useful. Theoretically, research on diverse first-year students can complicate deficit conceptions of "basic" writers (see Fox, 1990; Hull & Rose, 1990; Hull et al., 1991) and highlight the knowledge and discourses that already make up their repertoire. Inhabiting liminal spaces, first-year students often deploy a dual frame of reference, comparing experiences and opportunities in college to those in high school, and grapple with tacit or assumed writing conventions, practices, and belief. That makes this research practically useful for high-school and college writing teachers.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Writing

Instead of a set of skills, I conceptualize writing as a social and discursive practice, tied to culture and power. In this paper, I simultaneously draw upon and interrogate the academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 2006). The academic literacies model rejects the "study skills" approach to writing instruction, which prioritizes

teaching technical skills, language structures, and conventions as transferable across contexts and separated from intention and meaning. The academic literacies model also problematizes the "academic socialization" or "initiation" model (Fox, 1990), which recognizes the centrality of disciplinary contexts in shaping writing practices, conventions, and genres, and defines the basic writer as a newcomer to academic discourses. Proposing the academic literacies framework, Lea and Street (2006) emphasized the role of power and ideology in writing practices. The value and significance of writing practices are not a given, but constructed by dominant interests. While they overlap, the distinction between the two models—academic literacies and academic socialization—can be illustrated with an example of citation formats. While the academic socialization model might guide students to understand the differences between American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA) styles, the academic literacies framework would address not only how the politics of knowledge generation and epistemologies shape citation formats, but also the heterogeneity and evolution of citation formats.

The academic literacies framework challenges several prevalent myths about writing, including writing development as a straightforward, linear process, and the generalist notion of literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In contrast to generalist notions, the framework sees writing as multiple—the multiple ways of writing that are situated in and informed by nested sociopolitical contexts, including the class setting (e.g., English 101), the academic department, the university, and even higher education in the United States. It also challenges the idea that writing struggles reflect a deficit in the writer. Lastly, the model problematizes the view of the academy as a stable entity into which students can be unproblematically initiated or socialized (Jones et al., 1999).

Emphasizing power, ideology, and the sociopolitical contexts of writing, the academic literacies framework has advanced research and pedagogy in basic writing. However, this framework carries several assumptions that are limiting. First, it assumes the separation between a student's home or community-based discourse and academic discourse. While minoritized students' home or community-based "ways with words" differ from and even conflict with school discourses (Heath, 1983), discourses intersect or overlap in complex ways (Fox, 1990; Horner et al., 2011; Zamel, 1997). Second, while acknowledging the physical, social, and cultural contexts of writing, the academic literacies framework aims to codify discipline-specific discourses and intellectual practices. Such efforts often obscure the fractures, instability, and heterogeneity within a discipline (Zamel, 1997). Finally, the academic literacies framework aims to apprentice students to the practices of an academic community. But the aims of literacy education should be analyzing and critiquing the multiple discourses that students *already* use, which include academic discourses, as well as adopting and creating new ones (Harris, 1989).

The concept of discourse has been central to theories of writing and models of writing pedagogy. Discourses are ways of using language, generating knowledge, understanding the world, and positioning oneself (Gee, 2001; Ivanič, 1998). Discourses are inherently ideological in that they put forward a set of interpretive

frameworks and worldviews. Given that discourses are specific to social groups, Gee also likens them to an identity kit. If writing involves not just words, punctuation, and grammar, but also discourses, then writing becomes an act of *identity* (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). Writing involves different identities, including (1) the socially available identities that exist beyond the writer and act of writing; (2) the autobiographical and cultural self that the writer brings to the text; (3) the discoursal self or the representation of the self in the written work; (4) the authorial self, or the degree to which a writer conveys authority; and (5) the writer who is perceived by the readers (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). These identities can exist in tension. For instance, the autobiographical or cultural self can impinge on the authorial self.

Writers not only draw on but construct identities. What students "write or argue . . . makes them who they are" (Cooper, 2011, p. 443). Because writers think about who they are and who they want to be in the text (and how they want to be perceived by readers), all writing is deeply personal. This is the case even with writing that bears few "textual traces of the person" (Kamler, 2001, p. 83). The personal, however, should not be conflated with the individualistic or solitary. Instead, the personal recognizes that who we are (and by extension, how we write) is shaped by "what we have heard from other voices" (Wong, 2006, p. 199). The words that we use are borrowed from and inspired by others from our multiple, intersecting discourse communities. All writing is dialogic and intertextual (Bakhtin, 1981). This challenges the view of discourses as stable, internally uniform, and distinct from each other, and highlights writing as the *negotiation* of overlapping and conflicting discourses (Canagarajah, 2002; Fox, 1990).

In summary, writing is a practice shaped by contexts and power dynamics. Writers are not just putting words on paper. Instead, they are negotiating and constructing identities. This makes writing personal, as it is a (re)presentation of the writer's positioning within multiple, sometimes intersecting discourses. If we view writing as a "constant, dynamic process of negotiation of self-position" (Cho, 2014, p. 680), then the concept of agency becomes central.

Framing Agency

I draw on several definitions of agency. The first is agency as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). While inclusive, this definition emphasizes that agency is not the same as free will. Our actions are always mediated by, and situated in, sociocultural contexts. The second definition is agency as the "process through which organisms create meaning through acting into the world" (Cooper, 2011, p. 426). Cooper's definition calls out agency as a process, not a capacity or possession. However, like the first definition, it emphasizes action, which creates meaning. The third definition also sees agency as a process—a process by which individuals "gain greater awareness and control of the opportunities for action available to them" (Shapiro et al., 2016, p. 31). In all three definitions, agency is, or leads to, action. Actions are enabled or constrained by the "social, political, and cultural dynamics of a specific place and time" (Desjarlais, 1997, p. 204), as well as by the actor's membership in socially and historically defined groups. Throughout

the paper, I adopt this more critical view of agency, challenging the writer as an autonomous "I" who is making choices freely (Flannery, 1991).

There is some debate about whether an action has to be impactful or even recognized for it to be agentive. I posit that all actions have an impact, even if it is not visible to the writer or audience (Cooper, 2011). While student writers' actions may not "cause anything to happen, their rhetorical actions, even if they are embedded in the confines of a college class, always have effects: they perturb anyone who reads or hears their words" (Cooper, 2011, p. 443). This perturbation activates and becomes part of the complex system of a reader's mind, or their network of ideas, thoughts, and memories. Also, a writer's actions may fail to bring about the desired effect or be misunderstood by readers—a common issue in university settings for student writers (Jones et al., 1999). There is also debate about whether agency requires people to be aware of their actions (Ahearn, 2001), and relatedly, how perceptions shape action (Williams, 2017). A precursor to action is *noticing* that an "action needs to be taken and [having] awareness of the available actions" (Shapiro et al., 2016, p. 33). In other words, agency requires and stems from awareness.

The focus on agency highlights the writer's awareness and actions, not their deficits (see Hull et al., 1991). Hence it is a generative concept for understanding how first-generation students of color approach writing in college and what informs their approach. Williams (2017) more recently argued that issues of agency, often unaddressed, are the most crucial for minoritized students. Yet agency as a concept still remains abstract (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The abstractness has not helped practitioners and researchers in understanding what constitutes "agentive actions" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 173) and how awareness and identity enable student writers. That is a gap I hope to address in this paper.

Literature Review

While some scholars explicitly refer to agency (Geisler, 2004), others refer to empowerment (Crosby, 2010), ownership (Gorzelsky, 2009), or creativity and experimentation (Hamilton & Pitt, 2009; Leonard, 2014). This suggests the multiplicity of ways in which agency shows up in student writing. Despite variation in the performance and encoding of agency (Duranti, 2004), the literature offers several points about how agentive writers perceive and approach writing. Agentive writers feel positively about writing (i.e., investment or enjoyment in writing) and see writing as an opportunity to "transform knowledge" (Jeffery & Wilcox, 2014, p. 1096). From a longitudinal study of college writers, Sommers and Saltz (2004) found that students who developed as writers "see in writing a larger purpose than fulfilling their assignment" (p. 124) and use writing assignments to address issues that matter to them. Based on this finding, the literature also makes recommendations for pedagogical activities that shift student writers' paradigms about writing and learning (Sternglass, 2017).

In addition to affective and epistemic stances (i.e., stances toward knowledge and its relationship to writing), agentive writers assume a stance of criticality toward

academic discourses (Canagarajah, 2002), treating writing as a meaning-making and problem-solving resource, and academic discourse as contested and fluid. To put it differently, student writers do not treat the autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves as mutually exclusive, but instead *negotiate* cultural and discursive differences (Canagarajah, 2002; Fox, 1990).

Agentive writers also deploy a set of strategies. Leki (1995) identified strategies that enabled students to respond to writing tasks (in this case, graduate students who were learning English as their second language). The strategies included clarifying strategies (e.g., talking to the professor to understand the assignment), drawing on past experiences and knowledge, and looking for models (e.g., consulting research articles for examples of format and language). Leki also noted resistance as a strategy, with students completing the task from their interests – i.e., adapting the assignment so that it serves their goals or aligns with their questions. In an ESOL classroom (English to Speakers of Other Languages), Canagarajah (2002) categorized students' writing strategies as *accommodation, avoidance, opposition, transposition,* and *appropriation*; transposition is the "merger of competing discourses" (p. 116), while appropriation involves transforming language in ways that serve the writer's agenda and challenge dominant ideologies. Similar to the concept of transposition, Lillis (2003) described student writers who took a dialogic approach to writing by "bringing together two discourses which the academy considers as incompatible" (p. 204). Deploying these strategies, students from nondominant backgrounds have questioned, negotiated, and reinscribed dominant discursive forms.

More recently, writing scholars have advanced a translingual paradigm (Horner et al., 2011), which emphasizes "what writers are doing with language and why" (p. 305) and the "variety, fluidity, intermingling, and changeability of languages" (p. 305). The translingual approach complicates the codification and binary construction of discourses—for example, the separation between "academic" and "vernacular/home" discourses. Analyzing a paper by a student in a basic writing program, Fox (1990) suggested that conflicts *and* continuities in discourses shape student writers. In an ethnographic study of immigrant students in their first year of college, Crosby (2010) noted that their academic writing was a blend of many discourses. Similarly, Shapiro and colleagues (2016) found that students of color in college approached writing assignments by centering their lived experiences and blurring the distinction between the academic and the personal/cultural. More often than not, students made informed decisions about what and how to write, while considering audience and desired impact. While the study skills and academic socialization approaches might suggest otherwise, the backgrounds and discourses of minoritized students do not always work against school writing.

Context

This paper is informed by my work as an instructor of a summer writing course for incoming first-year college students at a small liberal arts university in the Northeast. In fall 2020, the university's student body comprised 2,242 undergraduates,

with 25% identifying as domestic students of color and 19% as first-generation. The writing course runs for 3 weeks as part of a "bridge" or preorientation program for up to 26 students of color and/or first-generation students. While many identify as both (students of color who are the first in their families to attend college), a few of them are white. Students apply to the program, and while acceptance rates vary each year, it is understood by students to be a selective program. Participation in the program is not required to attend the university. As part of the application process, students state their intended major. This determines whether they are placed in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) or humanities/social sciences cohort. Both cohorts take two half-credit courses in college writing and college math. The discipline-based cohort model, according to the program administrator, challenges a one-size-fits-all approach to college transition programs. The STEM cohort engages with a math curriculum for calculus-based physics. In the writing course, while both cohorts share readings and activities, they engage with different texts and issues, depending on their intended majors.

I am a faculty member in the education department at the university. I teach courses in youth language and literacies, and teacher education. I am an Asian woman, 1.5 generation immigrant, first-generation college student, and former high school English and literacy teacher. As a high school teacher, I began interrogating deficit assumptions about myself and youth who struggle with school-based writing, and worked to develop teaching practices that foster students' "incipient excellence" (Rose, cited in Hull et al. 1991, p. 317). Over time, I have participated in organizations like the National Writing Project and the Institute for Writing and Thinking. In designing and teaching the summer writing course, I bring not only my social identities and professional experiences, but also my scholarly interests in the literacy and language practices of immigrant youth (Park, 2016, 2018).

I have taught the writing course since 2016. Every year I have taught the course, I have documented my teaching practice and the students' learning as a form of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). The course, Inquiry into Academic Writing: Identity, Power, and Agency, focuses on the following questions:

- What makes academic writing "academic"?
- What is the relationship between reading and writing academic texts?
- What are some differences in writing across academic disciplines? What accounts for those differences? How are those differences meaningful or important?
- Who is my audience? What role does audience play in how I write?
- What are some of my resources—social, cultural, academic—that I bring to the university?

Built into the course are other forms of support, including two undergraduate teaching assistants. Framed by theories of critical academic literacies, the course foregrounds issues of power, identity, and epistemology. Instead of telling students how to write, I structure classroom activities and assignments where students wrestle

with their assumptions about school-based writing. For example, drawing on their experiences of writing lab reports in high school, students said they wrote using the passive voice. I asked why this might be a convention in a lab report, what beliefs about knowledge this convention reflects and upholds, and whether we agreed with this convention. Discussing with peers and analyzing texts that use active or passive voice, students realized that lab reports emphasize the processes, not the individuals performing the experiment. While accepting this, some students took a more critical stance, noting that the individual scientist (or team of scientists) matters and that scientific inquiries are shaped by the identities of the researcher(s).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

I report on data collected from the 2019 summer course, and qualitative interviews conducted with a smaller subset of students in the 2019–2020 academic year. Prior to data collection, I obtained approval from the university's institutional review board for all components of the study. In August 2019, I taught two sections of the writing course. In the first section, I taught 15 students in the social sciences / humanities cohort. In the second section, I taught 10 students in the STEM cohort. For 3 weeks, the class met 4 days a week for 90 minutes. In practitioner inquiry, teachers-as-researchers begin by asking questions about what is going on in their classrooms. During class, I wrote down student comments, especially their questions and insights, such as: "Is it OK to use the first person 'I'?" or "I realized how chaotic my writing process can be." I also wrote down my responses. After class, I journaled about my teaching, focusing on puzzling moments and students (Ballenger, 2009). I also collected students' written work, ranging from their longer pieces that integrated course readings and independent research, to their in-class quick-writes and course reflections.

A major data source for this paper is interviews and writing samples from a subset of the students. From December 2019 to January 2020, I conducted follow-up interviews with 6 students from the course. I invited all 25 students from the course and 6 accepted. The semi-structured interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour. I also collected writing samples from the 6 students for major assignments in the fall semester. Except for one (Brian), all students spoke at least two languages. Of the 6 students, 3 identified as male and 3 as female. Here are portraits of each student. All students' names are pseudonyms.

> Salvador identified as Chicano, and was born and raised on the West Coast. He described the challenges of attending a PWI: "This is a predominantly white institution and most of the Latinx community is not Mexican. So, I'm learning what that means." In his first semester, he enrolled in introductory biology and chemistry (from which he eventually withdrew). Planning to minor in Latin American and Latinx studies, he also took courses in Latin American politics and pre-colonial Africa. In high school, he had been an honors student on the International Baccalaureate track.

Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Sharon came to the United States at the age of 4. In the US, she grew up in two different socioeconomic sides of the same city: "I know how to communicate with both sides. . . . I guess you can say switching face when you're in the rich side. But when you're in this community [the poor side], you know how to act like them." She credited this upbringing for instilling an interest in languages, discourses, and cultures. She had learned Mandarin in middle school, and she spoke Mandarin proficiently, connecting with Chinese international students on campus. Sharon was a premed student, but was unsure whether to pursue a major in computer science or Asian studies. In the fall, Sharon enrolled in introductory economics, chemistry, computer science, and first-year writing.

Samuel was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but lived in South Africa for 12 years before coming to the United States. In Cape Town, Samuel had attended an all-white primary school on a full scholarship. In the US, he attended an urban high school, close to the college. He was a premed student. In the first semester, he took first-year writing, statistics for psychology, and introductory biology. He withdrew from introductory chemistry in the middle of the semester.

Brian identified as biracial, with a white mother and Sri Lankan father. Although Brian planned to major in psychology, he described himself as an "English person": "I feel like writing is something that I'm really into. I'm good with it." In the first semester, Brian took introductory courses in biology, economic geography, and psychology. He had enrolled in introductory economics but withdrew from the class.

Christy was born in the United States to Vietnamese parents. Like Samuel, she was a "neighborhood kid," meaning that she grew up close to the college. Christy said writing was challenging: "I never found myself as a like a great writer." She wanted to apply to art schools as a transfer student. In her first semester, she took courses in anthropology, computer science, business management, and art history. Taking classes in different disciplines, she realized that "writing for art history is very different than writing for managerial communications."

Michelle described growing up in a "Caribbean household in a Latinx community." She had attended a large high school in a city approximately 30 miles away from the university. Early on in the semester, Michelle decided to major in English, explaining that the professors in the English department were helpful in focusing her interests. In the fall, she took a political science class on international human rights, as well as classes on major American writers, American race and ethnicity, and philosophy.

I audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed the recordings in their entirety. Transcribing was an important first step in my data analysis process. While I transcribed, I "heard" the words of the participants with more clarity and noticed patterns and connections, not only between study participants, but among the data, my theoretical frameworks, and the literature.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process was ongoing and iterative. First, I inductively analyzed my notes from the summer course and follow-up interviews. I read the data until I had a general understanding of them. After that, I created codes and grouped the codes into categories. I made connections between the categories to construct themes. Once I had themes, I reexamined the data to further refine, develop, and validate the relationships between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To validate the categories and themes, and triangulate the data sources, I utilized student writing from the summer course and fall semester.

To give a detailed description of the process I outlined above: I coded my class notes from the summer program and follow-up interview data. I generated codes pertaining to writing in high school, such as: *writing experiences* (e.g., group projects, staying up late, etc.); *assignments* (e.g., lab reports); *rules or conventions*; *teaching styles* (e.g., strict, fun); and *references to classes* (e.g., Advanced Placement English). I grouped these codes and created the category of *high school writing*. There were also codes in the category of *college writing*: *professor's expectations*; *APA style*; *genre*; *thesis*; *critical thinking*; *style and tone* (e.g., objective, professional, academic). In the category of *college writing*, I noticed in the data from the summer course that students presented more questions about college writing than declarative statements. This made sense since students in the summer program were new to college. Their questions addressed topics ranging from definitions (e.g., "What do you mean by a synthesis?") to power asymmetries (e.g., "If I have my own idea that's interesting to me but not the professor, can I still use it?"). In the follow-up interview data, however, I detected a shift, with students offering more observations about college writing. Their noticings emphasized critical thinking, analysis, and research in college writing, and contrasted college writing from high school writing. From this I inferred that after a semester, students were forming ideas and developing awareness about college writing. A third category contained students' statements about themselves. Students made statements about who they were, how they wanted to be understood by readers, and what they brought (or struggled to bring) to writing. Utilizing the typology of identities in writing (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010), I coded statements—both oral and written—about the discoursal and authorial self, such as "I enjoy making the reader feel what I am feeling" (comment from student writing from the summer course) and "I bring up these scientific words and scientific activities that I specifically know about" (comment from follow-up interview). In addition to statements about the self as writer, I coded for statements about students' autobiographical selves or social identities, like being a first-generation student or Latinx.

The three categories—*high school writing, college writing,* and *identities*—constitute the theme that I am calling *awareness*: awareness of the differences between high school and college writing; awareness of resources for constructing meaning; and students' awareness of their identities as writers and cultural beings. Like the research literature's emphasis on noticing (Shapiro et al., 2016) and metacognitive

awareness (Sternglass, 2017), this theme suggests that student writers are aware of the differences between college and high school writing, and between their auto-biographical and discoursal identities. This theme also suggests that awareness enables student agency in writing.

From the follow-up interviews and writing samples from students' fall semester courses, I constructed the second theme, which deals more centrally with student expressions or "performance" of agency (Duranti, 2004). From the interviews, I constructed the categories of (1) *topics or issues addressed in writing assignments*; (2) *process or steps for completing a writing assignment*; (3) *strategies and resources utilized in writing the paper* (e.g., office hours, the university's writing center); and (4) *challenges associated with writing*. Since the interview data captured only what students reported doing (and not what students actually did), I also examined the students' writing from the fall semester to triangulate the interview data. Written work from the fall semester provided evidence of what students did to make the as-signment meaningful and relevant, and how they "carve[d] out a semi-independent domain of practice" (Ahearn, 2001).

These two themes (awareness and performance of agency) are connected. That is, what and how students wrote (or how they expressed agency as writers) was enabled by their awareness of college writing and their autobiographical and discoursal selves.

Findings

To explicate the two themes and their connection, I first highlight students' aware-ness of college writing (as different from high school writing) and their multiple selves. Then I identify three ways that students enacted agency in their writing, and suggest the ways in which awareness enables agency.

Awareness of Writing and the Self

Awareness is needed for action. Therefore, awareness itself is an asset (Cooper, 2011). Most students in the summer writing course and the six students I inter-viewed expressed that writing in college differed from writing in high school. This informed how they approached writing in college. Salvador said writing in college means "having an idea of what you want to do, getting some resources, . . . some opinions on it, and seeing how they bounce off any ideas from your own mind." He emphasized that writing begins with the writer's idea, not other people's ideas. Because these were first-year students, their awareness of college writing was of-ten understood in terms of high school writing. Michelle noted in her interview:

> For Major American Writers (English class), I did my first research paper which was really stressful at the time because I never did a research paper before. But I really liked it too because you could pick your own prompt, in a sense. In high school they would give you a prompt, but this time I could find a topic which I am interested in and I could just go from there, and it was really exciting.

Like Salvador, Michelle characterized college writing as starting with one's ideas, whereas high school writing was about writing what the teacher wanted. This awareness of college writing enabled Michelle to pursue topics and areas of inquiry that interested her.

The six interviewed students reported that in college writing, they were expected to take a position or put forward an argument and to think with multiple sources. For instance, Sharon learned that college writing is a process by which the writer puts into conversation multiple ideas. In a paper about Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, the expository writing professor provided this feedback: "You only put yourself in conversation with one scholarly source." Writing in college was less about impressionistic responses or a reformulation of the professor's ideas. Furthermore, writing in college served different functions, including building on a body of knowledge and introducing marginalized perspectives. In deciding what to write, Sharon, Salvador, and Michelle asked themselves about perspectives that were missing or perspectives with which they disagreed. They were coming to understand writing as ideological, not just descriptive. Lastly, the students developed a different connection between writing and knowledge. Instead of seeing writing as a way to demonstrate knowledge in a neat and tidy manner, Samuel described writing as engendering a process of inquiry—writing as "questioning."

Sharon was becoming aware of, and questioning, the boundaries of academic writing. She stated, "There's different types of writing and it's considered academic writing. It's published work. And these writers are not bad. They're not making mistakes." Similarly, Brian noted that what helped him write in college was knowing that he was able to "challenge the norm [five-paragraph essay] and challenge the expectations you were taught." However, students also acknowledged the importance of understanding the parameters of the assignment. Students, therefore, took seriously the need to understand the class and assignment-specific expectations. According to Brian, this was the first step of his writing process. But awareness was not just about recognizing the professor's expectations and disciplinary conventions. It was understanding *why* certain expectations and conventions existed in the first place, what they afforded the writer, and how they reflected certain interests or values. In evaluations of the summer course, many students noted that discussions of epistemology, identity, and power were more useful in helping them understand writing in college than lessons on APA citation or grammar. This data point suggests students were developing an awareness of writing as a practice, with personal (identity-based), social, and ideological dimensions which shape what and how one writes. With this awareness, grammar or APA guidelines did not become a rule for students to follow, but a *resource* for communicating their meaning. In a different example, during the fall, Michelle developed her awareness about counterarguments. In college, she not only included counterarguments, but explicitly named their sources:

> I would be like [in high school], "Some people think that, blah, blah, blah." But [the professor] taught me that I should research the scholars that do say my counterargument or would argue against me. I am supposed to say their names in my paper.

Through discussions with her professor, Michelle came to see why a writer might include a counterargument and what it would signal to the reader—namely that the writer was offering just one of several different perspectives on a topic. Michelle was learning that citing specific scholars/researchers gave her ideas more credibility, which in turn gave her more authority.

In addition to their growing awareness of writing in college, students expressed observations about themselves as writers, tied to their social identities. Sharon described herself as a writer addressing a "majority white" audience. Students also discussed the relationship between their autobiographical self and their writerly/discoursal self. Salvador noted that as a writer he was "true" to his autobiographical self. Describing a scholarship essay that he was writing, he noted, "One of my finishing sentences I put, 'I am not a pushover Latino that does yardwork. I am more than that.'" His autobiographical and discoursal self challenged dominant stereotypes surrounding Latino men in a PWI. That is, he was negotiating his autobiographical and discoursal selves with the socially available identities associated with poor Latino men. Samuel described his discoursal identity as a hybrid of different knowledges and voices—a point that I illustrate later in the paper.

Students were also coming to an awareness of their new identity as first-generation college students. This identity was not something that had been ascribed to them in high school. This awareness either motivated or hindered students' drive to take action in their writing. Below is a note that Michelle had written to her professor after receiving a disappointing grade:

> I just received my [assignment] grade, and I am very worried and confused. I have never talked to a professor about a grade I don't think I deserve in college, so please bear with me. I am a first-generation student so I don't know if this is possible or not, but is there any way I can get that grade to at least a 75% or do extra credit work?

Michelle claimed her identity as a "first-generation student" in a strategic manner. She noted that the professor, after receiving this email, scheduled a meeting where they discussed how she understood the assignment and what she could do when rewriting the paper.

The relationship between the autobiographical and discoursal/writerly self was central to agency. Students who saw their autobiographical self as irrelevant to or hindering their discoursal/writerly self were more likely to approach writing as task completion. This was the case for Christy, who consistently said that her writing was "simple." She believed that her social identity and language background negatively influenced her discoursal identity.

> I did not know any English and yeah, I had to kind of learn English myself through school. So that's why I never found myself as like a great writer. I never liked reading what I wrote. I never thought it was good. I think a lot of my writing is simple.

But students who saw their autobiographical and discoursal identities as aligned were more likely to engage in agentive actions as writers, which I describe in the next section.

Agentive Actions

Connected to the first theme of *awareness,* students acted on their awareness of college writing and awareness of themselves. They expressed agency by making writing personal, taking unexpected or controversial positions, and blending discourses. While presented separately here, the three actions were integrated throughout students' writing.

Making It Personal

The students exercised agency by making their writing personal. By *personal,* I mean that what and how students wrote were informed by their subjectivities and backgrounds. I also mean that students wrote for themselves as well as their professors. Instead of seeing the paper as a task to complete, students used the assignment to make sense of their experiences, solidify an aspect of their identity, or engage with the public and political rhetoric involving their country of origin. Salvador described how he approached an assignment:

> [For the course on Latin American politics], we're supposed to write an 8–10-page paper on Latin America, on a topic of our choosing. I focused on Mexico and used intersectionality to understand . . . *machismo.* It's this idea of how men are supposed to be and *marianismo*, how women are supposed to be. And I'm seeing that, like, "Yo, what the heck. Stop. If I wanna to cry, I wanna cry." . . . I know one of my friends from back home, her mom was a little bit frustrated with her because she wanted to go to college. I asked her. "What do you think about that?"

Salvador explored gender norms and ideologies in Mexico, using the assignment to understand his and his friend's experiences and struggles with the cultural models of machismo and marianismo. Salvador also exercised agency by blending his own discourse, experiences, and worldviews with academic concepts like *intersectionality*. By inserting his autobiographical and cultural self in college writing, he blended the personal and cultural with the academic.

Even a paper that contains few visible traces of the person or personal can be informed by the writer's experiences and identities. For the paper on *The Stranger*, Sharon wrote: "Meursault sees through the societal constructs imposed as normal. He is an outsider for rejecting the lie men have made for themselves." In the text, she retained a neutral "academic" distance through a focus on Meursault and the literary text. However, the perspective from which she wrote was informed by her own experiences as an outsider. In her interview, she referred to herself multiple times as an "outcast." Describing her experiences of growing up in a Black American neighborhood as a Haitian immigrant, she said, "I did not know how to speak like they spoke. I was the outcast. I was already not considered one of them, or not Black because of the way I spoke."

Taking a Controversial Position

Sharon made her writing personal by focusing on her home country. She also assumed an unpopular and unexpected position. In her interview, she described

writing a paper for an economics course. The assignment asked students to analyze a country's economic system, focusing on its strengths and areas of vulnerability.

> I wrote my piece on Haiti. . . . I had brought up Donald Trump's comments toward Haiti and African Caribbean countries being "poop holes," as he had said, and I addressed that in my paper. Surprisingly I did not go against what he said. I was actually talking about the economy and what I thought was wrong with the economy, and why people would see Haiti as a poop hole place.

Although the assignment did not require students to analyze the causes of the country's economic issues, Sharon named the education system, political corruption, and history of colonialism. She identified inflation, poverty, and emigration of highly educated Haitians as symptoms of the country's economic issues, differentiating root causes from symptoms.

Below are excerpts from the paper that Sharon wrote:

> Paragraph 1: *It's funny to think that a rich privileged white male has any business speaking on minority countries. It's even funnier to think that he actually referred to them as "shit-holes." But the butt of the joke is that I as a foreign black woman could not have said it any better myself.*

> Paragraph 2: *In the midst of watching immigrants curse the president of the country of their refuge, I thought of my birthplace, Haiti. With high inflation rates, corrupt government, and severe poverty, Haiti was not the best smelling of feces.*

> Paragraph 3: *In the same city where children eat dirt cookies to survive, tourists build sandcastles on beaches for amusement. As families struggle to find their next meal; feasts are preserved for the Joneses. It is an irony of the ages where visitors could better afford to live than citizens. But these are not the concerns that the brave, defensive, and American born citizens think about. Their only focus is the orange looking white man who dared to bring to light the economic sufferings of poor countries.*

> Paragraph 7: *But for the true immigrants involved, let's give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. National pride is necessary when you enter a foreign land and are forced to speak an unrecognizable language. It is what helps us foreigners aim to succeed in a country that is not our own. But it does not cover up for the reasons we chose to immigrate in the first place; here gives us better chances than over there. If we have such national pride, why not take those American diplomas and college degrees to rebuild our fallen immigrant nations. Get some MiraLAX for your bowels and toilet paper, it's time we wipe up the mess of our broken homes.*

Sharon drew on her autobiographical self, describing herself as a "foreign black woman" and using "we"/"us" when referring to immigrants. She also took a controversial position by agreeing with Donald Trump's assessment of Haiti. In her interview, Sharon said that her professor and peers were surprised that she agreed

with Trump's assessment. In addition to taking a controversial position, Sharon exercised agency by challenging the boundaries of academic discourse. While following the expectations set forth by the assignment, using terms like *inflation* and analyzing the role of Venezuela in Haiti's economy (paragraph 5), she incorporated multiple references to feces: "*Haiti is not the best smelling of feces*" (paragraph 2) and "*Get some MiraLAX for your bowels and toilet paper*" (paragraph 7). She educated the reader (i.e., professor) about the hypocrisy of "American born citizens" and sandcastle-building tourists who would rather criticize Trump than recognize poverty in Haiti and their own complicity in it. But she also addressed a different reader—the "true immigrant" (paragraph 7).

Michelle also exercised agency by putting forward a different perspective on Phillis Wheatley in her English essay. She argued that the "European aspects" in Wheatley's poetry reflected the power of white culture, and disagreed with scholars who used Wheatley's poetry to conclude that Wheatley "despised" her African heritage and identity. She said in her interview:

> My first research paper, it was on Phillis Wheatley and I really wanted to write about her because her poems really connected with me. I was trying to convey that Phillis Wheatley was an African American poet that was proud of her roots because a lot of researchers and scholars, they believe that she isn't proud of her roots because she assimilated into American culture. . . . I supported my argument by saying that, although she uses different type of words that are negative towards African people, she's trying to show people, this is what white people think of African people, not what she thinks about African people.

Michelle characterized writing in college as developing one's own ideas. Informed by this awareness, she put forward *her* idea, not the idea of her professor or literary scholars. She argued that Wheatley's poetry was subversive in that it exposed what white people thought of Black people. Michelle also wrestled with an epistemological question in literary studies: What is the role of a Black writer writing in white America? Michelle's premise—that we cannot judge a writer of color solely on the basis of their discourse—was informed by her own subjectivity. In her interview, she cited her own upbringing. Even though she learned at an early age to speak "school English" and not Portuguese at home, she was not embarrassed of her heritage.

Multivocal Approach to Writing
Student writers expressed agency through taking a multivocal or translingual approach. When students adopt a "multivocal" approach, they "[fuse] their native discourses with the conventions valued by the academy" (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 37). Salvador did this when he fused his home discourse with the framework of intersectionality. Samuel also enacted his agency by mixing or fusing discourses. He accomplished this by incorporating more expressive types of writing into writing for STEM classes, and incorporating STEM knowledge and discourses into non-STEM writing assignments. In the interview, he noted,

If we had to write something in a STEM class, because of my love for more creative writing, I take the skills that I know that are good for creative writing and put it in the STEM writing project. Whereas if I'm in writing class, because I have a STEM background, I bring up these scientific words and scientific activities that I specifically know about. So, it's kinda taking the knowledge that I know from both fields and switching them around.

When I asked Samuel to name a skill that he utilized for STEM writing projects, he identified the skill of providing real-life examples and stories to convey a scientific principle, problem, or phenomenon. Below is a paragraph from a paper on glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), a type of cancer, that he wrote for his introductory biology course.

GBM works differently; it is caused by a mutation in the nucleotide. Therefore, it affects the entire nervous system, plus it is inheritable through the genome. GBM spreads rapidly, according to the American Brain Tumor Association, "The median survival for adults with glioblastoma, IDH-wildtype, is approximately 11–15 months (ABTA, 10). According to the National Institute of Health (NIH), "GMB occurs in people with certain genetic syndromes such as neurofibromatosis type 1, Turcot syndrome and Li Fraumeni syndrome" (NIH 1).

In addition to using acronyms for medical terms (*GBM*) and scientific vocabulary (e.g., *nucleotide, genome*), Samuel referenced credible sources, such as the National Institutes of Health and the American Brain Tumor Association. The essay also included images of MRI scans of a person with GBM, with appropriate captions and descriptors for each image (e.g., "Image C shows how multifocal the tumor is; it has no specific location or origin).

Taking a multivocal approach, Samuel then offered narratives of GBM patients, which he found online. Reproduced here is a story he wrote about GBM survivor Vic Zanetti.

It was not until the symptoms started to appear physically, when he noticed that his left finger became numb, that he decided to go to the hospital. Vic Zanetti underwent a single surgery to remove the tumor. Not all of the tumor was removed so he had to go through another step of radiation. The final form of treatment was chemotherapy. Chemotherapy happened to be working well for Vic. The maximum life expectancy of people diagnosed with GBM is 15 months, but Vic Zanetti lived with the tumor for 15 years.

Through the story of a person, Samuel identified different forms of treatment (surgery, radiation, chemotherapy) and the dangers of ignoring early symptoms like headaches. The narrative also suggested chemotherapy as an effective treatment for GBM. In his interview, Samuel said that he focused on GBM because "I love neuroscience, and I also watch a lot of *Grey's Anatomy*, so I listen to a lot of, 'Oh, glioblastomas.'" In other words, Samuel's everyday discourse included scientific discourse, informed by popular culture. Samuel's writing shows the ways in which everyday discourse intersects or overlaps with academic discourses.

Discussion

In this paper, I conceptualized writing in college as shaped by contexts and power dynamics, and involving multiple identities. That is, writing has social and ideological dimensions, which shape the content and topic. The students in the study wrote using a multivocal or translingual approach (Horner et al., 2011), integrating different discourses and forms of knowledge, and challenging views of academic writing as uniform or monolithic. They also reconciled "conflicting rhetorical purposes" (Beaufort, 2004, p. 168), or the conflict between writing for the self and writing for the professor: they wrote *from* and *for* themselves, yet in ways that also conformed to the professor's expectations. While this supports what Fox (1990) and others have already said about intersecting discourses and the heterogeneity within a discourse (Canagarajah, 2002; Horner et al., 2011), it also offers a new perspective through the lens of agency. That is, this paper frames students' work with intersecting discourses as an expression of agency. This framing can support the practice of high school and college faculty. Instead of viewing intersecting discourses as nonacademic or nonstandard, teachers of writing can structure opportunities for students to experiment with multiple discourses in a single paper and interrogate what makes academic writing academic.

Students also recruited their autobiographical selves in creating and presenting a discoursal identity. This complicates the existing literature, which suggests that for first-generation students of color, their autobiographical or socially available identities may inhibit their agency. Scholars have suggested that writing often poses a conflict of identity and discourse for students of color or first-generation students because of their relationship to academic communities of practice (Le Ha, 2009). While study participants reported experiencing stress and anxiety as a result of learning in a predominantly white institution, their identities did not always contribute to writing struggles. Instead, identities enabled student writers to complicate existing perspectives and offer new ways of understanding an issue. They wrote about what they connected with and what they knew—whether that was machismo in Latinx communities, the economic structure of Haiti, or strategies of Black writers. Instead of asking students of color to distance themselves from their writing—through comments like "This is not about *your* opinion," "This is not a personal essay," or "Don't use 'I'"—writing teachers can support students to mobilize the personal in developing content and perspectives, as well as discourses and rhetorical practices.

Finally, the study's findings suggest the link between awareness and action. What and how students wrote were informed not just by their awareness of writing, but also by their awareness of themselves as writers, and as racial and cultural beings in a college setting. This finding builds on research on college students' metacognitive awareness of the relationship between writing and learning (Sternglass, 2017), but posits that awareness is a resource for action (Cooper, 2011; Shapiro et al., 2016). It also suggests the value of classroom activities and interactions that develop students' awareness of self and writing, and self *in* writing.

Conclusion

In this article, I aimed to offer thick descriptions of agentive actions in writing that illustrate the links between agency, identity, and awareness, and suggest awareness as enabling agency. The descriptions also highlight an underexamined area in academic literacies research, specifically the ways in which first-generation students of color construct and write from autobiographical and discoursal positions that are not always dictated by the professor. While theoretically attuned to agency (see Williams, 2017), writing teachers and scholars can benefit from more empirical accounts that contain evidence of agentic actions undertaken by everyday student writers. Thinking with such accounts, teachers and scholars can develop *our* awareness of student writers and the ways in which they deploy their multiple, intersecting identities and discourses to create meaning.

NOTE

1. First-generation students are defined as students whose parents had no more than a high school education (Pascarella et al., 2004).

2. According to the *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, white students account for 50% or more of the student enrollment in PWIs (Lomotey, 2010).

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