Put Your Thing Down, Flip It, and Reverse It
REIMAGINING CRAFT IDENTITIES USING TACTICS OF QUEER THEORY

The phrase “identity crisis” has frequently been used to describe the current state of contemporary craft.¹ This identity crisis came to a head when, as discussed in the introduction to this volume, several prominent educational and cultural institutions dropped the word craft from their formal names, choosing to exist under the banner of art, and in some cases design. These institutions’ actions seemed to demonstrate that the public image of craft is in shambles—the word itself evokes stigmas and stereotypes with which museums and schools do not wish to be affiliated. In her essay “Homespun Ideas: Reinterpreting Craft in Contemporary Culture,” Lydia Matthews writes:

While the categories of art and design are currently stereotyped and packaged as urban, hip, sexy, potentially transgressive, technologically savvy, intellectually astute, and politically progressive, craft is cast as fundamentally down to earth, time-honored, conventional, non-threatening, and conservative by comparison. Craft is comfort food spooned into a brown-glazed earthenware bowl, while art and design are upscale gourmet fare, plated vertically on Italian porcelain and served with all the economic and class connotations and Eurocentric assumptions suggested by that analogy.²

Other stereotypes of craft include objects that result from pursuits considered amateur or hobbyist. When first considering a name change, the institution now named the Museum of
Art and Design hired a “corporate-identity consulting firm” to conduct a survey that asked a focus group its opinion of the word *craft*. One participant stated, “Craft can never shed its macramé pot-holder image no matter what it’s done.” Items such as crocheted teapot cozies, bulky knitted wearables, whittled wooden tchotchkes, and whimsical blown-glass figurines all have a decidedly gendered and amateurish aura. It was possibly with these stereotypes in mind that David Revere McFadden, head curator at the Museum of Art and Design, articulated the stereotype of craft as “the bimbo of the art world.”

The lack of critical theory within the field of craft has contributed to its second-class status in the world of visual and material culture. As of late, many venues—including magazines, journals, and domestic and international conferences—have touted a generation of new-and-progressive critical craft theory as essential for craft to assert itself as a vital and rich part of visual and material culture and simultaneously to challenge the stereotypes that position craft at the bottom of the aesthetic and conceptual food chain. Writing critical craft theory is a formidable task; it must address craft’s relationship to the larger arena of visual and material culture as well as the state of crisis that currently characterizes insular circles specifically dedicated to craft practice. In an essay published in 2007 in the newly revamped *American Craft*, the official magazine of the American Craft Council, the influential artist and critic Bruce Metcalf writes: “Cogent theory (or theories) of craft must emerge from the ideas and attitudes that are peculiar to craft. The theory must make virtues of what are often considered limitations.” If we recognize that we need to invent a body of critical theory that harnesses both the peculiarity and so-called limitations of craft, what kinds of theoretical models might we turn to? Are there other existing theoretical frameworks that might prove instructive in terms of thinking through craft histories and its manifold current practices?

I argue that there is a theoretical terrain that artists and writers working with craft media could learn from to shape our own progressive discourse. In the past two decades, another discipline has predicated itself on virtues considered non-normative, “other,” and peculiar. In the 1990s, queer theory emerged from activist movements, feminist theory, and women’s studies. Often thought of as focusing on issues of gender and sexuality, queer theory has intellectually evolved to include discourses regarding race, socioeconomics, disability, and a host of other areas that factor into the makeup of what we call “identity.” These almost-always
marginalized groups are often expected to possess certain characteristics and, consequently, are saddled with stereotypes that group people together under a common label of identification despite their differences, resulting in muted individuality.

What makes queer theory so useful to those marginalized communities that must confront the pigeonholing stereotypes that overdetermine and essentialize identities? The tactics of reclamation, reappropriation, and disidentification used in queer theory and praxis give non-normative identities agency as well as question the seemingly stable systems that render them as other. These tactics acknowledge stereotypes, transpose them, and then subvert them to form new models of identity.

The reclamation of the word queer itself was a primary tactic to displace stereotypes often saddled on non-normative populations. The impetus for its reclamation came from within as well as outside the academy. AIDS activists played a pivotal role in moving queer from a term of denigration into one of agency. Beginning in the 1980s, queer as a word was deployed as a tactic to depathologize those who were HIV-positive. Using gay as a label to describe those in the population who were considered then to be most at risk for HIV (or who already had AIDS) was deemed essentialist and overdetermined. Queer recognized the endless configurations of identity made even more complex by their constant fluidity and it simultaneously served as a banner that could represent a host of people under the common cause of confronting an epidemic—one that was rapidly killing thousands, while the government refused, devastatingly, to acknowledge its existence.

Within the bounds of the academy on which queer theory was anchored, a larger platform of poststructuralism also played a part in moving the connotation of queer from one of degradation to one that asserts non-normativity, peculiarity, and so-called otherness as a position of empowerment. The tactic of ambiguity embodied by queer resists stereotypes and enables identities to encompass, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written, “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances” that renders labels and classification simplistic. Queer expresses a noncomplicity with systems that create and proliferate those stereotypes, which themselves establish and regulate power structures. The word is made further potent because it still carries with it what Sedgwick describes as an “always derogatory underbelly.” If the word were to lose all of its stigma and simply become a wholly affirma-
tive term, it would lose the potency that provides what she views as “a near inexhaustible source of transformational energy.”

In “The Other Question,” Homi Bhabha states that “the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectivity; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs the . . . identification subject.” When confronted with stereotypes that calcify identities, Bhabha contends that to simply dismiss the overgeneralization is ineffective. If the stereotype is simply written off as a non-truth, the systems that constructed it as a means of establishing and maintaining hierarchies and power structures are not brought to light.

Instead, if these systems are illuminated, the stereotype is revealed not only to be a gross generalization but also as a tool used to influence and control dynamics within the marginalized group it allegedly represents. To recognize and reclaim the stereotype, Bhabha argues, is the first step toward displacing it.

Reappropriation and performance can take on a variety of different forms. One technique of reappropriation and performance is over-performance. Through overperformance, identities that have been stereotyped are illuminated and exaggerated, and their constructions are revealed. Another avenue for reappropriation is the queering and re-queering of traditional identities, fusing them with elements that challenge and skew the essentialist notions they project. Through this tactic, the stereotype is continuously broken down and challenged, which allows the hybrid identity that is produced to endlessly add new elements and change itself. Simultaneously, this incessant transformation is a strategy that works to deflect mainstream culture’s tendencies to co-opt otherness and skew into trends marketed as hip or seemingly transgressive, which ultimately results in reinforcing the suppression of groups and individuals who have struggled with factors once seen as non-normative before this popular absorption.

With these reformulated identities at hand, tactics of disidentification then enable individuals to adopt or reject certain qualities of these new configurations and to reimagine them. José Esteban Muñoz writes in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*:

Disidentification, as a mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force, would always foreground that lost
object of identification; it would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification. . . . Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded meaning of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.10

This sequence of reclamation, reappropriation, performance, and disidentification succeeds in remodeling rigid and stagnant stereotyped identities; reformulated identities are possible and endowed with the ability to imagine, morph, and expand. Once the stereotype is identified as the “cultural locus,” it can then be transformed from an inhibiting identity immobilizer into the raw material that stereotypes exploit to repress the so-called unthinkable—the many minority identities that threaten and disrupt the supposedly stable identities of those in power. With so many configurations of identity, methods of repression would have to vary, which would require more effort for those of the majority. Stereotypes work to singularize, requiring less exertion for those seeking to control and repress marginalized populations. Disidentification works to make visible these infinite varieties of identity—or nonidentity—that present such a threat to dominant forces; the act plays on the stereotype and moves away from it. It endlessly confuses expectations and future efforts of those in power to reapply revised stereotypes to the minority once the former stereotype has been cracked. Using these tactics of reclamation, reappropriation, and disidentification, the individual, fueled by displaced and reconfigured stereotypes, is given the option to claim an identity, move fluidly between identities, or choose not to identify at all.

Craft can gain from the methods and tools that queer theory has deployed to reclaim and reconfigure its own marginal position into a place of empowerment. By flipping and displacing denigrating and confining stereotypes through tactics of performance and appropriation, craft can reimagine itself in multiple ways, molded and reconfigured by the desires of the maker. Through the dismantling and reconfiguration of its
own stereotypes, craft is positioned as a potent agent to challenge the very systems that create and proliferate stereotypes to maintain hierarchies of visual and material culture.

I maintain that by using the tactics and strategies of queer theory, craft could gain purchase by deliberately asserting an identity that defies fixed or historically prescribed boundaries in relation to its use of materials, processes, or formal vocabularies. This radical, critical position would relocate craft as an aesthetic category that embraces an enormous range of multiple and seemingly contradictory practices, as well as an agent to challenge existing systems that define materiality and makers.

For those deeply invested in craft, to acknowledge stereotypes can be a painful endeavor. It means tracing a history in which specific ways of making—tagged with the word craft—have been deemed as less valuable than other forms of labor, thought, materiality, and context. To be able to deconstruct stereotypes most effectively, however, we must examine and pull apart the history of these characterizations and ideas. This history is shaped not only by the ideas about craft that circulate in a contemporary moment but also by the modern origins of fine craftwork, that is, by capitalism and the production of goods—something rarely acknowledged, even in the hypercapitalist art world. Moreover, those who participate in craft circles must realize that they are a largely conservative and homogeneous group in comparison to those who participate in other areas of visual and material culture. Craft culture must come to terms with its insularity, which has contributed to homogeneous demographics and precluded the more diverse configurations of identity present in other areas of material and visual culture.

Those who take part in craft in any role—makers, critics, curators, collectors, and viewers—must consider the fact that craft is being applied not only to new practices that are rooted in materiality but also to newer trends of social practice that detach themselves from it. Although a departure from materiality seems contradictory to craft in many ways, it must nonetheless be considered. Practices considered "craft" that de-emphasize materiality present a terrain difficult to negotiate and could be viewed as an approach that will present craft with yet more indefinability, which in the past has been explicitly denounced as its undoing.

The conservative approach to this conundrum would be to vehemently oppose this trajectory and take sides pitting practices rooted in materiality against those that deviate from it. However, it would be more
beneficial to understand how these viewpoints work *in relation to each other*. This could itself open up new ways for craft to include those who work more traditionally, those who work more radically, and those who find ground somewhere in between.

While the aforementioned are issues that critical craft theory must address, studying the work of makers who are presently flipping craft stereotypes and reconfiguring identities will ground progressive discourse. So many types of practices and makers exist who are claiming *craft*—the terrain is so deeply rich and endlessly shifting—that critical craft discourse is positioned to redefine material and visual culture. This, in turn, can foster the multifaceted practices that have surfaced and continue to sprout and expand, enabling makers to further conceptualize and contextualize their practices and their identities as makers.

Lia Cook, a faculty member in the textiles department at California College of the Arts, serves as a dynamic example of a maker who asserts craft and dislodges its stereotypes through her processes of making, the contexts in which she exhibits, and her own identity. Cook’s roots are in the Studio Craft movement, a group virtually exiled—partly through its own doing—from larger arenas of visual and material culture. Cook began weaving on hand-looms and painting textiles to create complex and intricate illusionary images. In the past few years, she began to weave on a digital Jacquard loom—which also requires the use of the hand—to merge intimate family photos with woven structures (see fig. 1). Cook abstracts these images through pixilation on her computer before uploading them to a *CAD* program that relays her image to the loom. When taken off the Jacquard and installed, they present large, overwhelming phantom memories of childhoods gone by (see fig. 2).

Through her work, Cook displaces the stereotype of craft even as she simultaneously reclaims it. Although the Jacquard pulses with digital savvy, Cook must integrate the warp and the weft by hand. Weaving requires the constant, repetitive physical motion of the maker, and although the Jacquard is a high-tech, air-compressed beast, it is no exception. The merging of cutting-edge technology and the tedious handwork that is required of Cook is typical and atypical of craft: all at once, technology, standards in architecture, and design curricula are fused with traditional, centuries-old methods to create singular pieces that are rendered difficult, if not impossible, to classify.

Cook further complicates the contradictions embedded in her practice and weavings vis-à-vis her identity as a maker. While still remaining
1 Lia Cook’s Jacquard loom in her Berkeley, California, studio, pictured with *Resting Digits*, 2005.

Cr aft, reclaimed and reimagined, is the device Cook deploys to break through the prescribed boundaries of material and visual culture. In so doing she complicates her identity and, by virtue of it, the identity of craft. What is particularly exciting about Cook and her work is that she manages to bridge the acknowledged gap between Studio Craft practitioners and a younger generation of makers who identify themselves as hybrid makers or even choose not to identify themselves at all. Although allied with the Studio Craft movement, Cook also merges with makers who are increasingly interdisciplinary, technologically savvy, and unafraid to invade and borrow from other areas of material and visual culture not considered craft. Cook represents part of the older guard of the craft community that has expanded a practice into a multitude of areas and embodies many different positions at once but never has to settle on one.

Liz Collins is a prime example of a younger generation of makers who claim craft and employ it as an agent to traverse the constructed perimeters of visual and material culture. After earning both bachelor’s and MFA degrees in textiles from the Rhode Island School of Design, Collins immersed herself in garment construction and quickly garnered a reputation as a cutting-edge designer whose apparel was inventive yet simultaneously ready-to-wear. After a five-year tenure running her own, highly acclaimed independent fashion label, Collins began to stage her Knitting Nation performances. Knitting Nation consists of Collins and a team of assembled workers continuously laboring at knitting machines, as well as by hand, to produce large-scale installations. Clad in coveralls bearing the Knitting Nation logo, Collins and her crew operate like honeybees at the hive—little by little, their collective, repetitive motions build a large-patterned entity realized only through cooperation and diligence. Lined up in formation, Collins and her workers are goaded by
“overseers” to knit faster and faster, immediately evoking sweatshop set-ups that focus on profit rather than the people who do the work. However, there are clues that the Knitting Nation team is decidedly antifactory. Though their coveralls are plain, white, and uniform, the knitters have added their own personal embellishments, shedding anonymity for individual expression. Far from the industrial capitalist ideals of using unskilled workers, Knitting Nation is well versed in a variety of textile techniques, sewing by both machine and hand.

Collins’s first Knitting Nation performance took place during The Muster, a one-day event that occurred on May 14, 2005, on Governor’s Island, located near Manhattan. Those taking part in the event were asked to consider the question “What are we fighting for?” as they imagined and prepared their projects. Collins titled her project Knitting during Wartime and together with her Knitting Nation troops she constructed a huge American flag (see fig. 3). Unlike the majority of textile factories, which produce goods for an everyday, utilitarian function, the American flag fabricated by the Knitting Nation Army is so gigantic it could hardly flutter on a flagpole. Additionally, a public that could easily purchase a pristine and shining banner from a hardware store would likely reject its uneven seams and occasionally flawed fabric (see fig. 4).

The aesthetics of the flag are funky and handmade, perhaps a fitting tribute to Betsy Ross, who could be viewed as the grande dame of Do-It-Yourself production.

Audiences swarm Collins and her worker bees—the back-and-forth motion of the knitting machines emanating a befitting buzz. Collins and her team produce a spectacle of craft using materiality and performance that can only be accomplished through technical skill and expertise. Knitting Nation’s spectacle of slowness offers a time-out to the audience to observe acts of making usually sequestered from the public gaze. The absurdity of an army of knitters branded with matching logos compulsively stitching a monolithic flag clearly calls into question the blind patriotic fervor of a post-9/11 nation that is no longer considering the question at hand: “What are we fighting for?” The performances of Knitting Nation question ideas of nationhood through parody at a critical time in today’s tense political climate. In addition, this overperformed nation building warns the craft community that, in spite of its desire to assert a common and collective identity—a nationhood of sorts—this is not the solution to its identity crisis either; this trajectory of forming an identity would only re-stereotype craft once again and stifle the identi-

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3 Liz Collins and Knitting Nation perform at Allison Smith’s The Muster on Governor’s Island, 2005.
4 Liz Collins with her knitting machine.
ties of the individuals who, with their incredibly varied practices, claim craft.

Collins describes her practice as “firmly rooted in knit construction as a craft.” Through this statement she asserts craft in a way similar to how queer is deployed; craft becomes an agent to resist stereotypes and to challenge the constructed systems of visual and material culture. Deliberate acts of making are at the heart and center of what Collins produces, and, as she has said, through the medium of knitting she “transcend[s] boundaries of art, performance, industrial production, and fashion, always maintaining the involvement of my hands in all these endeavors.” Her purposeful gestures of skilled construction perform the non-normativity and peculiarity that are rife within craft and serve as her vehicle for infiltrating a variety of arenas. In turn, through her making and fluid movement across perceived boundaries, she continuously shifts and morphs her identity. By doing so, she defies any classification of her work and herself.

Strategies such as overperformance are endorsed by queer theory to critique stereotypes that over-determine identities. Similar to the way in which drag performance functions, the work of Josh Faught magnifies and dismantles prevalent craft stereotypes. Entering Faught’s installation Shitlist, one encounters granny squares gone rotten. Far from the comfortable and tender intentions typically thought of as infusing a crocheted quilt, the craft in Shitlist looks to have been stitched by a serial killer with a sentimental streak, each square a thoughtful materialization of the vengeance that creeps into his mind during banal hours sitting in the john—a notch on his shit list. Much like a campy drag performance, Faught’s installation is a masquerade: on first appearance the brightly colored granny squares are familiar, pleasant, and sweet, but in its center is a crass and dirty sense of humor—the word shitlist in big block letters. The amateur, homespun associations that Shitlist evokes also echo drag productions, created as they are with easily accessible, cheap materials that can be found at the local craft supplies stores. As is true of eccentric characters often found in drag—lunch ladies, grannies, truck drivers, or cheesy, small-town lounge singers who dream of Vegas—an underlying bitterness contrasts with the genial façade of Faught’s work. In contrast to slick high-tech shows filled with performers who aim to simply mimic Hollywood types and supermodels with as much authenticity as possible, Faught’s work, like drag queens or kings, does not attempt to hide the imperfect but instead magnifies
it. Extracted from their common living room environments, Faught’s crocheted afghans engulf the compact space of a bathroom. The densely installed yarn bears down heavily and inescapably. The claustrophobic conditions are replete with symbols of amateurism and femininity: it is suffocation through stereotypes of craft. Chintzy, unsophisticated blankets that scream with femininity (or effeminacy) and amateurism cover not only the walls but also the ceiling and the top of the toilet. There is feeling of unfinished sloppiness as yarn drips from all angles and threatens not only to engulf the bathroom’s users but to fall into the toilet water.

Faught’s sprawling installation *Nobody Knows I’m a Lesbian* covers an entire wall with layers of materials, images, and techniques (see figs. 5 and 6). Crawling up from the ground, the installation bombards the viewer with images, language, and methods that infinitely contradict each other. Plastered onto the wall is screen-printed wallpaper with the repeated image of a young boy. Some of the faces eerily drip yarn, making the boy look as if he is simultaneously melting and crying. Framed pictures of a man in drag, his face smeared with make-up, are piled in a heap near a crocheted web of metallic sequins. On the floor lays a sheet of sewn gold-lamé and black vinyl—a sort of heretic quilt. A diptych on the right side of the wall presents mirrored images of spread-eagle legs displaying male genitalia in shades of purple and brown. A violet flag with gold writing admits “Nobody Knows I’m a Lesbian” and droopily protrudes from a gaudy yarn base. In this piece, Faught continuously uses craft to disidentify with constructs of queerness and employs queerness to disidentify with conventions of craft.

His statement, *Nobody Knows I’m a Lesbian*, throws his perceived gender and sexual identity as a gay man into question. The person depicted in the piled portraits is Faught himself in campy drag, reinforcing the multiple mismatched gender expressions scattered throughout the piece. Both craft and queerness in *Nobody Knows I’m a Lesbian* are at once genuine and inauthentic. It is overperformed and gaudy but deeply personal at the same time.

Faught’s techniques that span the craft spectrum come with their own notions about gender, age, class, and education. Papier-mâché, thrown tinsel, crocheted sequins all relate to amateurism, hobbyist activities, and femininity, in stark contrast to Cook’s weavings done on state-of-the-art equipment like the Jacquard loom that showcase a well-studied craftsperson working with the most advanced and expensive

technologies. But, like Cook’s work, both the craft Faught practices and the identities he presents therein span an infinite range of overlap and divergence. With so many configurations of craft and identity, stereotyping once again becomes difficult if not impossible.

Through parody and extreme overperformance, Faught’s work slits open the derogatory underbelly of craft and spills its guts. Faught has crafted craft’s stereotypes; and at once this reclaims them, flips them through camp, and allows him to hew his own identity through tactics of disidentification. For Faught, craft and queerness mirror each other, reflecting the melancholia of marginalization. However, when reconfigured and reimagined together, they provide endless opportunities to continuously morph, affording an invaluable navigational tool for Faught.

A word that has emerged of late when people discuss the future of craft is *hybridity*. When people use *hybridity* in the context of craft and the trajectory that they believe will catapult it into territory that they consider fashionable and cutting edge within material and visual culture, they promote craft’s fusion with art and design (and occasionally with fashion and architecture). Cook, Collins, and Faught are certainly examples of this often-discussed hybridity. In fact, all three had their work shown at the “Shaping the Future of Craft” national leadership conference sponsored by the American Craft Council in Houston in 2006. However, in talking about hybridity one runs the risk of unwittingly reinforcing constructed and stereotypical categories within material and visual culture. For example, if the elements of certain processes or finished work are identified by way of conventional classifications—art, craft, design, fashion, architecture—these traditional categories are inadvertently strengthened and reified. Hybridity can be a tremendous asset and breakthrough, if elements in a piece are so thoroughly confused that the elements can no longer be defined as one category or another. The tactic of disidentification can come into play to reinforce hybridity as a concept that breaks down stereotypes rather than reinforces them.

Having a lack or loss of identity creates the opportunity for identity to be invented anew. Much of craft is about making. By not declaring a fixed identity for craft, it could always be *in the making*. If craft were constantly in formation, it could resist being stereotyped and could include many different types of makers. Its inability to be defined could be transformed into an asset and an agent of power to challenge systems
that use definition to limit. Instead of being ignored or denied, stereotypes can be made into raw material and transformed, much like the physical materials that Lia Cook, Liz Collins, and Josh Faught use to break down preconceptions about their work and themselves.17

Ironically, the lack of critical craft theory to date has opened up infinite possibilities to create new theoretical avenues to conceptualize and contextualize craft—a wide-open playing field. Queer theory can teach craft through its tactics of reclamation, reappropriation, performance, and disidentification. These methods present a potent and provocative template for craft on which to model new and progressive critical theory. If positioned in this way, craft criticism could be unearthed from its current quagmire to become a provocative part of craft instruction, scholarship, and criticism and to provide a dynamic framework for makers to conceptualize their own practices.

NOTES


and vice versa. Read together, these two areas of study offer a variety of angles from which to consider matters of identity, struggle, and resistance.


11. Additionally, it is important to consider that this theory could be applied to a variety of makers who claim the use of *craft*. How could traditional makers use this theoretical framework to think through or recontextualize their practices in different ways? How would the concept of an ever-shifting identity affect the maker and his or her practice alike? Would this theoretical template attract radical makers looking for new ways to conceptualize themselves and their work?

12. The “Shaping the Future of Craft” conference brought together 270 people considered to be leaders in the field of craft. The lack of diversity of the participants was an issue that was repeatedly addressed. The absence of young people and students was particularly noted, though it was also evident that the audience was overwhelmingly white, middle-aged, and did not identify as queer, among other factors.


15. Ibid, 144–145.


17. It should be noted that each of these makers was educated and received his or her MFA at a prestigious school: Liz Collins at Rhode Island School of Design; Lia Cook at California College of the Arts (then California College of Arts and Crafts); and Josh Faught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This is certainly a topic that craft circles should take note of when considering what is being touted as the current and future trajectories of craft. I acknowledge here my own studio practice in fibers, which accounts for my interest in makers who use textiles as a key component in their practices and perhaps display their own lack of diversity.