“They think I don’t know anything”: Race, gender and perceptions of expertise in crafts

Abstract

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett argues that almost anyone can become a craftsperson. While this may be true, certain crafts and makers receive more recognition than others. Some types of craft practice are deemed ‘professional’ because they are believed to require a degree of craft expertise, such as carpentry, whereas other forms of craft are commonly regarded as ‘amateur’, such as crochet. Why is this?

This paper focuses on the politics of craft value, and how it is communicated and recognised. Drawing on interviews with 15 women makers of colour in the UK, I explore how for them, getting their craft skills recognised and valued as expertise is a challenge which hinders their ability to establish a full-time career in craft. This is linked to how the craft practice of marginalised groups has traditionally been denigrated or omitted from accounts of craft. It is also connected to the relationship between craft and fine art in the professional sector, which valorises conceptual, abstract work which appeals to white, middle class tastes. The paper provides insight into the conditions which make the professional craft sector relatively unwelcoming for women of colour, who find their expertise questioned, often on the grounds of race and gender. The paper concludes with a discussion of how we could imagine a more inclusive craft sector, considering the ecology of activity which sits outside of traditional structures, occurring offline and online.

Keywords: Craft, expertise, race, gender, inequalities

Introduction

> Nearly anyone can become a good craftsman. The proposal is controversial because modern society sorts people along a strict gradient of ability. The better you are at something, the fewer of you there are. […] Craftsmanship doesn’t fit into this framework.
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> (Sennett, 2008:268)

In this quote from *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett (2008) argues that almost anyone can become a craftsperson. This, he says, is because the routine of craft and its relationship with materials draws on the basic principles of childhood play, and “almost all children play well” (ibid). While this may be true, certain crafts are valued more highly than others. Some forms of craft practice are commonly deemed ‘professional’ because they are believed to require a degree of craft expertise - such as carpentry - or draw on fine art aesthetics. Other forms of craft are often regarded as ‘amateur’, such as sewing and knitting (Luckman, 2015; Parker, 2010). These distinctions require further examination, especially as craft practice is becoming more popular as part of a wider trend towards authentic, handmade products and experiences (Ocejo, 2017). The proliferation of makerspaces and fabrication labs (or fab labs) across Europe in recent years demonstrate the growth of craft enterprise, as the opportunity to develop skills and become a self-employed maker is more appealing than ever. Within this modern ‘maker movement’, why are certain skills and expertise seemingly valued more than others?

This paper focuses on the concept of expertise in craft, the politics of its recognition, and craft value. Drawing on interviews with women makers of colour in the UK, I argue that expertise in craft can be developed by anyone, if provided with the means to do so. However, for the women interviewed, getting their craft skills recognised and valued *as expertise* is a challenge which hinders their ability to establish a full-time career in craft. I argue that the politics of expertise and its recognition preserve existing hierarchies in craft. Furthermore, diversity schemes and initiatives do little to address how craft created by women of colour, and craft with origins outside of Western culture, is devalued and denigrated. Some of my interviewees are not working in the professional craft sector but instead participated in a community crafts programme for migrant women run by Craftspace in Birmingham. Their relationship with craft is different, where they see it as both a domestic task and a potential source of income, depending on the context. Their cases illustrate the complex status of craft across cultures and the nature of craft practice outside of the professional field, which itself is relatively homogenous.

I understand craft as the creation of 3D objects using materials. Examples include jewellery, textiles, woodwork and ceramics, which are the areas my interviewees primarily work in. Craft is an area of creative work associated with mastery and practical skill. Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008) is an homage to the slow, deliberate process of craft, however it is arguably a masculinised account (McRobbie, 2016). Women's crafts are generally associated with 'amateur' pursuits in domestic locations, even in the age of websites such as Etsy which bring the craft shopfront online. Indeed, such sites are argued to re-establish women's place in the home, as Etsy in particular showcases a type of "hipster domesticity" which is white, middle class and heteronormative (Luckman, 2015). As I will show, women of colour who are trying to establish a craft career in the UK creative sector are struggling to get recognition for their work and craft expertise because of both their gender and race. Thus, expertise is both gendered and racialized, as well as related to class. The paper finishes with a discussion about how hierarchies of expertise within craft can be addressed.

What is expertise in craft?

Before going on to discuss expertise in the specific field of craft, it is first worth clarifying what expertise is in this context and what it may entail. Generally, expertise is believed to involve "knowledge of some sort" (Fleck, 1998) and skill, which is developed over time (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). In creative and cultural work, including craft, some knowledge of aesthetic codes and classifications is required (Bourdieu, 1996). As David Pye (2010) argues, craftsmanship has an aesthetic importance which depends on the individuality and relative creative freedom of making.

Annapurna Mamidipudi (2019) highlights the "innovative practices" (p.241) of handloom weavers in South India. Drawing on that case study, she argues that the practices of handloom weaving and dyeing should be understood in terms of tacit knowledge, in other words it cannot always be described. She demonstrates how the Indian handloom weavers exhibit high levels of craft expertise, yet it is widely denigrated because of the low status of handloom weaving in India. Much work about craft expertise emphasises the practical and embodied skills which become tacit. Richard Sennett discusses this at length in *The Craftsman*, (2008) which is an account of craft being done for its own sake. He claimed that to become an expert craftsman around 10,000 hours of work are needed. It requires obsession with technique as well as knowledge and experience which is developed over time. Other accounts of expertise in craft also identify how being able to act instinctively (what Peter Kelly (2011) calls 'unconsidered activity') is also characteristic of craft expertise. Unconsidered activity can make it difficult for some experts to impart their knowledge or talk about what they do. According to Kelly, embodied activity and embodied social engagement leads to dispositions, which as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues, are developed within social structures.

Building a level of craft expertise takes a great deal of time and personal investment, as highlighted by Erin O'Connor (2005) in her account of glassblowing. As part of her ethnographic work exploring tacit knowledge and craft, O'Connor took a beginner's glassblowing class in New York. She describes the process from novice to proficiency as she struggled to learn new techniques and made mistakes. She described in detail how she eventually managed to create a challenging piece – a goblet, recalling how she could 'sense' the right way to manoeuvre the pipe she uses to blow glass, because she "had done it time and again" (p.185). She notes how the manual processes of glassblowing, knowing when to lift and turn the glass in the furnace, marks the difference between a novice and a proficient glassblower.

Detailed accounts of the subjective experience of craft, such as those by Sennett and Erin O'Connor, highlight the struggle and risk of developing craft expertise. These accounts suggest that anyone could conceivably develop craft expertise, given the time and resources. The literature outlined in this section helps to clarify what is meant by craft expertise as discussed throughout this paper - as involving craft skills and knowledge, developed over time and which can be applied instinctively. What has received less attention in literature is the how access to resources can affect one's ability to develop expertise, and the politics of how expertise is recognised, particularly in the contemporary context.

The politics of expertise in arts and craft

In other work I have argued that one's ability to develop and signal aesthetic expertise is dependent on access to resources, or capital (Patel, 2020a). Signalling expertise is the process of communicating one's credentials, skills and abilities (Jones, 2002). In that work I discussed how cultural workers signalled their expertise on social media, by displaying work in progress and enhancing their status through sharing endorsements and prominent connections online. However, signalling expertise is not enough – it also needs to be recognised by other prominent people in your field who can help to enhance your status.

Some feminist scholars have argued that women's art and creativity has been misrecognised throughout history. For example Linda Nochlin (1988 [1971]) argues that the white, male western viewpoint of what should be considered great art is one that is unconsciously accepted. She highlights how women were traditionally excluded from life drawing classes from the Renaissance era up until the end of the 19th Century. As a result, women were restricted to painting still life and landscapes, which were considered a lesser art form requiring less skill. Thus, women's artistic expertise has never been recognised as such, and traditionally women's ability to develop creative knowledge and skills was stifled. These conditions persist, as Griselda Pollock puts it:

> High Culture systematically denies knowledge of women as producers of culture and meanings. Indeed High Culture is decisively positioned against feminism. Not only does it exclude the knowledge of women artists produced within feminism, but it works in a phallocentric signifying system in which woman is a sign within discourses on masculinity.
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> (Pollock, 2003:23)

Pollock identifies how women's art is judged in relation to art done by men, which will always be to the detriment of women artists. Cynthia Bickley Green and Anne Wolcott argue that the standards by which great art should be judged should recognise women's experience and thought as "real and integrated, or reconciled with male experience." (1996:178).

Writers such as Nochlin identify that women's art and expertise has been denigrated because of the societal expectation on women to focus their energies on domestic responsibilities. In the contemporary context craft is seen as an appealing way for women to balance work with domestic life, as discussed by Susan Luckman (2015). Luckman attributes the growth of craft micro-enterprise to both an increased demand for the handmade as an antidote to mass production, and the proliferation of craft marketplaces such as Etsy which allow almost anyone to make and sell online, from the comfort of their home. Luckman points out that this form of craft-based micro enterprise is feminised and as a result, can be considered 'amateur'. Indeed some forms of craft, particularly fibre crafts, are associated with the domestic space and completely separate from art, as Roziska Parker highlights:

> When women paint, their work is categorised as homogenously feminine - but it is acknowledged to be art. When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And crucially, it is categorised as craft. (Parker, 2010:494).

Parker argues that there is a gender division between forms of craft such as sewing and woodwork, which is inscribed in society. This is fostered by the education system which still "directs boys to carpentry and girls to needlework" (p.492). Lucy Lippard (2010 [1978]) identifies how the perception of forms of craft predominantly carried out by women such as sewing and embroidery, as 'amateur' is a form of class and gender prejudice. She argues that the distinctions between amateur and professional craft, or high and low art, mostly affect women. Indeed historically, when arts and crafts became professionalised and profitable in Western economies, women were marginalised (Parker, 2010). In craft this professionalization was organised through guilds, from which women were traditionally excluded. These institutions provided labour regulation and protection for artisans. They also helped members to identify as experts in their craft and required a demonstrable level of expertise to join (Sennett, 2008).

As feminist writers such as Nochlin, Pollock and Parker show, women’s creative expertise has traditionally been dismissed and denigrated. This is because what is recognised as culturally valuable or good art is judged against standards set by privileged men. Additionally, it is important to consider that the judgement of creative expression is also classed and racialized. For example, Audre Lorde points out how poetry can be considered a ‘lesser’ art form, yet it was “the major voice for poor, working class, and Colored women” (1980:855). This is because poetry requires less resources and time. As she argues:

> The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose. In this day of inflated prices for material, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers? When we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art.
>
> (Lorde, 1980:855)

While Lorde’s comments relate to one’s ability to produce art and craft, this also unavoidably feeds back into the judgement of creative work and which forms are valued. Mamidipudi’s (2019) work on the handloom weavers in India points out their skills and expertise which thrive despite existing hierarchies which “keep millions of handloom weavers and craftspeople in the global South at the bottom of the financial social and epistemic pyramids.” (p.241). She argues that:

> Handloom weavers, like other craftspeople in India, stand in the shadow of deep divisions - science/craft; modern/traditional; educated expert/illiterate labourer - and as a system of knowledge that tends to be associated with the past rather than the future. These divisions become further entrenched when knowledge owned by dominant social groups is privileged over others’ knowledge, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies.

(Mamidipudi, 2019:246)

Mamidipudi argues that for handloom weavers, the explication of their tacit knowledge is important in order to challenge entrenched notions of handloom weaving being a traditional and less valuable form of practice, because their tacit knowledge is not being adequately recognised. Her description of the denigration of handloom weavers' expertise resonates with much of what has been said in this section about entrenched hierarchies which determine what is culturally valuable. It also points to the perception of crafts and craft expertise of artisans in or originating from the Global South, and those working in traditional crafts.

The focus in this paper is British women makers, who are either working towards a craft career or aspire to do so. The research is part of a project in collaboration with Crafts Council UK which seeks to address the lack of diversity in the UK craft sector. According to Crafts Council UK's most recent figures (Spilsbury, 2018) most people working in secure, full-time craft occupations are white, older men. Of those working in craft part time or as a sole trader, the vast majority are women, suggesting that women are more likely to have a precarious position in the craft sector.

All the women interviewed for this research live in the UK – most were born in the country, three of them had migrated from Pakistan or Bangladesh in the past ten years. All the interviewees have family origins outside of the UK, predominantly from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. I interviewed 15 women in total, from various locations around the UK including London, Birmingham and Newcastle. Many of the participants were recruited through a call on the Crafts Council UK website and via my own networks. The three participants who had recently moved to the UK (Gulshan, Tehreem and Saima) did not have any formal craft or art training previously. They participated in a funded project held by Craftspace Birmingham which taught jewellery making skills to women migrants through their social enterprise programme, Shelanu. As a result of the skills the women learned on the course, they developed an interest in starting their own craft business. I felt it would be useful to include these interviewees in the analysis as they continue to see craft as primarily a domestic activity, due to their background and the cultural perceptions of craft in South Asian families (see Patel, 2019 for more on this). Their viewpoints provide an interesting perspective in the discussion about how certain types of craft are valued.

The rest of the women interviewed were working towards a career in craft and were either working full-time in a studio or doing part time jobs such as teaching and consultancy alongside their craft. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. Participants were asked about their journey into craft and, for those working in craft professionally, their experiences as women of colour in the sector. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. I found that throughout their careers these women have experienced challenges which are related to the intersection of gender, race, and in some cases, class. For the professional makers, such challenges have made it especially difficult to get their work valued and their expertise recognised as such, and thus has hindered their progression towards a full-time craft career.

"My work that relates to my culture doesn't sell" - craft and cultural value

Craft's position as a valued, legitimate form of cultural production in the Western context has always been precarious (Luckman, 2015). Organisations such as Crafts Council UK tend to promote work that sits at the intersection of craft and high art, work which exhibits an elite level of craft skill and aesthetic expertise. The probability of a maker reaching such heights is slim, as it requires a University education, and enough cultural, social and economic capital in order to develop craft and aesthetic expertise and get it recognised. As a result, the face of UK craft in this field is homogenous, dominated by white, middle class and relatively privileged makers. This is a situation concurrent with the wider creative industries, which remain "enclaves of privilege" (Banks, 2017). In the case of the women in this research, they have achieved varying levels of success in craft. Some have been working in craft for a decade or more, some are relatively new to it.

Almost all the makers working professionally in the sector mentioned that their work has been judged on the basis of their ethnicity, rather than the work itself. For example, Tina, who is of South Asian heritage and has a jewellery studio in London, described her experience at an Open studio event where she works:

> At Open Studios - I've sometimes had people - and they can see, at Open Studios, you have all your work out on display and it's for sale. You can see that this is a workshop. And people have said to me - And usually it's been people of a certain age and of a certain demographic. And they'll say, "Is this all made here, in the UK?" Or, "Do you make this yourself?" Or, "Is it made here or is it made abroad?" Why would they ask me that?

Tina felt that the origin of her work was being questioned because of her ethnicity. She also described instances where her craft expertise and the quality of her work was being questioned by customers. Tina was confident that a white maker wouldn't be asked such questions and described how it was "exhausting" to deal with.

Other makers felt that they were put in a difficult position in terms of the type of work they are 'meant' to produce, based on their ethnicity. Rebecca, a jeweller in Birmingham who is also of South Asian heritage, described how she hasn't felt successful in her jewellery career:

> It's quite hard to describe myself as a jeweller because people don't always understand. They have a certain perception of either somebody who obviously makes Asian jewellery or traditional jewellery, they don't quite get that I'm quite versatile in what I do. […] my work that relates to my culture doesn't sell.

Rebecca described how she made a collection inspired by her childhood and Indian heritage but it did not sell, and did not get selected for shows, which affected her confidence and direction in her work. She said: "it was almost like it was too Asian to be contemporary but not commercial enough to sell." Anita, a craft artist in London, mentioned the "lose-lose" situation she is in, where "craft is associated as something uniquely British. So, I can't be seen to be doing a British craft because I'm not British. […] On the one hand, I'm not allowed to do what's British, but on the same extent I'm not allowed to do what's culturally mine either."

It seems that in order to be successful in the UK craft sector and make a living, makers must appeal to the “certain demographic” which Tina refers to – namely white and middle class customers who will buy the work, or predominantly white and middle class gallery/show organisers who select the work. This means that not only is a certain standard expected but also a certain aesthetic to appeal to these tastes, to the exclusion of other work which sits outside of this framework. Therefore, some of these makers feel that they are in a difficult position - they feel are judged on the basis of their skin colour and the types of craft they are expected to make. Even when, like Tina and Anita, they try to incorporate their heritage, it is rejected. These examples illustrate Dave O’Brien and Kate Oakley’s (2015) argument that cultural value is linked to social inequality, whereby “specific types of cultural consumption are intertwined with who is able to succeed in cultural production” (p.4). Indeed, such attitudes have surfaced in conversations in academia and the arts whenever I have discussed the scope of my work. I focus not only on the professionalised craft sector but community and participatory craft programmes which seek to foster skills sharing and social cohesion among diasporic communities in the UK. I’m often told that the two spheres are completely different, that they cannot be compared (not that was ever the intention) but to mention both in the same sentence has sparked a strong reaction from some. I argue it is not helpful to so swiftly categorise makers and work which sit on the fringes of the UK craft sector as ‘amateur’ and seemingly a world away from the professionalised craft sector. This is unhelpful particularly without engaging in these groups and witnessing the collaboration which goes on and skills developed, simply because the participants are not University educated and are part of diasporic communities.

Valuing ‘functional’ crafts

Programmes such as the Women’s Maker Movement project run by Craftspace Birmingham allowed its participants, who are mostly women from Pakistan and Bangladesh who have migrated to Birmingham, to realise and develop their own craft skills and explore potential markets for enterprise. In interviews with the participants, two of them made their own clothes at home and knew how to stitch. The younger participant, Tehreem, described sewing as a "basic need" but also a "skill" which everyone should learn. In this sense she sees sewing as akin to cooking or cleaning, but noted that her mum runs a business tailoring clothes for the local community. She works with her mum to balance tailoring with other domestic responsibilities:

> She has to sew clothes for them (her customers) and for me and for her. After the season changes, you have to. […] It's like, "Now you do the cleaning, I'm going to go upstairs and stitch clothes." So I have to do all the cleaning and everything. I have to take care of… When my father comes, I have to give him food and everything and help him out with things.

Tehreem's family are from Pakistan and still adhere to traditional family values. It is clear that sewing is part of the household routine and it is important to state here that this is a 'functional' form of craft, not necessarily requiring a high level of craft or aesthetic expertise but still requiring a level of tacit craft knowledge and skill, which is embodied and called upon in a variety of situations. The perception of sewing in Tehreem's household as a domestic task mean that she doesn't think of it in the same way as the jewellery she and her mum created on the Women's Maker Movement course.

In this sense, it is important to consider the context within which craft is practiced, and cultural perceptions of certain crafts. These too are entrenched but as illustrated, the tailoring that Tehreem and her mum do is a form of small-scale, community-based craft enterprise which is not acknowledged in industry figures, not only because of its scale and geographical location but because of its function. The value attributed to it is not to the same level of, say, craft brewers, butchers or barbers, even though they are also relatively 'functional' occupations (Ocejo, 2017). We could again point to this as an example of how craft value is linked to certain privileged groups (white men in the case of Richard Ocejo's research), which also feeds into the politics of how craft expertise is recognised.

“They want the next new thing” - getting recognised

The more established professional makers frequently discussed the difficulty they have getting their work recognised, especially in studios where they feel younger, more recent graduates are getting championed by the studio owners more often. Though they have enjoyed some successes, these makers do not feel successful overall. This might of course be characteristic of the precarious nature of craft, where achievements are short-lived and makers must move on to the next project or commission in order to keep a steady income. Even so, some felt their work has been misrecognised or undervalued. Rebecca, the jeweller from Birmingham, spoke at length about how she tried to get into exhibitions and get her work selected. She felt her work wasn’t “out there” enough conceptually, and that because it is sometimes inspired by her culture, it is not considered contemporary.

Rebecca and Anita have been working in craft for over 20 years, and both felt that in competitions and exhibitions, there is a shift towards more abstract, conceptual craft, and thus they feel their work is not being recognised for the skill and expertise involved, instead it is being judged on its conceptual or abstract qualities. This requires some artistic education, which Rebecca hasn’t had, so she is left doubting her own abilities and questioning her career despite having worked for so long as a jewellery designer. She said that for shows and exhibitions, “people just want the next new thing, so the emerging designers will get those few opportunities […] how do you keep longevity in what you’re doing?” Rebecca also felt she was at a disadvantage because she was from a working-class background, she said “I think that you move in different circles if you come from a different class, and that also creates opportunities. You exude a certain confidence as well if you come from a certain background”. She felt that the existing criteria and structures in place automatically disadvantage her, and this has left her disillusioned with her career and future direction. Anita, who is based in a studio in London, said that the owners of the studio “have their favourites here […] and the favourites are the young white girls. They're not so keen on us older ones, and I think some of the older women do feel it.” In the same London studios Rita, an established knitwear designer, said she noticed that newer residents are promoted more, and sometimes she can feel “out of the loop”.

It appears that for these established makers, they can be excluded on the basis of their work not appealing to high-end, fine-art tastes. Susan Luckman notes that since the 1960s in the Global West, “craftspeople sought greater identification with the language and practices of the art world in order to gain greater recognition of their own unique creative capacities, and accordingly to enhance the value of studio crafts” (2015:46). In this sense established makers need to try and ‘stay in the loop’ in order to compete with younger makers coming through.

Some of the interviewees at early career stage found their own difficulties with breaking into a professional craft career, and often referenced their ethnicity as a potential factor. Sam, a ceramicist from London whose family is of East Asian heritage, says she feels like an “outsider” in craft because she doesn’t have the networks or know-how to get recognised. Candace Jones (2002) argues that signalling expertise is important to gain recognition, and recognition leads to status enhancement in the field. She also notes that status enhancement can also be achieved through awards and competitions. This is how Sam is trying to gain recognition – by entering awards and trying to get into exhibitions. Though she is from London she studied in Cornwall, and she found it a shock that “people were so fascinated by someone from a different culture.” She said that she didn’t experience any outright discrimination while studying, but “you would see they were like trying to tread carefully around you, or just assume because I am Asian, I am an international student. Whereas, you know, I’ve grown up and lived in London all my life.” As a result of her experience studying in a different part of the UK, Sam feels she too is ‘out of the loop’ and needs to find other ways to get recognition, because she hasn’t been able to build the social capital necessary to break into craft.

Olivia is another early career maker from London and of West African origin who secured a prestigious grant from The Princes Trust to get a studio space in London. Such schemes can help makers get a foot in the door and enhance their chances of recognition. Olivia said the grant gave her confidence:

> It gives you a confidence that you can be in a place like this and working with such amazing makers and it gives you a confidence in your work, it gives you a confidence in your pricing, it gives you a confidence in yourself as a person.
>
> I've taken that on regardless of whether I'm black or white and maybe more so because I'm black and I'm in the space where we're so under-represented. It does give me a confidence and no one's going to take that away from me, really, regardless of the throwaway comments or people asking ridiculous questions or questions that you've never even thought about that can get you to question what it is that you're doing

Here Olivia also references comments she has received which sometimes make her question her work, as mentioned by Tina earlier in this paper. The confidence Olivia has gained allows her to try and shrug off those comments, and she has embraced her role as someone representing black makers in a studio which is mostly white.

'Box ticking' and denigrating expertise

While grants and schemes can help makers get a foot in the door, many of the professional participants also felt they were 'box ticking' exercises which don't alleviate the challenge of getting recognised, and work being judged on its own merits. This is a criticism often levelled at organisational schemes which intend to increase diversity in media and education (see Ahmed, 2012; Malik, 2013; Nwonka, 2015; Saha, 2018). For example, Sam said that she felt she had a better chance of getting into University "because they have certain quotas to fill. So, I think because of my Asian background, I had a higher chance of getting into that university". She said that this has positive and negative impacts: "the positive impact is that you're giving people of different backgrounds a chance to get into a field. But then, the negative impact is, you're not really getting in because of your own skills; it's because they need to fulfil on their quota, and they just choose the best one that they need to fill in." This suggests that diversity schemes and quotas can overlook markers of skills and expertise.

Anita felt that her successes were being denigrated because they were dismissed as 'box ticking' – the idea that she is there to fill a quota. Upon winning funding for her studio, she said that she had "jibes" from other makers there:

> Someone actually did say to my face, 'Oh, you're here to tick a box', as though I couldn't actually draw or paint, and that also I didn't come from a culture that draws or paints. Maybe they think that white people made the Taj Mahal and they just dropped it there on India.

Anita felt the accusation of 'box ticking' denigrated her position in the studio and the achievement of winning the funding. Olivia, who has benefitted from such a scheme, felt that while there was a 'box ticking' element to winning the funding, she was pleased to have got herself into a position where she can show other Black women in craft that they can work their way into the professional craft sector. Representation was important for most of the professional makers, who felt that they rarely see other people like them in the sector. It seems, however, that representation is not enough to address the problem of how makers of colour and their craft are recognised and valued.

Discussion and conclusion

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was that the trends and tastes of the professional craft sector - which are aligned to the aesthetics of fine art – make it especially difficult for women makers of colour to make a career in craft and have their craft expertise recognised as such. Perceptions about the types of craft which should be valued are inherently linked to white, middle class tastes which in turn disadvantage anyone who does not fall into that bracket. Attitudes towards makers of colour in craft which are highlighted in this paper reinforce the sense that professional, contemporary craft is not inclusive. As well as the stories from Anita, Tina and Sam already referenced, Rebecca also talked about how she feels she is treated differently in the jewellery industry. She describes how she deals with trade suppliers such as gold platers, which are male dominated. She said that because she is an Asian woman, “they’re not used to it at all. They often think that I don’t know anything, you just get that attitude.” She feels like when she visits trade suppliers she is “looked down upon” and they “think you don’t know what you’re talking about when you go and speak to them about your work”.

The interviews reveal issues throughout the craft sector – from education, to fellow makers in studios, customers, selection committees for exhibitions and trade suppliers. All of the women working professionally in craft have experienced some form of discrimination, had their expertise questioned or made to feel like an outsider in craft spaces. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, perceptions of the types of craft which are perceived as valuable are rooted in longstanding ideas about cultural value, where Western ‘high’ culture and fine art are valorised, and the division between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ crafts is well established. These standards, as highlighted by feminist writers such as Griselda Pollock and Roziska Parker, denigrate women’s craft, the work of women of colour and women from working-class backgrounds. These standards reproduce the homogeneity of the professional craft sector.

We need to rethink how craft, and particularly traditional crafts, are judged and valued. They should be judged not only for their aesthetic value but the level of tacit knowledge, practical expertise and craftsmanship which has gone into them, as argued by Mamidipudi (2019). Craft created by women of colour should be judged on its own merits, and not through the prism of their race, gender or class. Furthermore, people who have not had a University or fine arts education should also feel like there are opportunities for them in craft, which is why community craft programmes are important. While the level of aesthetic expertise developed in such programmes will not be informed by the high level of aesthetic and conceptual knowledge as someone with a fine art degree, the craft industry is so much more than the professionalised occupations. It is an ecology, where people from all backgrounds are developing craft expertise in a variety of settings, from homes, to schools and community centres. Further work should explore these settings as sites of not only craft practice, but also social cohesion, wellbeing and inclusion. In the current political turmoil, it is important to highlight areas of cultural production which lie outside of the individualised, neoliberal entrepreneurial frame. It is also crucial to acknowledge that not everyone wants to make a living from craft – indeed the precarious nature of freelance creative work and self-entrepreneurship means that this is not possible.

Programmes such as Women's Maker Movement in Birmingham are examples of alternative pathways into craft which are instructive for a more inclusive and sustainable craft ecology. They also demonstrate how within some cultures, craft can be seen as both a domestic task and a career choice, depending on the medium and function. The types of craft carried out by Tehreem and Olivia are indeed worlds apart and recognised in different ways but require a fundamental base of craft expertise developed over many years. The fact that some of the more mundane, traditional occupations such as barbery, brewing and butchery are being converted into 'craft' occupations which happen to be dominated by white men (Ocejo, 2017) points to a politics of expertise in craft which is classed, racialised and gendered. To this end, this paper has highlighted the obstacles women of colour face when trying to forge a career in craft. Their position and their work are denigrated on the grounds of their race in particular, but also for the older makers, against aesthetic and conceptual ideas of craft which are classed.

What to do about this? Raising the visibility of makers of colour in craft is important, and on social media groups are mobilising to do this. For example, BIPOC in Fiber is a website established by prominent British knitter Jeanette Sloan. The 2019 crowdfunder for the site raised over £30,000 in 28 days. The website is "dedicated to highlighting and uplifting the work of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in the Fiber community" (BIPOC in Fiber, 2020). The website was established after ongoing debates about racism in knitting (see Patel, 2020b) and the amount raised via crowdfunding demonstrates the demand for such a space. It is an example of how women makers of colour can gain visibility online, coalesce and help each other. Another knitter involved in the BIPOC in Fiber website, Lorna Hamilton-Brown, spoke at a craft conference I organised in late 2019. On the issue of the lack of diversity in craft, she said: “I never get invited to the top table. So, I’m just going to build my own table.”

At least by building their own table, the expertise of these makers will not be judged against entrenched patriarchal standards about what constitutes ‘good work’ in craft. Such models which centre on co-creation and collective action offer a hopeful point of departure for thinking about how the craft sector can be more inclusive.

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