

“Wow, I did this!”

Making Meaning through Craft

Disrupting the craft canon

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Foreword from Crafts Council

Our study used ‘Living Labs’ as a way to explore what craft means to two groups of people in minoritised UK communities. We’re trying to challenge and upend the current craft landscape in which racism is a barrier to access.

Making is a powerful tool - it builds communities, boosts wellbeing and can empower people to change and enrich their lives. Yet makers of colour have long experienced exclusion from the cultural space that is craft in the UK.

Crafts Council is the national charity for craft. For over 50 years we have inspired making, empowered learning and nurtured craft businesses. We are seeking a step change in tackling inequality, locating this at the heart of our activities. We know that racism remains a significant barrier to participation and careers in the UK (*Making Changes in Craft*, Patel, 2021). But even with initiatives over the last three years in particular to develop anti-racist policies and ways of working, after craft arts/craft participation was identified as one of the highest happiness boosters during Covid 19¹, we know not enough is changing.

Organisations like Crafts Council recognise we have a role to play in countering a problem to which we have in part contributed - we know we can be part of the solution in working to challenge, upend and disrupt the existing craft canon, the current landscape that is craft. In this next phase of its work, Craft Council aims to disrupt monocultural definitions of craft, to bring new voices to the fore and to change the pipeline into everyday and professional craft practice.

Through the collaborative study described here, we set out to place greater emphasis on exploring the meanings of craft in some minoritised² UK communities, building on our work with Dr Karen Patel of Birmingham City University (*Making Changes in Craft* Patel, 2021, and *Craft Expertise Project*). Developing this study, with a team from Glasgow Caledonian University London, our aim was to understand more about the value of craft, through the development of new research methods which could explore what making and craft meant to people and diverse communities and how we can develop, share and apply new methods to illuminate change.

We need a broader conversation about new beginnings, discussing how we disrupt the craft canon and decolonise craft. This report aims to show how the research methods developed reveal what making and craft means to minoritised people and communities, how we/they feel about the space that is craft and how it’s navigated. The report also aims to explore how changes can amplify meanings and alter the craft space.

¹ How has Covid-19 affected wellbeing across the world? What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 13 January 2021 https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/how-has-covid-19-affected-wellbeing-across-the-world/?mc_cid=11fb-4318c5&mc_eid=4a81a8b99d

² Throughout this report we use the term ‘minoritised’, coined by Yasmin Gunaratnum (2003), to acknowledge people are actively minoritised by others rather than existing as a minority and to acknowledge the inequalities rooted in this racial hierarchy.

Listening to voices

As Nicola Dillon (partnership PhD candidate, Kingston School of Art and Crafts Council) says (Dillon 2022),

‘Craft discourse is often framed around ethnicity and tradition. Within craft literature, cultural diversity is well represented, however, the mainstream focus on framing craft through very particular products and skills can become oppressive and exclusive. It closes down the space and recognition for different ideologies and practices of craft and making that unfold within different identities and different intersections of life.’

It is these different ideologies, practices, identities and intersections which shape the lens through which we wanted to design our research into the cultural space and value of craft. Above all, our intention was to develop an approach to understanding how craft is experienced by makers of colour and explore its meanings. In this study, we chose to focus on UK-based Black and Asian women and it is our/their voices that we set out to foreground.

In their groundbreaking 1980s study, *The Heart Of The Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe documented the experience of Black women in Britain and the impact of cultural imperialism in its many forms on society, in which a positive sense of self and social identity is undermined by the trivialising, taking over, ignoring, patronising and stereotyping of all aspects of Black culture (1985). They insisted,

‘we must take stock of our experiences, assess our responses – and learn from them. This will be done by listening to the voices of the mothers, sisters, grandmothers and aunts who established our presence here. And by listening to our own voices.’ (1985:2)

What’s in the report?

In the report we describe the Living Lab as a methodology that emerged for exploring what craft means. We set out our ambitions and our approach, together with an analysis of the findings. Participants tell of an engagement with craft which:

- affirms family, tradition, community and status;
- is joyful, contemplative and full of memories;
- enhances participants’ own racial and cultural identity;
- underlines the value of community, sharing and accomplishment; and yet is frequently
- missing, unsupported and expensive to access.

At the same time, as the Living Labs were conducted, we were able to demonstrate the value of designing an approach to collaborative and co-created participative research that works with the community’s own space and programme and on their terms.

Steering the project – inclusive

We were keen to ensure a diversity of voices also informed the direction of our study. In addition to our partnership team, we asked members of Crafts Council’s Equity Advisory Council (EAC)³ to join and chair our steering group. Drawn from minoritised and underrepresented communities, the EAC came together during the Black Lives Matter debates to tackle anti-Black racism after a calling out of the Crafts Council on its stance. Since that date its members work behind the scenes as critical friends to the Crafts Council on its anti-racism and intersectional work and our/their voices were a key part of shaping the study. We started by inviting an external facilitator to lead discussion at our first steering group meeting in September 2022 to help create joint ownership of the space for our collaboration.

GCU London is an integral part of Glasgow Caledonian University – the university for the Common Good - a values-led, civic University with a strong commitment to delivering social innovation and sustainable development in its education and research⁴. This was a female-led research project and in the interests of co-designing inclusive research, the GCU London research team comprised a number of researchers with experience of collaborative community engagement and research and who also identify as women of colour.

To support career development Crafts Council funded a placement to contribute to our work from our Young Craft Citizens (YCC)⁵ programme, a collective of 16–30-year-olds interested in shaping the future of craft, design and making in the UK.

³ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/diversity-inclusion/equity-advisory-council>

⁴ Being the first university to adopt the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the framework for research, the SDGs are integral to conceptualising research that move us towards ‘environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society’ (UNESCO, 2019). With its aims to address social justice issues related to race and craft *Disrupting the Craft Canon* addresses several of the SDGs, namely SDG 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12 and 17 (<https://www.un.org/en/>).

⁵ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/learning/young-craft-citizens>

Where Next?

Through this study, we were keen to produce evidence to inform policy and practice that in turn could disrupt the power relationships in the existing craft canon. We also wanted to provide an effective model for exploring craft organisations and craft industries as well as providing them with tools which would enable them to be supportive, understanding and inclusive of their communities. The small grant used to support this project represents a small step in this journey.

How will we use this increased understanding to change how we support people in our/their craft? We are keen to see more extensive research undertaken using the Living Lab approach, working with more communities over longer periods of time to gain a deeper understanding of the value of craft and how it is framed. Central to this will be recognition by UK research funding councils and other funding bodies that craft offers a unique context in which to generate insight into creativity and the arts whilst practicing it. Craft can also be used to create authentic spaces within which to have conversations on sensitive topics such as mental health and racism.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study in the small cohorts who participated in it. The study cannot claim to solve issues around racism in craft, but it has started to raise questions about the value of craft to minoritised communities and our/their space within it. Working within the parameters of this project provided guidance to think in an innovative, co-collaborative way. We had meaningful conversations and through those started to identify what is of value going forward. We now have a case for seeking larger funding bids to develop research that opens doors to understanding how to tackle this systemic change and how to use this increased understanding to change how we support communities in our/their craft.

Crafts Council will be using the findings to inform our organisation-wide approach to public programmes, participation and engagement and our work with our sector.

We also wish to share our approach not only with other researchers, but with other creative community organisations. Accessible guidance about the Living Lab method could provide a model to help us understand our communities better and how we value creativity.

All of these take time, energy and resources.

Our Thanks

We're very grateful to:

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Natalie Melton
Acting Executive Director,
Crafts Council

Rose Sinclair
Chair of the Equity Advisory Group (2022/23) and Chair of our steering group

July 2023

⁶ GCU London Lead Academic Partner
⁷ Crafts Council Lead Cultural Sector Partner

“Wow, I did

Making Meaning through Craft

Disrupting the craft canon

In the Living Labs we asked participants about their lived personal experience of craft during a making activity. We wanted to use the Labs and our findings to co-develop research tools to help us and other organisations to tackle inequality.



Photo credit: Farhiah Chowdhury

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a study which explores the cultural value of craft in the context of race and racism in the UK through the use of a novel methodology known as Living Lab, conducted between August 2022 and June 2023.

The collaborative research project explored the structural omissions of the experiences of makers of colour from the cultural space of craft. The partners were Crafts Council (CC) and Glasgow Caledonian University London (GCU London), and the project was funded by the Centre for Cultural Value's (CCV) Collaborate Fund.

The study developed a Living Lab methodology⁸ with partners focused on co-developing research tools grounded in the reality of individuals' and local communities' lives and to illuminate inequality in the experience of craft. The Living Lab is a collaborative and reflective research approach facilitating sharing and knowledge exchange using appreciative inquiry, “co-creating innovation through the involvement of aware users in a real-life situation” (Dell’Era and Landoni, 2014). Two place-based Living Labs were held in spring 2023 with invited participants from the communities who are the focus of the research question i.e. UK Black and Asian communities.

The *Making Meaning Through Craft* Living Lab format was a focus group set within place-based participatory craft-making workshops. These workshops were informed by the principles outlined in *Stitching together: Good practice guidelines* (Twigger Holroyd and Shercliff, 2020) and we worked with two community partners OITIJ-JO (London) and Legacy West Midlands (Birmingham) to ensure the Living Labs would be open and creative spaces for participants to experience craft making. During these sessions, participants were asked to respond to a range of prompts (stimuli) that helped uncover their personal experiences related to craft and generate those questions about the value of craft which are most relevant and important to those individuals and what they consider important to their communities.

Findings are arranged thematically and highlight the contribution of the Living Lab method and its potential for future research.

These findings include:

- The value of craft to celebrate culture and family across generations
- The value of craft to communicate themes with significance to diaspora communities
- The value of craft for wellbeing
- The value of craft for community building
- The commercial value of craft
- The value of craft for lifelong learning
- The value of representation and role models for minoritised communities
- The value of craft for facilitating collaborative participatory research

The report concludes with recommendations and implication for future practice and research. The contribution of the project to understanding what making means to be people will also inform Craft Council's organisation-wide approach to public programmes, participation, and engagement.

⁸ Living Lab methodology: <https://enoll.org>

Making Meaning Through Craft

Introduction

Efforts have been made to make the craft sector more diverse, but many of these offer short-term fixes for what are long-term issues (Sinclair in *Crafts Magazine*, 2020). We need research that identifies and recognises the value of the knowledge, experience and cultural heritage of makers of colour in professional, community or other crafts spaces.

The Centre for Cultural Value (CCV)'s Collaborate Fund⁹ is a novel research initiative in which UK cultural organisations partner with academic researchers to develop collaborative research projects that ask new questions about the difference arts, culture, heritage and screen make to people's lives i.e. the value of culture. These projects also invite new approaches and ways of working.

The Crafts Council believe that craft skills and knowledge enrich and uplift us as individuals and can change our world for the better. However, a dominant monocultural construct persists around what it means to craft, with work by people of colour often fitted into narratives around race and ethnicity. While efforts have been made to make the craft sectors more diverse, many of these offer short-term fixes for what are essentially long-term issues (Sinclair in *Crafts Magazine*, 2020).

Craft is identified as one of the sectors which come under the 'creative industries' grouping as categorised by DCMS (Department of Culture and Media & Sports). In 2016, Global Majority¹⁰ workers represented only 23% of the workforce with women mainly in mid to lower-skilled positions. The Centre for London's report, *Culture Club: Social mobility in the creative and cultural industries* (Pinoncelly & Washington-Ihime, 2019), identified that 95% of workers in the creative sector came from advantaged backgrounds. *Self-Made Sector: Working in the creative industries* (PYL & Roundhouse, 2019) found that young people from minoritised communities in London are being excluded from the creative industries. Even in 2021 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Creative Diversity noted that racially minoritised people are significantly underrepresented in the creative and cultural industries (Wreyford, O'Brien, & Dent, 2021).

To address racism in craft we need research that identifies and recognises the value of the knowledge, experience and cultural heritage of makers of colour in professional, community or other crafts spaces. For the Crafts Council, the CCV fund offered a way to co-develop and co-create research which would allow us to more deeply understand how craft generates cultural value. The initial provocation set out to challenge the predominant and hegemonic narratives of craft and crafters and expand the UK craft sector's potential by reflecting the impact of immigration, migration, movement, displacement and community on cultural production and making. This project represents one workstream in the Crafts Council's ongoing commitment to reassess the narrow craft canon and the Craft Council's place in it, to address the lack of alternative histories and narratives in craft and to work towards de-colonising the craft curriculum, themes drawn from the 2021 report *Making Changes in Craft* (Patel, 2021).

Making Meaning through Craft was designed to bring together academics, cultural partners, and communities in cross-cultural, cross-generational research to facilitate sharing and knowledge exchange in the complex area of craft and race in order to identify creative solutions at a micro and macro level. As the proposer of *Making Meaning through Craft*, the Crafts Council sought an academic research partner with an understanding of cultural inclusion and experience of community research methods who was familiar with the craft sector and so able to surface the cultural meaning and emotional value of craft practiced by individuals and communities in domestic, community, liminal and unfamiliar spaces.

⁹ <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/collaborate-fund/>

¹⁰ BAME: Black, Asian, and minority ethnic. BAME is an umbrella term which was used in the quoted report to describe non-white ethnicities. The term BAME is not used any more. See <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/writing-about-ethnicity>. Global Majority is the preferred term.

The Glasgow Caledonian University London (GCU London) research team responded to the Crafts Council's initial CCV call and brought together a diverse collective of academics from the disciplines of sustainable fashion, marketing, and behavioural science in public health working under the umbrella of conscious consumption and wellbeing. As the University for the Common Good, GCU's mission is to deliver social benefit and impact through research. Being based in London's Spitalfields neighbourhood, GCU London is immersed in the histories and current context of immigration, migration, movement, displacement and community.

For GCU London, *Making Meaning through Craft* provided an opportunity to examine the power of making and teaching craft skills to positively impact not only individuals, but groups and communities in order to address the ongoing issues of the dominance of the Eurocentric/global North craft canon and the resulting historical exclusion of makers of colour from the cultural space of contemporary craft. In so doing, the research design directly responds to the recommendations from the earlier *Making Changes in Craft* report to:

- Reframe the narrative of craft by prioritising stories of and by craftspeople from ethnically diverse backgrounds to help redefine making, allow them to tell their own story.
- Improve the evidence base by addressing data gaps, evaluating and redesigning local data collection and recruitment practices for the craft and creative industries.
- Embed and support craft in education ensuring the craft curriculum includes craft histories and traditions from around the world, fully contextualised and not delivered through a Westernised, Eurocentric lens.
- Ensure craft education moves away from elitism by widening the scope of what is considered to be 'legitimate' craft, highlighting the diversity of making across the amateur to professional spectrum (Patel, 2021).



Photo credit: Gene Kavanagh



Photo credit: Gene Kavanagh

A close-up photograph of a person's hand wearing a white glove, holding a piece of purple fabric with a white pattern. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a workshop or studio setting with various tools and materials.

How we disrupted:

The Living Lab

Our two Living Labs were craft workshops held with local community groups who work with UK Black and Asian communities. We used making activities, personal stories of craft makers of colour and objects from the Crafts Council's Handling Collection to explore past and current craft experiences with participants.

"A Living Lab is a design research methodology aimed at co-creating innovation through the involvement of aware users in a real-life situation"

<https://openlivinglabdays.com/virtual-learning-lab/>

The Living Lab represents a step-change in research, an innovative real-life method using participatory approaches to ensure research is grounded in the reality of the lives of local communities. The European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) defines Living Labs as “user-centred, open innovation ecosystems based on systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in real life communities and settings.” Thus Living Labs are authentic interventions bringing affected parties together in spaces designed to facilitate the exploration of the kinds of complex issues faced by local communities (ENoLL). Whilst there is no set method for Living Lab research, the approach aims for iteration of exploration, experimentation and evaluation in order to understand the current state before designing possible future states.

Social justice and behaviour change are embedded within social and cultural contexts and therefore our focus was to propose an innovative approach to facilitate new ways of thinking about crafts practice. In seeking to eliminate barriers to participation in craft, the project also sought to eliminate barriers to engagement in research. So, although the GCU London team took the lead, it was important to develop a process of co-design to ensure the research process was grounded in the reality of the lives of makers and local communities. In this way *Making Meaning through Craft* necessitated the use of new approaches to engaging with people who aren't part of dominant networks, who may practise in less visible spaces (e.g. at home) and who may not call what they do 'craft', in order to answer the project's research questions:

- How is craft experienced and conceptualised by makers of colour
- How does craft add value for the individual and communities differentiated by race
- What is the contribution of the Living Lab method to capturing the meaning and value of the knowledge, experience and cultural heritage of craft makers of colour?

In response to the provocation, two craft-based Living Labs were conceived as craft workshops to be held within local communities where the various parties would convene to explore past and current craft experiences as well as generate alternative future visions for the UK craft sector. By centering community, the Living Lab challenges traditional models of generating evidence and contributes to emerging decolonised research methodologies (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012). Collaboration and reflection are key to achieving decolonised research; specifically, through engaging with the questions the community seeks to explore, determining what the community values and the value of the research to the community (Freire, 1996).

Understanding craft as both an individual and collective practice and recognizing the imperative for authentic community engagement underpinned the design of participatory activities that would allow for firsthand craft experience as a means to unlock personal reflection on the value(s) of craft (Gauntlett, 2018; Ingold, 2013; Lapum et al., 2014; Woodward, 2020) to explore the meanings and value of craft grounded in the reality of the lives of makers and local communities

The project was designed and conducted in line with anti-racism and cross-cultural best practice. Anti-racism work should bring together people targeted by racism and allies who are committed to addressing racism in order “to increase their collective agency to promote change in power relations and address the root cause of social and health inequities” (Came and Griffith, 2018:183). Cross-cultural research is often considered as an international practice, but also refers to domestic research conducted with a sub-group or sub-groups of diverse populations, who may have a different language or cultural background to those of the researchers. Since this was the situation in our project, it was designed, delivered and evaluated with a number of 'cultural brokers' i.e. individuals with shared cultural backgrounds and cultural sensitivity to the social and cultural context of the research (Hennink, 2017). As an external advisory committee, the oversight provided by the Equity Advisory Council was essential in maintaining cultural sensitivity, checking cultural appropriateness, language and communication strategies and protocols. We were likely to be working with a range of participants from diverse backgrounds, so cultural insiders on the research team would have the advantage of facility with language and cultural norms. However, we did not exclude cultural outsiders since they may encourage participants to give more detailed descriptions of objects and experiences than to a cultural insider with assumed knowledge (Henninck, 2017).

The aim of the Living Lab was to create an authentic environment within which to explore an under-researched topic. Fundamental to achieving this aim was the ability to access the views of underrepresented and/or minoritised groups, to capture descriptions of their experiences and events in relation to craft, and to elicit a wide range of views, perspectives or understandings. Following a pilot Lab testing the use of vignettes (stories or scenarios) designed to prompt connections and reflections from research participants, several learnings were taken forward, including the desirability of working with pre-existing community groups with a level of familiarity between members. In addition, the need to design a craft activity simple enough to complete within a limited time and that could be worked on whilst engaged in conversation. We learned that crafts and objects with which participants are familiar provoke wider-ranging conversations and associations. Finally, we determined that the craft activities themselves should have value i.e. it would be counterproductive to engage in research on the value of craft and then ask people to work on 'throwaway' projects.

The *Making Meaning through Craft* Living Lab format was a focus group set within place-based participatory craft-making workshops informed by the principles outlined in *Stitching together: Good practice guidelines* (Twigger Holroyd and Shercliff, 2020) working with two community partners OITIJ-JO and Legacy West Midlands to ensure the Living Labs would be open and creative spaces for our partners to experience craft making and respond to prompts (stimuli) that would help uncover their personal experiences related to craft and generate those questions about the value of craft which are most relevant and important to those communities.

Two place-based Living Labs were held in spring 2023 with invited participants from the communities who are the focus of the research question i.e. UK Black and Asian communities. All participants received an honorarium for their time in participating. No male participants were in attendance in the two groups. Further studies should therefore highlight when and how the male voice is present in craft.

The Living Labs introduced various stimuli (vignettes and objects from the Crafts Council's handling collection) to explore participants' experiences of and opinions on:

- Participation in individual craft activities
- Participation in community craft activities
- Cultural appropriation/appreciation of craft
- Societal value of craft
- Wellbeing in relation to craft

A range of craft vignettes were constructed by the research team to help frame the various topics to be explored in the Living Labs. Vignettes provided a way to bring the lives of a diverse range of crafters of colour into the workshops. A number of vignettes were developed, based on real crafters and included authentic examples of their lived experiences to illustrate a variety of ways into craft and of practicing craft by makers of colour. To ensure the vignettes contributed to showcasing opportunities for craft makers of colour, the starting reference points were Dr. Karen Patel's *Maker Stories* podcast series and the Crafts Council's Handling Collection. Amongst those featured in the vignettes were British-born people of colour, immigrants, people who had studied creative subjects and those who had come to crafts later in life following prior employment in other sectors. The types of crafts featured in the vignettes included ceramics, leatherwork and a range of textiles-related crafts.

As well as direct quotes from crafters, the vignettes incorporated wellbeing assessment measures, such as how frequently participants make time to pursue their own interests. The team also adapted the Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965) to gauge participants' views on the present and desired social status of crafters. In creating the vignettes, object, image and text were considered as to how each could add to the communication of craftwork and crafters' experiences as well as how they connected to the broader themes of the project. For example, where crafters in the vignettes had featured in television shows, this could be used to ask participants about their familiarity with craft in mainstream media. Sharing others' parental disappointment or support of a career in craft allowed them to reflect on their own experiences as well as projecting about what their advice would be to children or younger people of colour.

Vignettes were also selected as a method that helps to provide distance, especially in relation to sensitive topics such as mental health and racism. And in this they were especially effective. The Living Lab format allowed participants to discuss their mental health in relation to wellbeing and how they use craft to bolster their mental health. The format was also facilitative in unpacking what discrimination looks like and feels like – from micro-aggressions to systemic discrimination. When asked whether they considered themselves to be a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country, most participants confirmed that they did. In one group this question led to an extended discussion of racism where participants shared their personal stories and related these to the experiences of the subjects of the vignettes.



Photo credit: Gene Kavanagh

Vignettes were developed about the following crafters and their work:

- Pratima Kramer - a contemporary British artist, now based in Hertfordshire, who spent her formative years growing up in a Hindu brahmin family, in Gujarat, India. Pratima originally trained as a microbiologist and now works in the UK craft sector.
- Jasmine Carey – a designer-maker for Deco22, a craft-based label producing leather and fashion accessories. Jasmine trained as a fashion designer and pattern cutter before and now makes her living as a maker and teacher.
- Yemi Awosile - a British born Nigerian woman. Yemi studied textile design and now makes her living as a maker working primarily in textiles. Yemi's knitted cork samples are part of the Crafts Council's handling collection.
- Esna Su - an artist and jewellery designer, who grew up in Turkey, near the Syrian border before moving to the UK. Esna studied jewellery design and now makes her living as a crafter/maker using traditional Turkish techniques. Esna's woven paper rush and leather pieces are part of the Crafts Council's handling collection.
- Georgina Scott's resist-dyed fabric samples using the Japanese technique of Shibori are part of the Craft Council's handling collection. The samples highlight the spread of such techniques as indigo dyeing used mainly in Japan, India and Africa
- Simon Hasan's leather bottles made using a Medieval tanning process are part of the Craft Council's handling collection. Simon originally worked in advertising and now works in the UK craft sector.

The Living Labs

The CCV funding extended to hosting two Living Labs and the research partnership steering group agreed that we should aim to work with community organisations who work with minoritised communities from UK Black and Asian communities – the focus of the research. Crafts Council were keen to extend our networks beyond those organisations we already knew and developed new partnerships with OITIJ-JO and Legacy West Midlands.

The choice of partner organisations and their locations was significant and referenced in the craft activities. GCU London were familiar with the work of the London-based OITIJ-JO Collective with whom the first Living Lab took place held in East India, London an area with links to the historic colonial indigo trade. The craft selected for the session was indigo dyeing and *Shibori*¹¹ and was situated within the history of the global textile trade. The Legacy West Midlands Lab was held in Edgbaston, Birmingham a city with historic links to the leather-trade and the jewellery industry. The craft selected for the session was leather-work.

The structure of the Labs was designed to prioritise making over asking participants questions. The two Labs ran for different periods of time to fit into the groups' regular meeting patterns, they followed the same structure, opening with a description of the purpose of the sessions and introductions to the organisations and people involved. The opening and close of each Living Lab session was led by a maker educator with a period of small group making during which a focus group format was used to introduce the research stimuli and prompt discussions. A group of three to four participants worked on their craft projects whilst a researcher took them through a series of questions relating to an illustrated vignette and/or a craft object from the Craft Council's Handling Collection. Whilst participants engaged in the making process and in the discussion of experiences related to craft and their understanding of the topic, researchers and note-takers observed the interactions, gathering data on the participants' experiences and views. The workshop context was conducive to getting participants thinking and talking about their own experiences of craft. And in this type of exploratory research it was beneficial that conversations became quite wide-ranging, encompassing issues of migration, cultural hegemony, generational change, visibility and representation as well as the specifics of the featured crafter and their craft.

The first Living Lab: OITIJ-JO

OITIJ-JO community organisation hosted our first Living Lab for us in London. OITIJ-JO promotes Bengali traditions in the arts and crafts. Participants learnt the Shibori indigo dyeing practice from a sustainable and ethical fashion designer Shama Kun. They embellished their pieces with embroidery using the traditional Bangladeshi Kantha stitches while discussing the value of craft for them with the research team.

22 11 Shibori from the verb root shiboru - to wring, squeeze or press - is a resist dyeing technique originating in Japan primarily using indigo dye. As with many textile techniques the practice spread globally with each country/culture adapting to their own tastes. Historically, Bengal (much of which forms modern-day Bangladesh) was the source of quality indigo cultivated under the oppressive conditions enforced by the British colonisers. As a commodity, indigo was also central to the trade in enslaved African people

OITIJ-JO Collective was the cultural and community partner for the first Living Lab. OITIJ-JO is a UK based charity and social enterprise set up through a collaborative process in 2013 in response to the lack of representation, inclusion and non-acknowledgement and support of creatives and creative practices carried out by those of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK. OITIJ-JO's aim is to present creative excellence and achievement of Bengali traditions in the arts and crafts, enhancing the perception and practice of specific domestic crafts including but not limited to creative work with foods and fabrics. OITIJ-JO engages directly in all stages of planning and delivery with those whom they are providing services for - co-designing activities and events is fundamental and forms a core part of their work and services. This was greatly enabled in our project by Maher Anjum, co-Director at OITIJ-JO being a member of the research team.

The OITIJ-JO Living Lab was held during the first of a two-part textile workshop planned in collaboration with the facilitator and Lead for OITIJ-JO and Community Engagement Producer. The Living Lab involved participants who had previously taken part in OITIJ-JO arts, crafts and design workshops as well as members from OITIJ-JO Kitchen team, who also provided refreshments. The majority of the participants self-identified as Bangladeshi or British Bangladeshi origin but there were others who self-identified as African and Asian or Asian British¹². The ages of participants ranged from early thirties to late fifties with a median age of early forties.

The session was approximately two and a half hours long. Participants learnt about the *Shibori* technique for dyeing clothes, the history of indigo in the Indian sub-continent including the colonial period and how the sector was destroyed but how muslin and other materials became the primary materials for women's fashion in the west. The craft sessions were led by Shama Kun, a sustainable and ethical fashion designer whose work celebrates and promotes indigenous Bangladeshi textile knowledge. Having a facilitator who was an expert in crafts and traditional Bangladeshi craft practices was important to the decolonised research design. Shama's presence as a role model both acknowledged her own expertise and in addition validated the participants' own experiences and knowledge.

The conversations with participants took place following the introduction of the session, presentation on history of various dyeing practices, indigo and sustainable practices. Participants started work on their own piece of fabric sitting at tables of two or three per table along with two people from the research team – a researcher who introduced the various research stimuli (vignettes and pieces from the Crafts Council's Handling Collection) and a note-taker to observe the interactions.

By the end of the session, all participants had been involved in discussion on the value of craft for them, had taken part in designing and dyeing their own piece and had planned what they wanted to do with the piece in the next sessions. In a session held the following week participants came back to work on the pieces they had created and to embellish these with embroidery using the traditional Bangladeshi Kantha stitches. They also continued to talk about the topics raised in the first session.

¹² Office for National Statistics questions were used. They are designed for use with adult respondents aged 16 or over. It is a self-identification measure of ethnic group where respondents are invited to select, from a list of categories, the ethnic group to which they consider they belong.

²⁴ The recommended ethnic group question for use on surveys "What is your ethnic group?" came out of a 2-year cross-government consultation programme that wanted to harmonise data collection to enable consistency and comparability of data.



Photo credit: Fariyah Chowdhury



Photo credit: Fariyah Chowdhury

Living Lab 2: Legacy West Midlands

Legacy West Midlands hosted our second Lab in Birmingham. They celebrate the heritage of post-war migrant communities in Birmingham. Participants learnt leather coaster painting from Deborette Clarke, a designer-maker in this traditional West Midlands craft while discussing the value of craft for them with the research team.



Photo credit: Gene Kavanagh

Legacy West Midlands was the cultural partner for the second Living Lab. Legacy West Midlands is a registered charity with its roots in celebrating the heritage of post-war migrant communities in Birmingham. Their work highlights their relationship to the industrial, architectural, and cultural heritage of the city. They deliver projects in the northwest inner-city wards of the city, areas which have faced long-term economic disadvantage but are rich in diverse cultural heritage and entrepreneurial spirit. To reflect this, projects focus on food, architecture, migration, and industrial history. In this way, Legacy West Midlands goes beyond recording and celebrating heritage. Their work uses heritage to engage with local people – young and old – to increase their awareness of the cultural resources around them, using this as a means to promote physical and mental wellbeing.

The second Living Lab took place in Edgbaston, Birmingham, planned in collaboration with Dawn Carr, Director of Operations at Legacy West Midlands. The Living Lab formed part of an existing programme of the group's wellbeing-related activities and was held in their own familiar space and timetable. It involved participants who had previously taken part in various Legacy West Midlands' workshops, and refreshments were provided. The majority of the participants self-identified as Chinese or British Chinese origin but there were others who self-identified as Indian, Asian or Asian British. The ages of participants ranged from early fifties to late sixties.



Photo credit: Gene Kavanagh



Photo credit: Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas

The session was approximately one and a half hours long. Participants learnt about a mark-making on leather technique, using paint. The craft sessions were led by Deborette Clarke a local designer/ maker with experience in many areas of the creative sector. Having a facilitator who was an expert in leather crafts and also a qualified teacher was important to the decolonised research design. Deborette's presence as a role model both acknowledged her own expertise and again validated the participants' own experiences and knowledge.

Participants worked on their own leather samples before moving onto a final piece(s). They sat at tables of three or four along with a researcher and a note-taker to observe the interactions. The use of vignettes and stimuli helped open the various conversations the tone of which was informal. Participants were very encouraging of one another, opening up about their experiences and sharing their perspectives. Participants were very keen to take home their creations at the end of the workshop.



Photo credit: Gene Kavanagh

Findings

Participants highlighted the value in craft of:

- The value of craft to celebrate culture and family across generations
- The value of craft to communicate themes with significance to diaspora communities
- The value of craft for wellbeing
- The value of craft for community building
- The commercial value of craft
- The value of representation and role models for minoritised communities
- The value of craft for lifelong learning
- The value of craft for facilitating collaborative participatory research
- The Labs also showed the value of collaborative participatory research.

The findings that emerged from the two Living Labs are discussed below. They demonstrate the value of craft as discussed and elaborated by our participants.

- The value of craft to celebrate culture and family across generations
- The value of craft to communicate themes with significance to diaspora communities
- The value of craft for wellbeing
- The value of craft for community building
- The commercial value of craft
- The value of representation and role models for minoritised communities
- The value of craft for lifelong learning
- The value of craft for facilitating collaborative participatory research

The value of craft to celebrate culture and family across generations

In the conversations prompted in the Labs, craft was frequently mentioned in relation to the value of family and tradition, both venerated subjects throughout diaspora communities. Many participants talked about the strong links that exist between culture and craft practices:

“The things that I treasure most, funnily enough, are heirlooms basically, so like a hand-embroidered quilt, cushions”

And the identification of craft as integral to identity was mentioned by several participants:

“I feel like it’s because we struggle with our identities when we’re away from the culture that perhaps our parents grew up with. And it doesn’t 100% have that same meaning that it would have had for the parents.”

Participants frequently referred to female family members’ participation in crafts. However, they felt that these traditions and practices were diminishing and that as a consequence both craft and culture were in danger of dying out:

“Even now, if you go to a village in Bangladesh, still the whole walls would be adorned with things that the ladies have actually made themselves.”

Craft was identified as a medium to bring participants' own culture to life, especially when in current times they see that more and more younger members of the community become "westernised":

"The more it's become more westernised it gets hidden, hidden as in the culture of Bangladesh, sewing, the actual sewing itself was like a tradition. Every Bengali household knew what it was. My grandmother, my grandmother's mother, mothers, every single woman in the household, would know how to do it, even a little six-year-old would know how to do it."

For participants who grew up in the UK, or for their children - who were often perceived to have a limited knowledge of their background culture - craft appears as a medium to learn about and become more immersed in culture. Participants spoke about how culture is eroded for immigrant families and expressed their desire for more opportunities to explore their own cultures, both for themselves and also for their children.

"It's important for our children to know where they're from, and their parents or their grandparents (are) from".

Not doing this, participants felt, would result in a loss of identity:

"Belongingness would be lost as well."

"Bangladesh is the most colourful place, it's like India. We have so much colour. We have so much out there that can bring life, it's not dull at all any time of day. We want the colour. We want the excitement. But in the years that has come, it's like reducing, reducing, because I think people are busy, life's busy. Parents are working now. Both parents are working now. Kids are, we're just so focused on their career, their lives, their everything, and we're forgetting to teach them our culture."

The value of craft to communicate themes with significance to diaspora communities

During the Labs participants were encouraged to develop their own designs to apply in their craft projects. Several participants chose objects or images that were culturally significant e.g. a boat (Bangladesh) or notable landmarks (Lion's Rock in Hong Kong). They also recognised how the diaspora crafters featured in the vignettes used craft to (re)connect with their culture. One participant said in response to the vignette featuring Pratima's work:

"It brings back to her, culture back again, so the things that's been missing."

Participants' understanding of craft was very varied and covered a wide range of applications. For some participants, cooking was the craft they practice and develop. For other, hair braiding is a significant form of craft:

"Yes, making hair, making African hair. Where you braid, like plaiting the hair."

In fact, every day materials e.g. woven bamboo fans or sleeping mats were mentioned and could be considered as a way of widening the definition of craft.

Connected to the cultural aspect and sense of identity, the topic of mentors and their importance in allowing communities to become more visible was introduced by participants. It was felt that where people become a representative of a group, whether intentionally or not, by making themselves more visible they could inspire other members of their communities, especially by showing them that:

"...there are other kind of jobs out there and careers."

"It's important for people who are thinking of working in craft or interested in craft. Knowing that there's other people like you around because representation does matter. It makes a big difference."

This can also be connected to the sense of belonging since, through enlarged visibility of various members of the community from similar background, the feeling that one does not belong in places associated with craft becomes less prominent. For our participants, it was an opportunity to take pride in their heritage and cultural practices and to find ways of integrating these through craft and making. It was noticeable how many participants used collective words such as 'we' and 'our' as if they understood how their thoughts and experiences form part of a wider cultural experience.

The value of craft for wellbeing

The topic of wellbeing and mindfulness brought up by many of the participants highlighted the value of contemplative craft practices to integrate mind, body and spirit and to creating positive self-affect states/flow i.e., cheerfulness, pride, enthusiasm, energy, and joy.

“(I) can find what is happy, knitting, drawing can make happy and relax easier.”
“It is important because it keeps your mind thinking, it keeps you motivated, if you’re a creator, to keep on having opportunities to think and get your ideas out”

The connection between craft and wellbeing was highlighted by several participants. Participants recognised craft as a contemplative and cognitive practice, one which boosts self-efficacy. Some participants viewed crafting as a welcome outlet to explore their inner feelings and described craft as a form of “therapy”.

“This is like my therapy, makes you feel like, I don't know, like more able to do something that makes you happy.”

Others reflected how the levels of concentration needed to participate in crafting provided a welcome distraction to the issues they faced in their everyday lives.

“It helped me adjust my mind away from other things that's happening around the world, not just in the world, but generally my life.”

“It allows me the opportunity to come and just try something different and takes me away from the ongoing difficulties of life with all the energy crisis and the turmoil and stuff. Just gives you a bit of break”

“Making keeps my brain still and stops thoughts I don't want”

Furthermore, the group aspect was identified as beneficial to wellbeing. Participants referred to time spent together crafting as opportunities to escape from their daily lives and commitments and bond with their peers. Another factor was the fact that they could meet new people at these gatherings.

“Again, with these like groups which are thankfully free and it gives you an opportunity to meet new people. And it gives you a taster of what is out there, that kind of thing.”

“With a lot of craft you do actually need that interaction with someone else to do it, it's more enjoyable.”

“Exciting to learn something new and share (the) experience with others.”

The value of craft for community building

Participants identified the links between the craft workshop where they were working in small groups and those naturally-occurring group community practices where groups of women come together to work on joint projects e.g. for a baby’s birth blanket

“In our context just before a baby is born all the old saris were donated to make for the baby”

“Next week I want to do the traditional Bangladeshi Nakshi Khantha. Very traditional. So lots of women do huge big blankets and loads of women will sit together”

Furthermore, participants reflected on group craft sessions as an anti-racist practice where people from different communities come together via a joint activity and learn about each other.

"At the school I used to work in, we had this coffee time for parents and they had a club for a while. And sadly, because I was working at that time, I couldn't attend them. But I know that that generated a lot of interest because it was a lovely way of bringing the native British women and Bengali women together and do crochet. And they were sharing and they were learning from each other."

This even held when participants do not share a common language. Although language could have presented a barrier between participants as well as between participants and researchers, some of the research team acted as translators and participants and researchers made efforts to find common language and assist in translating questions and responses. In fact, the act of crafting could be seen as an effective means of building community across migrant peoples. One of the participants had experience of running craft workshops and shared:

"When I delivered the workshop for classmates the asylum seeker ladies some of them they can't speak English, so my English already not good and they can't. What can we do? Just body language. But I think arts like music or drawing you can communicate without language."

And as an extension of this, participants recognised that the where groups are mono-cultural, this presents barriers to participation that having diverse groups lessens:

"If you imagine you go into a new setting as a student, and you're just the one and only whoever nationality you may be. You're kind of thinking, 'do I belong? I'm not. Should I be here?' Okay, you get a welcome, but it's like you get little cliques wherever you go. Don't you?"

The commercial value of craft

The primary focus of the research was to uncover what participants understood by the value of craft and how craft should be valued. Aside from craft as a leisure activity we were interested in how people view craft as a career choice. Participants responded to one of two scenarios captured in the vignettes; one where crafters had pursued a creative education leading to a career in craft, or another where the subject of the vignettes had only become a crafter later in life, after having first pursued a more traditional career.

"In south east Asia crafts people are hardly paid, they're paid a pittance, some of the amazing, amazing work they do. People buy their products and are happy to sell it here for a lot of money..."

Participants were also asked to speculate on scenarios where their younger selves may have considered a career in craft and/or where they might be advising younger relatives. They recognised the experiences of the crafters whose families may not be supportive of craft as a career:

"This is normal. I love drawing but my parents not allowed me. They let us send you to learn any until I finished high school, I earn money, I paid for myself to do some drawing. It's because they think this is very silly, not earns you any money. Not very reliable."

"I think that you can take the craft as your second job. That's very good. Or part-time job."

Whilst personally recognising and valuing the skills of craftspeople universally, participants identified a double-standard, expressed with reference to income and/or class, whereby indigenous crafters are frequently considered and paid as low-skilled workers whereas those with cultural capital are able to gain personal benefit, including financial, from practicing the same, or similar crafts.

"In Asia I think the lower income person to do that. About foreigner, overseas people, maybe rich person to do this because have the money to improve their skills about that, and then they know how to go on even how to promote their products. Once successful, the person's interest is different. One is for find some money so I think to do this, one is to become artisan, one is artisan, one is worker, difference for this."

Intimately connected to the topic of craft as a career, was the notion of background and class. Craft appears as a luxury for those that can afford to dedicate time and have available income to support it:

“Because a lot of people might be from working class backgrounds, single parents. And how would they get funding, say, to go to arts classes or acting classes or drama or whatever? So, it’s money is always a big barrier.”

So ultimately, following your heart into craft seemed to be supported by the majority of our participants, yet poor salaries and racism often preclude craft as a viable career choice

“As an English person, white person, you know how to do this. You know where to go. You know how to connect. You know how to, where to ask for things. And also, you know how to fill things out. As a Bangla person you have to learn all of those things. You have to find where to go to get them, where the connections are.”

“A lot of young people, young men and women, would be kind of turned off the idea of going into arts and crafts, because of they think what reception would I receive? Would they look at me disfavouredly?”

Value of representation and role models for minoritised communities

Although lack of time was referred to as the most frequent reason for not partaking in craft, participants also referred to a lack of access related to race and minoritised status (see above). The Labs were implicitly designed to provide a range of craft role models from minoritised communities operating in various functions within the UK craft ecology. From the subjects of the vignettes, the makers of the Crafts Council Handling Collection objects, the maker educators and to some extent, the research team itself. Thus, it was pleasing to see role models emerge as a proposed solution and part of anti-racism work in craft. Participants identified the subjects of the vignettes as role models as well as suggesting how more role models would help diversify the craft sector, which was seen as especially important for younger people who might not otherwise see craft as a viable pursuit

“Mentors, role models are a good thing. I know I’ve seen other people who’ve done things, you think, ‘wow, I can do that!’”

“It’s good to have someone like Jasmine, who despite probably feeling a bit out of place, to carry on and get her work out there, show. And then young people can think ‘Yeah I’ll give that a go, see I can come up with it.’ Because if she’s doing something that we as a person of colour don’t do much of, and she gets known and her work gets out there. Then, yes she’s a trailblazer.”

The value of craft for lifelong learning

For the majority of participants, craft is not part of their regular activities. They generally recall craft as being something they did when they were much younger – in most cases not having practiced craft since primary school, although some participants remember taking part in craft in secondary school.

“I’m very busy. And that’s why I’m saying it’s important for me to have my time. I’ve realized that I’ve missed out that time when I was creative, arty when I was younger.”

“When I was still young I make a lot of detailing, make the clothing for myself but I grow up I just focus on my job”

“The more you see of your own nationality or your own ethnicity, the better. You can just get in, get in, and get on with what you come for. Not feeling like shall I go next week, oh my god, or shall I carry on.”

They felt this was a direct result of school curricula prioritising other subjects meaning that craft activities were generally associated with very young children:

“They need to start with the small ones. Well they do, don’t they? Meaning in the nurseries they get this out and let the kids and have a little you know potter around and then it vanishes when they start school. It vanishes and it shouldn’t it should never vanish.”

“They’re all concentrating on all these writing and everything like that instead of actually doing creation. Children learn differently. And you may get a child that’s very artistic. Like to draw, colour and invent things, create things but do they get the opportunity? Not very often You know. They don’t do enough of it it’s all bookwork you know the reading and essays.”

“If you look across the school curriculum, art is there, but the focus is always going to be maths and English isn’t it? What are you telling the children at the very young age that those subjects are not valued.”

Some participants had either returned to or taken up craft in later life, and several participants were inspired by the Lab and expressed a desire to further their craft activities. They also suggested craft as a positive addition to the formal and informal curriculum.

“I haven’t done anything like this actually. I don’t think I’ve done it as an adult. I think I need to go to more classes.”

One of the biggest value-added aspects of craft is the ability to motivate and develop a creative side. Participants spoke of value of participating in craft workshops as part of lifelong learning:

“I think it is important because, you know, it keeps your mind thinking, it keeps you motivated, if you’re like a creator, to keep on having opportunities to think and get your ideas out.”

The value of craft for facilitating collaborative participatory research

One of the main findings is the value of intentional research practices. Through the Living Labs and the collaborative research tools used, we feel we were able to generate authentic insights and questions of interest to diaspora communities. Research is all too frequently an extractive process. In this case, our participants’ comments made during the Labs and in their exit surveys showed how well-designed, mindful research can add value for individuals and groups whose thoughts and experiences are the subject of research projects. The objects especially, really helped break the ice to start talking about craft, making research more comfortable for participants. However, both object and image-based vignettes were effective in prompting sharing from participants on how they felt about their own experiences with craft and in highlighting what they considered of importance for the sector to develop.

Participants’ response to the Lab was positive and showed they understood the purpose and process of the Labs:

“Thanks for being here and going through this with us because it is nice just to come out and relax and share and have different people around to teach us different skills and ideas and hopefully we’ll take something from this today.”

“Really interesting questions and conversations, being asked them is an opportunity to think about the answers.”

Most participants acknowledged that their opinions are rarely sought and expressed how they valued having the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences across the range of topics explored in the Labs. Being asked what mattered to them about craft was very important. No-one of consequence to them had asked them what they thought and what their views were on the matter or how things could be changed:

“Talking about it is really interesting, it’s not things I’ve thought of before and having these conversations really makes you think”

“(…) we don’t talk about these things to anybody, who would we even, nobody really.”

“I think having conversations sometimes opens up what you actually think about it.”

For some participants, just by taking part in these workshops they felt validated in how they replicated community practices, something they feel has been lost with over time.

“It’s nice. Sit around. Do something together. Have a bit of a chat.”

“I know I’m going to feel like I have engaged with something, because it’s cultural. (…) Get a sense of accomplishment from it. Feel proud of as well. Like, you know, the food I was talking about. I would only share that with my own immediate family but with the crafting I could share that with friends. I’ve made this. It’s this kind of technique.”

The Living Lab method allowed for findings to flow in what felt like a natural manner, and so allowed the generation of a wide and deep range of data. Just by running the Living Lab sessions themselves with participants from minoritised communities and bringing their voices to the table was and is disrupting the craft canon as it stands. Something as simple as this action can start making a change. For the participants of the Living Lab, being involved in the session with Craft Council was a start. In addition to showing what issues and which questions were of interest to our Living Lab participants, each session closed with an exit survey where participants were asked to highlight topics they would like us to consider as we take the research forward. Alongside comments showing how much they had enjoyed the sessions, participants expressed how much they considered craft as an integral human activity:

“Craft is a part of life.”

They wanted us to know and consider how:

“Diversity is a work in progress in people lives.”

And urged action that would be:

“Making things better for the next generation.”

Having set ourselves a complex set of deliverables across the two Labs, it was extremely satisfying to receive positive feedback on how sessions ran. Engagement, verbal and written feedback was enthusiastic. Furthermore, participants explicitly reflected upon the method of the Labs, saying how participating in research in such a way i.e. at the same time as working with your hands, didn't feel like a cold or sterile interview, in fact one of the participants described the whole process as feeling *'like a hug'*.

Conclusions and

We explored, developed, and tested measures of the cultural value and wellbeing attached to craft by racially minoritised communities who are excluded from craft. Craft was identified as a means to bring participants' own culture to life and to take pride in those cultural practices.

All communities must be supported for everyone to access and explore their own craft ambitions. But this will not happen without more investment in research, more inclusive involvement in craft and more opportunities to apply the Living Labs approach.

The ethos of the Collaborate fund is to bring cultural organisations and academic partners together to co-design innovative and impactful research. Our funded project *Making Meaning through Craft* explored, developed, and tested measures of the cultural value and wellbeing attached to craft. The research facilitated the co-design of a community-based, cross-disciplinary research project. We worked specifically with racially minoritised communities who are excluded from the cultural space of craft.

The findings showcase the value of craft to celebrate culture and family across generations, to build communities and to communicate themes with significance to diaspora communities. The findings demonstrate the positive value of craft on wellbeing and its value for lifelong learning.

The Living Lab approach itself shows the value of communicating objects and themes whose absence has contributed to the exclusion of people of colour from the craft canon. It gives an idea of the racism experienced and how the intersectional issues of background and class are still big barriers to craft and craft skills.

The findings also demonstrate the inequalities in the commercial value of craft and the value of representation and role models for minoritised communities. Established networks are important to facilitate connections and links that can be valuable to drive the practice of crafts. With networking comes an internal sense of confidence and progress that participants saw as a key driver of crafts. Without enough confidence to put yourself out there, you are unlikely to look for and explore those networks.

The findings also show the value of craft for facilitating collaborative participatory research that is innovative, challenging and drives us forward. A key stage in our project was working with community partners and within real-life craft contexts, to help the research be more collaborative and less extractive. Taking research out of academia and grounding it in a real-life context helped us demonstrate the potential for working with a creative, socially responsive methodology.

By collaborating on this project Crafts Council and GCU London have generated insights that address the complex issues highlighted by the earlier *Making Changes in Craft* report. Our participants' voices are integral to a journey whose impact must change and disrupt the craft canon. The value that our study participants attached to the space of craft must be supported for everyone to explore their own craft ambitions.

Our findings have already formed the basis of public-facing and academic research outcomes. We have disseminated findings through research seminars and events, such as the Craft Expertise conference and a Creative Industries Journal article (forthcoming). Furthermore, building on this project OITIJ-JO successfully bid for funding from the RSA Catalyst Fund to set up OITIJ-JO Design Studio and creative workshops for East London NHS Trust for a pilot social prescribing project.¹³

As a sector leader Crafts Council will be seeking to tackle these challenges more with a focus on race and equality. But this will not happen without more investment in research, more inclusive governance of the craft space and more opportunities to apply the Living Lab approach.

We recommend that:

- Funding bodies, research councils and development organisations must recognise the value of undertaking more research with cultural organisations into the cultural value of craft in the context of race, racism and a wider intersectional approach
- Inclusive governance must be central to work to challenge and disrupt the existing craft (and creative) canon
- Barriers to access should be understood from an intersectional perspective
- Craft and creative organisations must be supported and enabled to learn from the Living Lab approach.

“Even when we’re practicing our crafts solo, we’re engaging in connection. Our practices are the culmination of our experiences, our backgrounds, our skills, and our identities. None are formed in a vacuum. We draw on and contribute to communities that are far larger than we are.” (Hewett, 2019 p 359)

¹³ Using a circular business model, OITIJ-JO aims to establish a studio to design and develop fashion, textile samples and products that have been sourced ethically and are sustainable. The studio will engage with British Bangladeshi and other ethnic minority women Tower Hamlets initially, to co-create and co-develop the entity <https://www.thersa.org/blog/2023/07/rsa-catalyst-awards-2023-winners-announced>

Afterword

“The card identifying the maker reads, ‘anonymous black woman’ ... Art historians focusing on quilting have just begun to document traditions of black female quilters, to name names, to state particulars” (hooks, b:pp 326:2007)

In craft, much of the work of makers of colour has often gone unrecognised, unnamed, unacknowledged. In getting into the craft industry it is still difficult to obtain figures that actually tell us the true story of how as makers of colour or a minoritised community we are represented, and where we are represented in the craft sector. The pipeline from informal learning spaces to formal learning spaces that allow engagement in craft whether for pleasure, leisure or an opportunity to make a living, are still to be researched in full.

Therefore a method of collecting stories, that speak of values and engagement in the practice of craft in our communities allows a picture to be collected that demonstrates that craft is a practice that is treasured and honoured and in that there are innate values that are demonstrated and can be gleaned.

The increasing interest in the last five years around connected histories of craft and the dialogues of neglected research about race in craft as discussed in Karen Patel’s report (2021), has opened up the landscape that allows wider discussion around the perception of craft outside of the perceived studio concept.

The CCV Collaborate project has presented an opportunity as Chair of the EAC to work jointly within and across the Crafts Council and alongside external project partner GCU London.

The ability to share difficult as well as exciting conversations around craft and knowledge exchange in a safe space that do not emerge from the position of the space of the studio craftsman, but are rooted in communal grassroots community values, presents us all with new vision of how craft as a tool can open up new approaches to the commonality of the language making across communities.

The value of this project will lie in its legacy and the determination of the Crafts Council to push forward with the agenda to develop the work as it has started. As the national body responsible for craft it is now spearheading change across the sector, and the development of this work is one aspect of this change.

This research project demonstrated a collective effort to engage and discuss the value of craft in communities whose voices are not often heard in the space. It offered the chance to give space to open dialogue around what makes craft so vital and how knowledge exchange happens. More importantly it opens the dialogue around how race and ethnicity play a part in the framing of the discourse of how craft itself has a hegemonic hierarchy and often excludes.

Inclusion is the key point of this research and the legacy is to create wider guidance for all organisations that the Crafts Council engages with to support and work with.

Being part of this project has not been without its challenges: it has offered insights into how meaningful conversations can be had in working collaboratively, creating safe spaces to have conversations, and engaging in exchange of practice and searching the archives that are the Craft Council’s Collections.

The journey does not end here and there is a need for more research, but this needs to occur at all levels of the current system of funding in terms of research agenda, research funding councils (Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK Research and Innovation), and other funding bodies and charities. Policy needs enabling, that recognises the value of craft as a catalyst for change, and part of one’s heritage and identity.

My thanks to my fellow EAC members, Chinelo and Chanelle for walking alongside me in this project, and also to Julia Bennett for the conversations too numerous and the team at Crafts Council who have walked with this conversation, and the GCU London team who have really opened the door to collaborative discourse. To Natalie Melton, Acting Executive Director, thank you for your support and encouragement.

To those who will read this report, the challenge will be to no longer have nameless makers of colour in your archives and spaces, to seek to move forward in opening the doors and making change happen. As minoritised groups, Global Majority makers, we have knowledge, we make, we craft, we have history, we share stories - come on the journey, be part of the change.

Rose Sinclair,
Chair of the Equity Advisory Group (2022/23) and Chair of our steering group

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