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**“I want to be judged on my work, I don't want to be judged as a person”: Inequality, expertise and cultural value in UK craft**

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the relationship between inequality, expertise and cultural value in UK professional craft. Drawing on interviews with ethnically diverse women makers, I explore how getting their craft skills recognised and valued as *expertise* hinders their ability to establish a full-time career in craft. This is because judgements of craft expertise are largely predicated on aesthetic codes and classifications which are historically racialised, gendered and classed. In order to address these exclusionary processes, I argue that expertise in craft, which refers to the practical skills of production and the capacities of the maker, should be more central to evaluative judgements. I draw on Janet Wolff's work on community evaluation to discuss how evaluative judgements about craft expertise can be less universalizing and instead located within specific contexts and communities. I propose that community evaluation could help to reframe what ideas of craft expertise are and help address existing inequalities in the sector.

Keywords: Craft, Cultural Industries, Expertise, Gender, Race, 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.

(Sennett, 2008:268)

In this quote from *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett argues that almost anyone can become good at craft. 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” (Sennett, 2008:68). While this may be true, certain types of crafts, and certain types of maker, are valued more highly than others in the Western context. I explore the lived experience of these hierarchies through interviews with 18 women makers from ethnically diverse backgrounds based in the UK. All of the interviewees are working as professional makers either full time, or part time alongside other craft or arts related work. Their accounts provide an insight into the experience of inequality in UK professional craft. I understand craft as the creation of 3D objects using materials. Examples include jewellery, textiles, woodwork and ceramics, which are the areas the interviewees primarily work in.

The irony in Sennett's quote at the beginning of this article, of 'anyone' becoming a good 'craftsman', is not lost on me here. The figures demonstrate that indeed not everyone can come to be regarded as a good craftsperson, otherwise the UK professional craft sector would ostensibly be more representative of the British population. According to the Crafts Council's *Market for Craft* report (Crafts Council, 2020) “the sector has to go further to ensure craft is an inclusive space for all ethnicities and genders, with the proportion of black and minority ethnic (BAME) makers remaining unchanged compared to 2006 at 2-4%” (p.8). In their book on inequalities in the UK creative and cultural industries, Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor (2020) show that of those working in secure craft occupations, just 22% are women, and 92% are white (p.63-66).

Susan Luckman and Jane Andrew, in their work on the craft economy in Australia, note how contemporary craft is “marked by its whiteness” (Luckman and Andrew, 2020:18).

Why are there inequalities in crafts, and how can they be addressed? As highlighted in the introduction to this special issue, while there has been a significant uptake in research which highlights inequalities in the creative industries, much of this work has focused on the media industries and the arts, with relatively little focus on professional craft. In this article I focus on how the prevailing conditions of inequality in craft are shaped by social and cultural structures which determine what, and who, is of value. The work of Janet Wolff (1981, 2006) highlights how aesthetic standards are socially constructed, determined by patriarchal judgement criteria that exclude women and people of colour. These aesthetic standards are produced and reproduced within capitalist structures where whiteness is ideological (Skeggs, 2019; Virdee, 2019) and shapes how certain groups of people are deemed to be more valuable than others. I argue that it is especially difficult for makers from marginalised groups to be regarded as experts in their craft, not because of their perceived aesthetic knowledge or practical capabilities, but mostly because of their gender, class and the colour of their skin. This “snarling vine” (Skeggs, 2019) of race, class and gender entraps anyone who is not white, and in the context of craft, these value hierarchies reproduce the inequalities and whiteness of the sector.

In previous published work I have discussed the idea of the expert in cultural work (Patel, 2020), where I have argued that expertise is inherently linked to power, and that these power relations shape the conditions of cultural production and reception, contributing to inequalities within the creative and cultural industries. In that work I focused primarily on professional artists, who often did not self-identify as experts, mostly because expertise as a term is generally associated with rationality and bureaucracy (Prince, 2014). As such, the figure of the expert is at odds with the figure of the ‘genius’ artist (Patel, 2020). However, I suggest that the concept of expertise can help us to rethink how cultural objects - and their producers - are valued. In this

article I apply this thinking to issues of cultural value and inequality in craft, in conjunction with Janet Wolff's (2006) work on community evaluation. I argue that judgements about expertise and cultural value in craft need to be located within specific communities, and be reflexive and contingent. A consideration of craft expertise, of the skill and mastery in creation of a craft object, can help to inform contextualised evaluative judgements and attempt to detach them from exclusionary aesthetic criteria. Such an approach can help us to think about how inequalities can be addressed, rather than simply highlighting that inequalities exist.

The structure of the article is as follows: in the next section I outline the theoretical work which informs how craft expertise is conceptualised in this research. I then introduce the methods used, before going on to discuss the experiences of the women interviewed. I analyse their experiences in relation to the social and cultural conditions which preserve existing hierarchies in craft. Finally, I discuss Wolff's concept of community evaluation as a potential way to address these inequalities, by doing away with restrictive and prejudiced value judgements, focusing on the craft expertise of the producer.

### **Expertise and inequalities in craft**

The concept of expertise is of interest here because it can help us take into account both the material conditions of craft and the makers involved in this research, and the wider power structures at play in determining who, or what, is of value in craft. As I have argued elsewhere, the idea of the expert as a powerful, authoritative, and mostly white and male figure helps to reinforce hierarchies within cultural work (Patel, 2020). This is because much research on expertise in creative and cultural work focuses on policymakers (see Prince, 2014), or critics and intermediaries (see Nixon and du Gay, 2002; O'Connor, 2015; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014) and not the creators. Such work affirms the cultural expert as a powerful authority figure, with the social and cultural capital to determine the career pathway of an artist or creator. This

process is detailed in *The Rules of Art* by Pierre Bourdieu (1996), who described how the success of an artist is determined by external forces - “the ensemble of agents and institutions which participate in the production of the value of the work via the production of the belief in the value of art in general and in the distinctive value of this or that work of art” (p.229). For Bourdieu, artists and works of art are produced within the cultural field, which has a set of rules about what types of art, and artists are to be consecrated. The intermediary is responsible for unearthing and promoting the work of the artist. Thus, Bourdieu’s account places the creator as subject to external forces, with little room for resistance or potential change (Born, 2010). In this article I suggest that more attention should also be paid to the practical, aesthetic expertise of professional makers. I conceptualise aesthetic expertise as a knowledge of aesthetic codes and classifications, as well as skill in mastering the techniques to produce a work of aesthetic value that is recognised and legitimated (Patel, 2020). This definition of aesthetic expertise can arguably inform an understanding of craft expertise too, as it also involves practical skill and aesthetic knowledge, and recognition and legitimation by others in the craft sector, including craft organisations, commissioners, galleries and collectors.

The figure of the expert in judgement became increasingly prominent in craft during the latter part of the 20th Century, when craft was increasingly aligned to fine art aesthetics during the Arts and Crafts movement and the work of William Morris in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the work of the Crafts Council later on (Luckman, 2015). As such, professional craft practice in the UK became highly valued and associated with fine art. ‘Master craftsmanship’ became a marker of excellence, skill and expertise. Though anyone can seemingly develop craft expertise, as mentioned in the quote by Sennett at the beginning of this article, very few ostensibly ‘make it’ as a ‘master’ of their craft, as it requires not only practical skill, but also knowledge of aesthetic conventions (Pye, 2010). In professionalised craft, the expertise of the maker needs to be recognised and valorised by the relevant ‘experts’ in the field, but such value judgements are

often exclusionary, based on criteria and conventions which are racialized, gendered and classed. These hierarchies of value reproduce inequalities in professional craft, leaving the craft expertise of marginalised groups undervalued and misrecognised.

Such hierarchies are evidenced in Annapurna Mamidipudi's (2019) work on handloom weavers in South India. Mamidipudi highlights the "innovative practices" (p.241) of the weavers, describing 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). For her, handloom weavers "stand in the shadow of deep divisions - science/craft; modern/traditional; educated expert/illiterate labourer". Handloom weaving is associated with the past, rather than the future. These divisions are further entrenched when "knowledge owned by dominant social groups is privileged over others' knowledge, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies" (p.246). Mamidipudi argues that for handloom weavers, the explication of their tacit knowledge is important to challenge entrenched notions of handloom weaving being a traditional and less valuable form of practice, because their tacit knowledge is not adequately recognised (see also Gajjala in this issue). Handloom weaving is considered to be a 'lesser' form of craft, as are many forms of craft which are traditionally associated with women and the domestic environment, such as knitting, crochet and embroidery. Roziska Parker (2010) discusses the cultural downgrading of textile crafts which occurred during the Arts and Crafts movement. During that time, the split between art and craft had associated gender and class connotations which ascribed art to middle class practice, and craft to working class practices which mostly took place in the home and by women. In the contemporary context, Susan Luckman notes how such forms of textile craft have gained popularity during the 2010s as part of what she describes as the "post-Etsy handmade economy" (Luckman, 2015:12), but the dominant image of this newer 'maker movement' is mostly white, middle class and originating in the Global North.

The literature highlights how craft made by women and people of colour is considered to be 'lesser', but there is little empirical evidence of the lived experiences of these hierarchies, and even less consideration of how these hierarchies could be addressed. In the following sections I discuss these experiences using the interview data from participants in this research, before drawing on the work of Janet Wolff to explore how craft expertise and value judgements can be reframed.

## **Method**

The focus in this article is the UK professional craft sector, because this is where the research project which informed this article is situated. I carried out semi-structured interviews with 18 women makers from ethnically diverse backgrounds, whose ages ranged from their early 20s to mid 60s. All of the interviewees were British and have family origins outside of the UK, predominantly from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. The women were based in various locations including London, Birmingham and Newcastle, and most of them were either working full-time in a studio or doing part time jobs such as teaching and consultancy alongside their craft. Most of them had some sort of formal training in art and craft, mostly through University courses, with some completing practical craft courses at college. The types of craft practice the interviewees were involved in included textiles, jewellery, ceramics, leather and craft art. The interviews were carried out throughout 2019 and 2020, were semi-structured and lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. Participants were asked about their journey into professional craft and their specific experiences as women of colour in the sector. Interviews carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic were face to face, so I visited the participants' places of work or studios. After the pandemic they were carried out online via Microsoft Teams and recorded. Pseudonyms are used for all participants, who provided written consent. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed and I used Nvivo software to organise common themes running throughout

the interviews. The methodology was informed by a cultural studies approach, whereby the methods are designed to get a sense of the lived experience of making culture, the relationships and “complex material conditions” (Gray, 2003:12) which determine who makes culture and who determines its value. The excerpts from the interviews used in the following sections were chosen as they best represented the two major themes which emerged from the analysis: racism and microaggressions, and how the work of the participants is judged.

### **Inequalities and cultural value in UK craft**

Expertise has some relation to cultural value – for example a craft object created by someone considered to be a ‘master’ or ‘expert’ craftsman is likely to be deemed more valuable than a coaster crocheted by a hobbyist friend. However, the criteria by which judgements of expertise and cultural value are made often favour privileged groups (O’Brien and Oakley, 2015). Eleonora Belfiore (2020) notes that in the UK cultural value is “shaped by the power relations predominant at any one time, and is a site for struggles over meaning, representation and recognition” (p.384). For the women interviewed in this research such power relations are often experienced as intersectional oppression - overlapping systems of prejudice and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989), which can affect how their work is judged by others in the craft sector.

### *Racism and microaggressions in UK professional craft*

Many of the interviewees described experiences of racism and microaggressions in craft spaces such as studios or fairs. These experiences make it difficult for them to feel included or valued in professional craft communities. Microaggressions are “brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to people of colour because they belong to a racially minoritised group” (Rollock, 2012:517). Microaggressions were more commonly experienced by interviewees, but



there were some examples of racism. For example Sophie, a craft artist based in Newcastle of South Asian heritage, experienced outright racism at a craft fair in the region. She described how a fellow stall holder, an older white man, came over to her stall and said “oh yeah, we don’t want brown people here”. She said: “it was so in my face, it was horrible. Unfortunately, apparently, that is kind of like the norm at some markets, and it’s a bit strange”.

The idea that racism is normalised at certain craft markets is sadly indicative of the increase in racism and discrimination throughout the UK during the Brexit conjuncture (Virdee and McGeever, 2017). Anita is a craft artist of South Asian heritage based in London, and described how she frequently experienced racism and microaggressions from customers at studio events and from fellow members of the studio. She was once asked “you’re not a Muslim, are you?” by a fellow studio holder. She said that Brexit and far-right politicians in the UK had legitimised racism: “they’ve basically said it’s all right to be racist. I mean I’ve even noticed it on the radio as well, and things that nobody would have said 10 years ago, people are now saying. It’s insidious. It’s creeping through all kinds of things”. Anita said that in professional craft, it is no different. “I think the irony is you assume that if you’re with artists, that they’re liberal, freethinking, expansive ideologies or alternative perspectives on life. When it’s actually just the same old, same old”. What Anita said has echoes of Rosalind Gill’s research on the myth of the ‘cool, creative and egalitarian’ creative and cultural industries (Gill, 2002) where even though workers in these sectors may appear liberal and inclusive, hiring practices and working conditions are incredibly discriminatory.

The experiences of racism and microaggressions relayed by the interviewees occurred in many different areas of the sector – from studios, to customers, and dealing with suppliers. Some interviewees described times when they were made to feel alienated and dehumanised in craft spaces. For example, Jennifer talked about her experience at a studio in London, where she was often confused with other black makers in the studios. She said that even though one of the other

black makers there had a strong American accent, they were often confused. Jennifer described one encounter with a fellow stall holder she knew well:

So we would come in, in the morning, “Oh, hi, how are you doing?” Just, like, a quick thing. So I know everything about her and know her brand. And then one morning I came in and she started talking to me and I realised that she didn't know who I was. She was talking to me about the other girl. And I was just like, “Gosh, she thinks I'm the other person.” It's, like, all these months, you didn't see me. I was just, like, this shape in front of you and that is so dehumanising.

The woman Jennifer was talking to would not have realised how what she did was a form of microaggression, making Jennifer feel dehumanised. The idea that women of colour are not ‘seen’ or appreciated in craft spaces was a common recurring theme in the interviews which took many forms. For example, Leila was a student on a textile course at University, and described how in a workshop she “was just minding my business and I just felt somebody’s hand in my hair, feeling through my braids, and it was my tutor”. She said that she felt shocked, and when she turned around the tutor said “Oh, I love your hair”. Leila said she didn’t know how to take it, and felt that in a white dominated classroom, she had no one to turn to who could understand her reaction and reassure her that the actions of the tutor were not welcome.

Other experiences were related to makers being made to feel like they don’t belong in some craft spaces. For example Rebecca, a jeweller in Birmingham of British South Asian heritage, described how she felt she was discriminated against by suppliers, because of a combination of her race, gender and class:

I have found people are quite often rude to me as well. I can’t tell if that’s because I’m young or I’m Asian or they don’t like work, I can’t tell what that is about, you

know...[they] just look down on you and they think you don't know what you're talking about when you go and speak to them about a piece of work. [...] I just think people have a set view and they can't change that. Some of it is class too.

Rebecca later in the interview described herself as working class and having a Midlands accent, which, combined with her outward appearance as a British South Asian woman, she felt contributed to people in the jewellery industry, particularly suppliers (which are male dominated), not taking her work seriously.

Meg, a knitter, described how whenever she went to knitting shows in the UK, "you always get looked at like you're weird. So, I love it when I do see different ethnicities, when I go to knitting shows, because we have a right to be there." Meg spoke a lot about wanting to be treated better by others in craft, particularly when it came to judgement of her work:

I mean, just because we're of colour doesn't mean our products are any less than somebody else's that is white. [...] You know, we all just want to be on an equal playing field, and not having to compete and work twice as hard, where it's so easy to some.

Her comments point to the whiteness of professional craft in the UK and how difficult it can be for makers of colour to gain recognition. Even when some of the makers won prestigious awards or placements, which should give them increased status, this was often questioned by some. For example Julia, who is of Caribbean heritage and based in London, described an instance when she had won an award and someone pointed to her skin, and said "did this work for you then?" implying that she won the award because she was black.

Anita, mentioned earlier, was once told by another studio holder "you're only here to tick a box". The idea of 'box ticking' and tokenism is a common criticism of diversity schemes which aim to get more people of colour into the creative industries (See Malik, 2013; Nwonka, 2015; Saha, 2018)

and Julia and Anita were judged to not 'belong' in craft spaces, because they were seemingly there only to fulfil a diversity quota. Anamik Saha argues that policy attempts to increase diversity in the cultural industries are serving "an ideological function that sustains the institutional whiteness of the cultural industries even while they claim (often genuinely so) to do something more inclusive". (2018:88). Indeed, some interviewees felt that such schemes can put them in a difficult position, because of the 'box ticking' accusation. They are being judged based on their ethnicity and/or gender, rather than their work.

### *Judgement and cultural value*

Many of the interviewees felt that their work was often unfairly judged by others. For example, Tina, who is of South Asian heritage and has a jewellery studio in London, has been based at her studios for twenty years and is well established in her field. She 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 described another instance where her craft expertise and the quality of her work was being judged by potential customers, despite her years of experience as a jeweller:

Another guy bought a pair of earrings off me, they were like £150. And he said, "So, when they break, I can come back to you?" and I said, "What? Why would you even

say that?" [...] And I said, "Look, I'm always here if there's ever any problems with the piece, I'm here to fix it". But I wished I'd have pulled him up, and said to him, "Do you know what, I don't think that's a very nice thing to say to me. [...] Because you're questioning me as a maker, and the quality of my workmanship.

Tina said that microaggressions such as the comments about her work were "exhausting" to deal with. Described here are examples of the evaluative moment (Stewart, 2013) in craft, with potential customers. Simon Stewart argues that in studies of cultural production, more attention should be paid to the moment when cultural objects and their aesthetic qualities are evaluated by others. Stewart describes the dynamics of the evaluative moment, which include:

*The presence of other people and the influence that they bear.* Our evaluation of a cultural object is often something that is at least in part a result of dialogue with peers as well as with wider societal forces, and our judgment will be influenced by the presence of others.

(Stewart, 2013:120, emphasis in original).

In the case of Tina, her presence as a maker seemingly has some bearing on the dynamics of the evaluative moment. She felt if she were white, she would not be asked if her jewellery were made abroad, thus not British, or she would not be asked if her jewellery would break, and implicitly seen as poor quality.

It is not only the presence of the maker themselves which can influence evaluative judgements, there are also wider social and cultural factors to consider. For example, Childress and Nault (2019) highlight how intermediaries in trade fiction publishing select manuscripts based on cultural proximity to themselves, or 'cultural matching'. They describe and how race in particular is a "marker of cultural similarity and difference" whereby intermediaries "select and pass on manuscripts along culturally inscribed racialized lines"

(p.116) resulting in inequalities faced by non-white authors in the publishing process. Their work, and the work of Simon Stewart, mostly applies to cultural intermediaries and their role in selecting work. However the idea of cultural matching, and people being drawn to art and objects which they can relate to, could also be an underlying factor in the evaluative moment. Even so, that does not fully explain the microaggressions the makers experience, assumptions made about the quality of work produced, and in Anita's case, even when her expertise is recognised and legitimated via a major commission, her achievements are questioned by others.

Anita, who is based at a shared studio in London, told me about a significant commission she received from the British Royal Family. She said that other makers at her studio "were really pissed off, that I did that. [they felt] the only reason I got the commission was because I was Asian, not because I was good at what I did". Here, Anita's craft expertise was seemingly questioned by her fellow studio holders, despite securing a very high profile commission. Rather than being congratulated, her achievement was downplayed and could seemingly be explained by her ethnicity, rather than her craft skill. The British Royal Family and their iconography can sometimes be associated with a royalist and patriotic idea of 'Britishness' and implicitly, whiteness (Gilroy, 2002). Indeed, the explosion of craft's popularity in the UK in recent years is to some extent coded with an idea of 'twee' Britishness, captured in television shows such as *The Great British Sewing Bee*. This idea of 'twee' Britishness is linked to a nostalgia for the handmade amidst the politics of austerity and crisis which underpin craft's resurgence in the UK (Hall and Holmes, 2017; Luckman, 2015). The popular media coverage of craft in the UK predominantly reinforces ideas about what British craft 'should' be and 'should' look like – which broadly incorporates a Eurocentric aesthetic (Luckman, 2015), most likely to be created by white makers. Anita discussed the idea of 'British' craft when talking about the type of work she is expected to produce, as an Asian maker. She said: "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 [...] so I'm in a lose-lose situation". Anita and some of the other interviewees felt restricted by a framework of a British craft aesthetic which is marked by whiteness.

Rebecca, the jeweller based in Birmingham, voiced similar concerns about the type of jewellery she is expected to make, which has an impact on how she defines herself as a jeweller. She said that it is:

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 get selected for shows and didn't sell, 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". Such issues with getting work adequately recognised is summarised by Rita, a knitwear designer based in London of mixed race heritage, who said: "you so often remember that people's first look at you is based on what they see, not on your work".

The moments of judgement that I have described in this section are all examples of how judgements about cultural value, of objects created by women of colour, are in these cases rarely made on the basis of the aesthetic qualities of the objects or the perceived level of craft expertise. Instead such judgements, whether by critics or customers, are "grounded in structures and institutions of relative, and differential, power" (Wolff, 2006:152). Other work on judgement in the creative industries suggests that evaluations about the value of cultural objects can be influenced by the presence of others (Stewart, 2013; Wohl, 2015) as well as cultural proximity (Childress and

Nault, 2019). In other words, people tend to favour things that they can relate to. In her research on literary criticism in the USA, Philippa Chong (2011) argues that critics engage in “reading difference”, where an author’s ethnicity and race is “constitutive of” the cultural value of a book. While the strategy of reading difference doesn’t necessarily increase the likelihood of a bad or favourable review, Chong found that reviewers were more likely to comment on the content of a novel when no mention was made of the author’s race or ethnicity. This resonates with the accounts of Anita, Rebecca and Rita in this section, who all felt that they were the ones being judged, not their work.

While the other research mentioned here can go some way to explaining individual and group behaviours in the process of judgement, the prevalence of racism and microaggressions experienced directly by the makers interviewed for this article is indicative of a much wider issue, related to how value can be placed on *people*. The professionalised UK craft sector which these women are in sits within a wider capitalist system, the development of which, as Satnam Virdee (2019) highlights, is entangled with racism. Virdee details the development of ‘racialised capitalism’ over centuries, arguing that “racism’s rise was incremental yet relentless over the course of modernity’s unfolding” (p.7). Capitalism was able to advance through a process of racial categorization and hierarchization, which eroded working class solidarity during industrial capitalism in the UK. This led to a form of socialist nationalism gaining traction during the 1960s and 1970s where “the British state, employers and workers had come to internalize a common British nationalism underpinned by a shared allegiance to whiteness” (p.21). Virdee’s historical account helps us to understand how *people are valued* on the basis of their skin colour, and how this is imbricated within the development of capitalism. An understanding of how capitalism is racialised and hierarchical is essential for informing accounts of inequalities and racism, and as Beverley Skeggs notes:



Whiteness is both material and ideological – another crucial concept we lost in the hegemony of the perspective of the privileged – always connected to value [...] without understanding the development of capitalism and its methods we cannot fully understand how class, race, gender and sexuality as classificatory systems of value proceed into the present.

(Skeggs, 2019:32-33).

This work helps to explain how makers of colour, and women makers of colour in particular, are not likely to be judged in the same way as a maker who is white and male, and in many cases they experience racism and microaggressions in craft spaces which are often dominated by white people. The unequal system of capitalism underpins the conditions within which these women try to make a living from their craft, and determines the extent to which their craft expertise is recognised and their work deemed to be of value within the wider sector. In the next section I discuss how this could be addressed, by focusing more on the dynamics of judgement of expertise.

### **Discussion: expertise and community evaluation**

Georgina Born (2010) argues that many accounts of cultural production do not pay enough attention to the cultural object. Though my account so far has focused on how *persons* are discriminated against and in relation to the cultural valuing of the objects they produce, it is important to consider how certain craft techniques and aesthetics are valued and hierarchized, feeding into the evaluative moment (Stewart, 2013). I have already alluded to this in the previous section when I discussed the whiteness of the British craft aesthetic, part of a hierarchical capitalist system where whiteness is a wage, a form of value related to respectability (Skeggs, 2019). Skeggs' work on personhood helps us understand how people and the objects they produce are legitimated:

Ideas of European personhood, used to legitimate colonialism, extended models of possessive individualism by equating civilisation with a particular model of commodity exchange. This process involved the denigration of other ways of relating to people and objects – a form of personhood premised upon disinterest in the objects/subjects of exchange, but interest in the profit that can be made from exchange itself.

(Skeggs, 2011:500)

Skeggs discussed how these processes produced regimes of value, which underpin ideas about who and what matters. These regimes of value produce the conditions and criteria through which expertise is judged and objects are valued. Cultural objects can move between regimes of value and transform, as explored by Fred Myers (2005). Myers shows how the production of Aboriginal art takes place within communities, incorporating ancestral knowledges and rituals. Aboriginal art is not the product of one 'genius' person and it is not created with the market in mind. It is created within a certain regime of value amongst the Aboriginal community from which it arises, which Myers calls the "revelatory regime of value" (p.97). Yet as these objects are shifted into the Western "art culture system" their original qualities and potentialities cannot be assimilated into the new system, thus a "reorganization of value" takes place (p.89). In other words, there are specific knowledges and forms of expertise which are lost when the work of Indigenous Australian artists is moved into the Western regime of value. The same can be said of the handloom weavers in Mamidipudi's (2019) research – their particular forms of expertise and knowledge are not judged on their own terms, the qualities and the properties of the objects they produce are lost once the objects move into a new regime of value.

The women in this research are inculcated within this Western, Eurocentric regime of value – they would have been educated through it and are embedded within it. The issue is

that this regime of value originated through a system of capitalism which privileges whiteness, and through a set of aesthetic codes and classifications which were created by mostly white, privileged men. This is why, as Anita described, she is in a “lose-lose” situation where within this system her ethnicity leads others to believe she is not supposed to create work within this framework; a framework which values the aesthetics of whiteness, and at times, actively excludes marginalised groups.

Janet Wolff (2006) highlights how theories of post-colonialism, race and gender have “exposed the myth of objectivity in Western art history” (p.148). Wolff acknowledges that there are both aesthetic and “extra-aesthetic” value judgements at play which exclude women, people of colour and non-Western artists from the canon. In an attempt to address this, Wolff developed an approach which recognises aesthetic criteria as “grounded in community”, where criteria for the judgement of works of art is a result of reflexive discussion within “communities of interpretation” (p.152) located within a specific culture and its values. Wolff’s aim here is to avoid universalising or relativist judgements about the value of cultural objects. When thinking about how craft objects created by the women in this research are judged and valued, Wolff’s work indicates that one possible way of addressing this is that judgements need to be made reflexively within communities, rather than against the current hierarchical standards. Wolff uses the example of the artist Kathleen McEney, whose work she rediscovered and curated for an exhibition. Wolff wondered on what grounds she thought McEney’s work was “any good” (p.145), as McEney was marginalised once she moved away from New York, and her work seemingly became “more provincial” (as stated by Wolff) and increasingly associated with amateurism. The social and historical context of McEney’s marginalisation, for Wolff, allows her then to address the question of whether her work was ‘any good’. Wolff found that McEney’s ‘credentials’, such as high-profile exhibitions she was previously involved in, as well as Wolff’s own judgement of the work based on criteria she

learned from discourses on aesthetics – “questions of form, colour and composition” (p.154) assisted her judgement. The context of the marginalisation of the artist revealed gendered hierarchies at play, and the “complex intersection of the aesthetic and the political”. Wolff shows that aesthetic judgements need to be fully contextualised, and ideally “as the reasoned outcome of dialogue and communication on the basis of community” (ibid.).

In the case of the makers featured in this research, who are involved in the UK professional craft sector, I have shown how the cultural objects they produce have been judged and valued, and I have shown how they, as people, have been judged and valued. What has been described here has taken place on a largely interpersonal level, which can somewhat be explained by matters of personal preference and cultural proximity (Childress and Nault, 2019) but is also contextualised by wider mechanisms of regimes of value where certain types of craft, and maker, are implicitly valued more than others. Community evaluation of course cannot address the wider structural racism which is embedded in UK society, but in professional craft some steps can be taken to move toward mechanisms of judgement and representation which are more transparent, reflexive and grounded in community (Wolff, 2006). This can involve including a greater variety of people from different backgrounds and craft traditions in decision making and evaluation processes in professional craft, such as show selection panels, funding panels and interview panels, so that these areas of professional craft are more inclusive.

Furthermore, I want to refer back to the discussion of expertise at the beginning of this article and propose that communities of craft evaluation should also consider craft expertise. This means that while criteria will include contextualised aesthetic judgements, it should also include judgements made on the “skill in mastering the tools and techniques to produce a work of aesthetic value” (Patel, 2020:2) within a particular context. Such an approach would help to not only appreciate the effort and skill of the creator (see also Wohl, 2021 on the creative processes

of artists) but also to evaluate the qualities of the object produced. It would help to foster “objective respect”, in other words “to respect cultural objects and practices, by evaluating them in terms of their own objective qualities, as well as their subjective apprehension and value” (Banks, 2017:146). Expertise can be difficult to judge, but it could be based on an appraisal of the craft techniques and knowledge exhibited by the maker and manifest in the object. This approach can attempt to take a little more focus away from the outward appearance of the person doing the work, and towards the object itself and how it was created. As one of the interviewees, Olivia, a craft artist of West African heritage based in London said:

When I'm in spaces like that [professional studios and craft fairs], I do always look at the work first. Obviously I notice if there are no ethnic minorities there but I always look at the work first because I think that's what, if anything, it should be judged on.

That's what I want to be judged on, my work. I don't want to be judged as a person.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have discussed how the conditions of the UK professional craft sector can make it especially difficult for women makers of colour to make a career in craft and have their craft expertise recognised as such. The interviews reveal some of the stark and shocking experiences the participants have had, demonstrating that institutional racism is still very much alive in the UK, despite what its current government may claim to the contrary (Walker, Mohdin and Topping, 2021).

I have suggested that the inherent whiteness of the craft sector is linked to perceptions about the types of craft which are deemed valuable. The dominant regime of value in UK

professional craft, characterised by high art aesthetics, orders and excludes certain makers along the lines of gender, race and sometimes class, and is undergirded by patriarchal capitalist notions of expertise and value. To begin to address these issues, I have proposed a more contextualised approach to evaluative judgements, based on Janet Wolff's idea of community evaluation. Such an approach would require professional craft organisations to revisit their evaluation criteria, address the lack of diversity on their leadership and judgement panels, and broaden their attention beyond the exclusionary, high art aesthetic which is marked by its whiteness. Instead, judgements should be contextualised and grounded in reflexive communities (Wolff, 2006), rather than made against universalised criteria which exclude any makers or work which does not fall into the dominant category. They should also consider craft expertise - how techniques and tools are mastered, and how that craft skill and knowledge is manifest in the cultural object itself. Evaluations about work should be carried out in dialogue and transparently, including a wider variety of people from around the professional craft sector, from divergent traditions and backgrounds. Only then can we begin to diversify the types of craft which are valued and championed, and people who are thinking about a career in professional craft, who may not think it is for them, will start to see themselves represented.

Of course, many of the incidents of racism described in this article are interpersonal, often with other studio holders, suppliers or with potential customers, and are a separate yet linked issue, related to the types of people and objects which are valued in society. Addressing the wider matter of representation and value through community evaluation will not necessarily trickle down to change individual perceptions and prejudices on a day to day basis. People working across all areas of craft, from suppliers, to craft education, to studios, need to actively engage with and educate themselves about the experiences of people of colour in the industry.

This article has provided some empirical evidence of the experiences of women makers of colour in UK professional craft, while also providing a conceptual framework to think through

expertise and hierarchies of value in the sector. Further research could build on the ideas presented here and explore in greater depth how craft expertise is developed by makers from marginalised social and cultural groups. Such work could also explore craft practice beyond the formal professionalised sector, in community groups and social enterprises, for example. Within the UK and beyond there is scope to analyse the material conditions within which craft expertise is developed by individuals, and how this expertise is manifest in craft objects. Such an approach responds to calls for the need to focus on the cultural object in cultural labour (see Banks, 2017; Born, 2010) while at the same time helping to broaden our understanding of what craft expertise is.

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