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## **Crafting with a purpose: how the ‘work’ of the workshop makes, promotes, and embodies wellbeing**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines two case study community arts textile projects to understand more about how specific workshop structures – the interactions between people, processes, materials, and place – relate to the research/knowledge (work) that emerges. While differing in structure and intent, the projects share concerns about the relationship between creative making, health, and wellbeing. Craftivist Garden #wellMAKING, an activist project, worked with a network of local amateur craft groups across the United Kingdom, while Kotha and Kantha examined how stitch serves as an alternative wellmaking strategy for a group of Bangladeshi-born women living in Manchester. The article argues that thinking about the workshop as a ‘holding form’ and/or ‘bloom space’ for participatory projects, helps better understand its value and potential, particularly at times of uncertainty, while paying close attention to the ‘stories of what happens’ told in, and the ‘knowledge objects’ made within or in response to workshops are vital resources for interpretation.

**Keywords:** craftivism, kantha, hand-stitch, storytelling, wellbeing, workshop, community, material culture

### **Introduction**

Arts and humanities research culture in the United Kingdom (UK) has witnessed a significant turn to collaborative and participatory research methodology, and the workshop as a research method, over past ten or so years. This was undoubtedly enhanced by the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) Connected Communities programme that began in 2011 and funded hundreds of participatory arts projects, many of which focused on health and wellbeing (Connected Communities n.d.). Specialist funders such as the Arts Council have also shifted focus to support a wide range of participatory creative projects involving workshops in a range of community settings. This article aims to look deeper into how the workshop – as a method and, informed by theory, a methodology – works to produce/uncover knowledge/research for two very different textiles community projects: Craftivist Garden

#wellMAKING (CG), an activist project funded by the AHRC, which worked with a network of local amateur craft groups across the UK in 2013/14, and Kotha and Kantha (KK), a 2016 Arts Council-funded initiative that celebrated alternative ways to connect with and document the stories of a group of Bangladeshi-born women living in Manchester. Questions about creative making and health underpinned both projects. CG examined how stitching might function both as an immersive and critical means of sharing and reflecting on making and health, while KK asked how a form of Bengali stitch practice might act as a wellbeing strategy and cross-cultural device. Drawing on such concepts as the workshop as holding form (Phal et al. 2013) or bloom space (Stewart 2010), the authors consider the relationship between a workshop structure – a specific set of interactions between people, processes, materials, and place – and the knowledge/research (work) about creative making and health that emerges.

### **The ‘work’ in workshop**

Helen Graham and her colleagues, working on the AHRC-funded research project *Ways of Knowing*, distinguish between the terms ‘workshop’ and ‘workshopping’ as noun and verb, place, and process – the former being ‘a place where things are made or fixed’ and the latter an ‘act of working something through’; both signal an ‘element of transformation: of materials, of ideas, of people’ (2015: 404). Conceptualising place and process as distinct yet conjoined, Graham et al. define workshop/workshopping as ‘encounters between people and the physical world of materials and objects’ that enable ‘a fusion of histories, practices, relationships...[and] are best told through the stories of what happens’ (2015: 406). Unlike more conventional research methodologies, the ‘work’ of the workshop – the research and knowledge – emerges in that place and unfolds from that process, is embedded in and central to ‘ways of living and models of action within the existing real’ (Graham et al. 2015: 413; see Bourriard 2002: 13).

Thinking about a workshop as a ‘holding form’ and/or ‘bloom space’ also helps us think about the significance of the structure and context in which workshops operate. Kate Pahl and others argue that collaborative and participatory research requires a structure that is at once defined and bounded, albeit loosely, in terms of place and open to evolution, even disruption or collapse via the process, and the people involved (Pahl et al. 2013). Different holding forms or ‘repertoires of structuring’ enable different ontologies, ‘knowledge objects’, and forms of social interaction to emerge through the movement of bodies – embodied knowledge – and improvisation (Graham et al. 2015: 404, 406, 414). The anthropologist

Kathleen Stewart, meanwhile, coined the terms ‘bloom space’ to refer spaces that emerge at times of heightened individual and/or communal tension, crisis, and transition when the senses come to the surface and new lessons are learnt about our embodied reactions to how we operate in the world, a process she terms ‘worlding’ (2010: 340). Mah Rana and Fiona Hackney (2018) used these ideas to analyse the ‘work’ emerging from a series of workshops, or stitch-encounters, between Rana and her mother Waveney, who then had early-stage Alzheimer’s. Findings revealed that the carer-caree relationship between daughter and mother transformed, at least for the duration of the workshops. Thinking about the workshop as bloom space and stitching as worlding revealed the ‘work’ of the workshops as a ‘series of daily, lived minute adjustments’ which drew on existing resources to learn new skills, ‘address challenges, survive and even thrive, despite the stuff life throws at us’ (Stewart in Rana and Hackney 2018: 150). Such knowledge become ever more urgent in a (post) COVID 19-world where arts and crafts are an important ‘medium for exploring the negotiations of day-to-day uncertainty’ (Buchczyk 2020: 180; Marco Speiser and Speiser 2021).

Research on the value of art workshops for health and wellbeing is growing – much of it pioneered in this journal – from Anni Raw’s ‘workshop ecology approach’ (Raw 2013) to art-making as mutuality in an ‘open studio mental health setting’ (Lewis and Spandler 2019), and the transformation of classrooms into ‘healing spaces’ (Alfonso 2018). This article builds on findings from a number of participatory textile crafts workshop projects that examined the wider social, emotional, affectual, and economic value of creative making (Thomas et al. 2013; Hackney et al. 2013; Settingington and Slater 2017; Settingington 2020; Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd 2020 a & b; Stitching Together 2020; Twigger Holroyd and Shercliff 2020). Thinking about the workshop as ‘bloom space’ and ‘holding form’, it considers how the ‘work’ (knowledge/research) emerging from two very different textile community projects relates to the structure – encounters between materials and processes, participants (their life experiences etc.), and the real-world places in which the workshops take place. Participants’ ‘stories of what happens’ and the ‘knowledge objects’ (art produced during or in response to the workshops) also provide key resources for interpretation (Graham et al. 2015: 406).

### **Craftivist Garden #wellMAKING: the workshop as bloom space for health activism**

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity...Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in

which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. (World Health Organisation in Hackney et al. 2014)

The World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of wellbeing was the starting point for Craftivist Garden #wellMAKING (CG), a community workshop project about craft activism, amateur making, and health. While controversial, particularly in its declaration of the need for 'complete' physical, mental, and social wellbeing for health, the WHO's assertion of an intrinsic connection between the self and the body, and recognition of the vital relationship between social and environmental conditions and health, has been highly beneficial (McDonald 2022). At a time when the health benefits of craft were conceived largely in therapeutic terms (Corkhill and Riley 2014: 39-43), the WHO's wider social and political framing seemed appropriate for a project that wanted to examine craft's potential for fostering community engagement and critical thinking.

Funds were initially acquired to disseminate findings from Beyond the Toolkit: Understanding and Evaluating Crafts Praxis for Health and Wellbeing (BTT), a one-day symposium with invited speakers and making workshops delivered by academics, art practitioners, and professionals working in an arts-for-health context (see for example BTT 2014; Auch 2014; Corkhill 2014; Desmarais 2014). BTT participants found the workshop format particularly stimulating and Sarah Corbett from Craftivist Collective, whose Craft Footprints workshop had introduced people to health activism, joined the BTT research team (Dr Fiona Hackney, Dr Ann Roberts, Dr Sarah Desmarais), Jayne Howard, Director of Arts for Health Cornwall, and Daniel Carpenter at Voluntary Arts, to develop Craftivist Garden #wellMAKING (Hackney et al. 2014). The project launched at the AHRC Connected Communities Festival, July 2014, and Katy Bevan (Bevan 2022), Betsan Corkhill (Stitchlinks 2005), and Dr Anni Raw served as advisors.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE >

Figure 1: Craft Can Make You Blossom #wellMAKING Manifesto, booklet, and workshop materials, 2014. © Fiona Hackney.

CG adopted a network structure to explore how health stories might be told and shared through a series of workshops connecting local craft groups that were scattered

throughout the United Kingdom. Asking participants to make flowers functioned as a metaphor for seeding and growing a garden – a reference to how crafts can help us flourish. Flower making (sewn, knitted, or crocheted) was also a workshop activity that could accommodate all skill levels and was at once bounded (simple templates were sent out with information packs) and open enough (participants were encouraged to go stitch freestyle if they wished) for creative interpretation. A video link (Craftivist Collective 2014a) in the accompanying pack (Figure 1) explained the project aims, ethos, and process giving simple instructions on how to host workshops, or ‘stitch-ins’. In all, facilitators for over forty groups joined the project, supported by and connected through CG social media and websites (for instance, Craftivist Garden #wellmaking 2014-15). Three thematic questions, extrapolated from the WHO definition of wellbeing, provided prompts to help participants critically reflect on and share their experience of, feelings and thoughts about, wellbeing in a personal and wider social and environmental context. The questions: What does it mean to realise our potential? What does it mean to cope with daily stress? What does it mean to contribute productively to society?, along with ‘How has crafting helped you engage with the issue of wellbeing?’ and ‘Tell us your craft story’, were embroidered on flowers and included in the project packs.

The workshop process was devised around a three-stage structure: Craft/make-connect/reflect-challenge/grow. This was designed firstly to connect participants through the ‘flow’ experience of making. Crafting/stitching is widely acknowledged as a flow-inducing activity – a condition of ‘optimal experience whereby one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1992: 71). The quality of intense concentration achieved is experienced as pleasurable, as feelings of worry and self-consciousness fade away, and a sense of time becomes distorted. Having achieved some degree of flow-through-making, participants were asked to use the questions to prompt conversation and reflective thinking. They could continue making while they talked or put down their stitching if that was more comfortable. Towards the end of the workshop everyone was asked to note down their responses and thoughts on a short questionnaire. Ethics were conducted in line with Falmouth University guidelines and all questionnaires were anonymized.

<INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE >

Figure 2: Flowers, a sample of the 300 plus flowers stitched by participants and exhibited at the #wellMAKING Craftivist Garden Party, 2015, London. © Fiona Hackney.

The project ran for around six months and involved groups from as far afield as Glasgow in Scotland, Hastings on the South-East coast of England, Somerset in the South-West, and Pembrokeshire in Wales. Hundreds of flowers were crafted (Figure 2) and displayed in a colourful bower at the Craftivist Garden Party, Toynbee Hall, London, in January 2015, to which all participants were invited (see Craftivist Collective 2014). The Craftivist Garden #wellMAKING Manifesto: Craft Can Make You Blossom was developed from participant feedback, and a selection of quotations featured in the CG booklet (Figure 1) (Hackney et al. 2014). Some workshop facilitators had run craftivist initiatives before, and many had turned to craft to support their health, several were happy to be named. Lizzy Stonhold in Pembrokeshire had run a project recruiting 600 locals who produced 170 knitted items to celebrate their town. ‘It gave everyone a huge sense of pride...and it brought people together. This project builds on that...Using my skills to give something back to my community is amazing’, Stonhold reflected (Craftivist Garden 2014: 12). Gemma Nemer who hosted workshops at The Button Tin, Rotherham, wrote ‘[s]ewing healed me and brought me closer to others by sharing and teaching. Also creating gave me confidence to make CHANGE in myself and SOCIETY around me’ (Craftivist Garden 2014: 12). The focus on local stitch-ins also encouraged diverse participation. The questionnaire, for instance, was translated into Gujarati for the 25 women who attended the Peepul Centre workshops in Leicester, facilitated by Charnwood Arts.

Closer analysis of the interactions between people, materials, processes, and place at one workshop – the Brick Lane Stitch-in, London, run by Craftivist Collective’s Sarah Corbett (Craftivist Collective 2014b) – will reveal more about the relationship between ‘workshop structure’ and the nature of the ‘work’ (knowledge/research) emerging. First, because Corbett is well-known as a Craftivist, it is useful to briefly consider current debates about craft activism and the politics of making. Craftivism, a combination of craft and activism, emerged as a mode of anti-capitalist, anti-globalist critique in the early to mid-2000s (Buszek 2011; Greer 2014). Leveraging the aesthetics and values of handmaking to convey messages of political agency, it was eagerly adopted by artists, craftspeople, and activists (yarn bombers, for instance) alike. Craft, however, is not a political movement, nor is creativity inherently progressive, and both must be examined within the broader histories, systems, social, and economic structures in which they are embedded (Black and Burisch

2021; Mould 2018). Citing a Craftivist Collective banner bearing the slogan ‘Become Who You Are’ (Corbett 2013: 44-5) Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch note that ‘craftivist dialogues [can] echo and easily reproduce neoliberal values of individual creativity and self-expression’ (Black and Burisch 2021: 16). This article argues that while tensions between a sense of individual (self) and group identity did emerge in CG workshops, the combined process of immersive making *and* critical thinking, alongside the overarching CG network structure, which brought embedded local groups together in a collective imaginary around health and wellbeing, helps resist any easy conflation with neo-liberal thinking.

The Brick Lane stitch-in ran for two hours with thirty participants. Most did not know each other and although older people were present the majority were in their twenties or thirties, some of them active craftivists. As one participant noted, the workshop structure encouraged a particular environment or ambience: ‘[w]hen we got started with the crafting something unexpected happened: a communal and liberating atmosphere emerged. It felt like a free-flowing environment. People were relaxed and open to engage in the discussion’ and the ‘crafting seemed to modulate our thinking’. This participant, who planned to run CG workshops in the US, was particularly interested in the relationship between making and thinking, commenting ‘[t]he strangest thing is that because of how you structured the workshop, it helped me to bridge these two worlds (creative and critical thinking) and somehow reconcile them’. She observed:

Ideas were pouring and bouncing back and forth between people in [what seemed like] slow motion. It struck me that we didn’t necessarily need sustained eye contact...Most people would focus on the craft and jump in and out of the conversation when they felt they wanted to contribute.

Significantly, she felt that her personal history, having lost her mother in early childhood, was instrumental in the ‘deep impact’ the workshop had on her, ‘crafting sends me back to that happy time I spent with my mother. Crafting recreates that bubble of love that she created around us.

While participants commented on the therapeutic elements of crafting – craft’s meditative aspects, how the slow process of crafting aids focus, the social benefits of being part of a like-minded group, and how crafting is ‘good for introverts’ – many others also confirmed the connection between creative crafting and critical thinking. Making, for instance, was considered to promote a deeper level of engagement with an issue, in this case



wellbeing: '[t]he quiet moments breed more thought. Crafting helps activate the thoughts', 'the repetitive crafting movement helps you think', 'it's easier to talk about issues with crafting in your hands', '[m]aking can facilitate your thinking. Thinking + making = talking + craftivism'. The 'doubleness [of] both talking and making' was noted and how 'doing something with your hands...helps you open up and talk more'.

Workshop encounters, moreover, promoted a sense of safety and trust: 'it felt like a very safe environment and having something to focus on meant it was easier to open-up and be honest with each other', 'more present, less pressured'. Rather than crafting as public spectacle – a strategy of first-generation craftivists – much of the workshop's appeal for participants was that it endowed the public world with private associations, making it seem comforting; the workshop was a surrogate home and the participants family. Others observed: '[c]raft is a creative vessel of communication. It can be public and personal', '[m]y craft story is very intertwined with mental health and identity. I began knitting with my grandma and every time I do any sort of craft, I feel close to her'. In this atmosphere private experiences and larger public concerns converged in conversations that broached the stresses of living and working in London – job insecurity, long hours, pressure from social media, loneliness, not fitting in – with the structures of capitalism. Significantly, the phrases 'contributing productively to society' and 'realising potential' were interpreted negatively by many as referring to pressure to earn money and achieve career success. These were rejected in favour of desires for a less pressurised, more equitable, caring, society that values: 'the importance of just being', 'self-directed progress', 'how we can be better people and better for society,' 'help[ing] others reach "a potential" and their "best"'. One participant explained,

I have M.E. so this question [what does it mean to realise our potential?] is a good one to reflect on making sure we try not to be superheroes or superhuman. It teaches you there are benefits to learn from including patience and not thinking you can do everything and anything. Don't compare yourself to others even though social media teaches the opposite.

Critical thinking about health underpinned more politicized understandings of craft as a 'campaign tool...I like to craft with a purpose :) beyond the physical activity', and such statements as: 'I've come up with a new way of seeing what wellbeing is especially on society structures and it's made me more of a critical thinker crafting', 'we are not consumers, we are makers', and 'I think it is so important that we recognise the benefits of

creativity and making to our wellbeing and that government put more funding back into these areas’.

People attending the Garden Party repeatedly remarked on their pleasure in being part of a larger initiative, connecting with other groups, and working purposefully to engage with social and environmental issues of health and wellbeing. The whole project, as such, became an imaginary bloom space, as one participant reflected:

While I was making the flower, I thought a lot about the connection between flowers or plants and human development. We’ll only realise our potential if we are in the right soil type (which could include lots of things from nice, safe place to call home, a supportive network of family and friends etc.). Also, like plants, if people don’t have the right tools to cope with daily stress they’ll wither and be less able to contribute to society. I think everyone has their own uniqueness which can help them contribute to wider society but it’s important that others in society care for and encourage others’ uniqueness so that a beautiful society grows (like a meadow or garden overflowing with plants).

Uniqueness, yes, but uniqueness determined by and evidenced through connections with others and contributions to society. The ‘stories of what happen[ed]’ in CG workshops informed the Manifesto (Figure 1) which promotes the value of connection, communication, reflection, and collective action through making and sharing. It foregrounds quietly activist transformation rather than neoliberal thinking – activism that is embedded in, draws on, and operates through participants’ everyday knowledge, experiential, and affective relationships, bringing these powerfully to bear on larger issues, in this case, health and wellbeing (Hackney 2013; Hackney et al. 2016).

Acknowledging the complex history of men’s relationship with stitch (see McBrinn 2021), and the problematically idealised image of home that emerged from many participant testimonies – home can equally be a place of intimidation, fear, and violence – the deep connection between domestic, amateur, textile crafts and the relationships of care historically associated with women help bring ‘other’ values to the public sphere. The full radicalism of such thinking became apparent during the uncertainties of COVID-19 when the urgent need for a rejection of carelessness in society and a reassessment and re-valuing of the structures of a care, and a commons-of-care, emerged (Bunting 2020; The Care Collective 2020; Hackney et al. 2021).

### **Kotha and Kantha Work: workshops, benefits, and outcomes**

Lynn Settrington has many years of experience initiating stitch-based partnerships and devising inclusive workshops, which function as tactile forms of communication and flexible memorials. In this case study she describes how a series of kotha and kantha embroidery workshops (kotha translates in Bengali as to speak/tell and kantha refers to old/rag cloth) had immense richness and value for a group of women recently arrived in the United Kingdom (UK) from Bangladesh, not only as a tactile cross-cultural means of communication but also as a positive collaborative wellbeing strategy. As a practice-based researcher and embroiderer, Settrington's research (work) is embedded in community through the process of stitch and sensory tactile engagement with textile materials. The 'work' – the knowledge emerging from encounters between people, processes, and place in the workshops – as such, aims to be 'as loyal as possible to the context and the embodied sensory and affective experiences...through which the knowledge was produced' (Pink 35: 2013).

Kotha and Kantha (KK) is a cross disciplinary project that was supported by an Arts Council National Lottery Heritage grant. It brought together the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Archive (University of Manchester), eleven women – Rukshana, Doly, Asha, Sultana, Tanzin, Rahima, Tahera, Taskina, Amena, Nargish and Taskina – new members of Annana (a Women's Bangladeshi Project in Longsight, Manchester, see Annana) who had recently arrived in the UK and were experiencing a time of change and transition – with Dipali Das, a British Bengali writer and poet, and Settrington (Settrington 2016). The Race Archive, as the centre is now known, is a national body located in Manchester Central Library and named after a local boy of Bangladeshi heritage, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah who was killed in a race related crime in 1986. KK was one of three initiatives instigated by the Archive to mark the thirty-year anniversary.

The project's initial focus was Bangladeshi women and storytelling drawing on Das's experience as an author of British Bengali heritage. The project initially intended to avoid stereotypes of traditional domestic female occupations, but Das conceded that cooking and sewing were important creative elements in Bengali women's lives and including these subjects would enrich the project. The funding bid was expanded to include to Kantha work, a Bengali, female-focused stitch-based art form which Niaz Zaman acknowledges reflects 'the blend of several factors that form the cultural identity of this land' (1993: 8). Settrington, based in Manchester and experienced in facilitating socially engaged stitch

projects and making Kantha embroidery, was invited to work on the stitch-based project strand.

The project framework location – a small private room in the basement of Manchester Central Library – kantha stitch processes, and textile materials were designed to be intimate and friendly, creating a familiar semi-domestic space for the women in what may otherwise have been an unfamiliar world. The project design involved twelve half day workshops, six stitch and six text-based sessions, which took place on alternate weeks so that Das could include storytelling, writing, drawing, recipes, and poetry into her sessions, and Settingington could engage participants in sensory stitch-based work. Kantha embroidery, although a relatively simple technique, has a long and complex history that references multiple themes and imagery – Danielle Mason suggests the term may have Sanskrit origins (2009:2). It includes Hindu iconography, and folk-art motifs such as birds, fish, animals, the landscape of Bengal, as well as domestic items and ornaments. Kantha work has long been associated with undivided Bengal but only came to the attention of the British public after the Woven Air exhibition (1987) at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. This form of female expression has a unique place in Bengali identity and tradition, so much so that when the Bangladesh constitution was formed in 1971 it was wrapped in a kantha. Settingington strongly identified with the cloths displayed at the Whitechapel Gallery: the hand-stitch processes, narrative themes, domestic objects, and their celebration of the ordinary all resonated with her embroidery-driven work; themes which Ian Hodder argues are ‘of great importance to the expression of alternative perspectives’ (2000: 705-6). So began many years of practice – based research, creating hand worked quilts which celebrate women’s lives in thread. Incorporating some of this lived sensory knowledge into the 2016 stitch sessions was therefore an appropriate and fitting way of engaging with participants.

Using her kantha work examples, Settingington was able to connect with the Bengali women. Examining and handling textile samples helped to foster material understanding and visual and practical understanding of embroidery processes, compositional elements, and colour (Figure 3). The textiles also enabled the women to ‘speak and tell’ in a shared stitch language and served as prompts to encourage stories of home and family in a form of material memory. Although none of the women had made a kantha before, they were familiar with its origins and, seeing and handling the cloths, they recalled stories of relatives stitching back in Bangladesh. The sharing of publications on the subject further reinforced the significance and stature of this form of textile practice and helped to increase confidence and a sense of purpose and value.

<INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE >

Figure 3: Workshop session, May 2016. © Lynn Settrington.

The project was also designed to be flexible and achievable, so that participants could be individually creative and part of a group. Given the limited time frame, it was agreed from the outset that each person (including Settrington) would design and create a small individual kantha embroidery, approximately 40 centimetres square (Figures 3 and 4). Giving each person an individual cloth meant that they could work at their own pace within a shared, nurturing environment, and could take it home if they wished, encouraging connections between their lives at home and the group. Suzanne Lacy's observation that 'power relations are uncovered in the process of creating' (1995:31) was also implicit in the shared work where issues of ownership, power and authority play a part, as they do in socially engaged initiatives (Hackney et al. 2016). Nevertheless, qualities of empathetic understanding, and an ability to listen, adapt and think on one's feet all emerged from the experience of partnership working.

The notion of the workshop as holding form that enables different ontologies and types of social interaction to emerge was also evident in the ways in which the workshop produced a sense of connection, community, trust, and shared purpose. Sharing sewing skills encouraged other forms of sharing and celebration – the birth of a child was celebrated with home cooked food in one of the stitch sessions, for instance. The kantha sessions likewise encouraged team building and mutual understanding, important elements in today's often divided world. Settrington observed how the elasticity of the workshop, which encouraged collective stitching and individual creativity, built confidence and as women worked together, sometimes silently, an 'alternative tactile conversation' and storytelling emerged. This activity allowed different voices to be heard, and a different type of tactile conversation and storytelling emerged. Most of the group had limited written and spoken English and although they had not stitched by hand for many years (if at all), the confidence with which participants expressed themselves in pattern and thread was evident in their embrace and interpretation of the kantha tradition in bold colours, imagery, and an inventive composition (Figure 4). Settrington found that the stitch and writing/poetry workshops led by Das complimented each other, as women reflected on different ways of telling and sharing their own stories.

<INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE >

Figure 4: One of the completed stitch cloths, July 2016. © Lynn Settingington.

The kantha workshops were structured to develop participant skills and knowledge gradually and allow confidence and a sense of community and wellbeing to build as the weeks progressed. The sessions brought together a group of women not only new to the country but also new to each other. The six stitch sessions, moreover, provided a legitimate reason for leaving home for a short period, an important factor, given that in some circumstances women (especially) may find it difficult to ‘escape’ the family home, which can be isolating with its day-to-day pressures and routines. This is something that Belinda Montagu discusses when she describes how in shared textile projects the group offers companionship, especially for ‘people who do not go out to work and who are house-bound for much of the time; the work provides an opportunity to participate in something outside the domestic environment’ (1986: 8). Settingington saw how the workshop environment helped women feel comfortable, encouraging them to share ideas and feelings with each other while engaging in the activities, and how their confidence and wellbeing grew (Figure 3). She observed how, for instance, participant interactions aligned with the New Economics Foundation’s ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ (Aked et al. 2008) as women connected to and interacted with others, were active by visiting a different place and learning something new, and reflected on their experience.

Stitching together whether it is to learn new skills, meet others, or be part of something and belong, can offer positive rewards particularly if the workshop format is framed sensitively. This study demonstrates how the workspace can become communal through the mutual experience of shared making as a means to engage with other people and their ways of being in the world. The findings also show how embroidery practice can be utilised as an inclusive tool and form of non-verbal communication. The workshops took participants on a making journey that included learning new stitches and re-engaging with already known embroidery processes, enhanced sensory understanding, experimenting with different types of yarn and embroidery threads, and pattern making. Developing a personal stitch vocabulary and colour palette gave the women confidence and helped them to create their own unique compositions and well as being part of the group (Figure 4). As such, the needle acted as a tool for them to negotiate and affirm a sense of identity and self in their current context, while also prompting them to re-engage with and bring with them crafts skills and identities connected to their Bangladeshi heritage. This project not only created a

number of important planned outcomes which add to existing knowledge on Bengali culture, including potentially for those who find traditional academic accounts excluding, but the creative workshop setting also provided a means for women to negotiate new identities through individual expression, social cohesion, and wellbeing through making.

## **Conclusion**

So, what kind of workshops or holding forms have been examined here, could they be described as bloom spaces, and to what degree has their structure in terms of interactions between materials, processes, people, places enabled or constrained knowledge (work)? One key finding was that while knowledge/learning was specific to the particular constituencies of each group, common elements emerged in response to their structure. The place of the workshop, which is evidenced as a determining factor in alternative ways of knowing emerging from informal community spaces (Maughan and Hackney 2015; Hackney et al. 2016), was further valued as a private: place of trust and safety in a public world that could be experienced as uncertain and threatening. The comforting domestic associations of working with textile materials and stitch processes were a key contributory factor here, with the added value for the kantha stitchers of engaging with their heritage. The flexibility of the workshops, moreover, combined pleasure in creative self-expression with opportunities to work collectively, think critically, and connect with the wider world. CG participants aligned their experiences of health and wellbeing with wider social and political structures, while the KK group engaged in embodied ‘tactile conversation’ and told stories locating their memories of life in Bangladesh with new Manchester concerns, and aspirations.

Supported by external funders, both projects targeted people from specific groups and the workshops helped them further connect with a like-minded community, albeit in a time-limited way. As such, reported and observed experience in both case study projects was restricted to the purpose in hand and did not delve into the sometimes-difficult power relations that can operate in more established groups (Hackney et al. 2016). Each project framework, in contrast, was underpinned by an ethos of looking outward, connecting with, learning from, and supporting others, through creative making and its value for health and wellbeing and, as such, the workshops operated as bloom spaces. The knowledge gained from these workshops, and others like them, is symbiotic with their framework. It is held in the bodies, minds, and imaginations of participants, located in the places they live, evidenced in the knowledge objects they make and display – in this case, flowers at the Craftivist Garden party and kanthas at a celebration event in the Central Library, Manchester – and disseminated through the stories they continue to tell through family, friends, social networks, related publications and, most importantly of all, the projects they go on to initiate or be involved in.

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