Transformation in Higher Education
ISSN: (Online) 2519-5638, (Print) 2415-0991

Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group: Informal reading groups as spaces for epistemic becoming

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Dates:
Received: 08 Sept. 2021
Accepted: 12 Jan. 2022
Published: 08 June 2022

How to cite this article:
Khan, S., Asfour, F. & Skeyi-Tutani, Z., 2022, 'Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group: Informal reading groups as spaces for epistemic becoming', *Transformation in Higher Education* 7(0), a152. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v7i0.152

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Background: This article explores the dynamics of the Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group (BFK) of the Rhodes University Fine Art Department and the Wits University Fine Art Department, as a space of black-African feminist care for participants. It reflects on the motivation to create the group, examines methodologies employed by the facilitators, and how BFK was experienced by the killjoys that joined.

Aim: The article aims to exemplify how the BFK provided a space for women-of-colour to connect with theoretical texts and to own them. It argues for the importance of reading / writing and support groups for students-of-colour in academic institutions.

Setting: The article studies reading groups that were offered in two South African universities – Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand – between 2016 and 2019.

Methods: The article uses a range of qualitative methodologies including analysis of solicited anonymous online questionnaires, WhatsApp voice-notes sent in response to questions, as well as auto-ethnographic reflective pieces by the authors (all premised on an understanding of continuing to maintain a dialogue with Black Feminist Killjoy participants).

Results: Using both black-African feminist theories in dialogue with responses from the Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group, the article outlines aspects that ought to be considered in conceptualising reading and writing support groups in Higher Education and the relevance of extra-curricular activities in academic contexts for creating holistic communities and academic citizenry. It also exemplifies how black-African feminist theories can be transformative for students who feel it captures their lived experiences.

Conclusion: The article concludes that reading groups, as supportive identitarian spaces, are crucial in the formation of scholarly identities as these assist students in 'epistemic becoming' through processes of familarising themselves with theories and epistemologies, establishing black-African feminist intimacy and building diverse communities, permitting difference, debate and discomfort.

Keywords: Black Feminist Killjoy reading group; epistemological becoming; extracurricular activities; black feminist safe spaces; Africanised academic community building.

Introduction

In October 2016 Sharlene Khan, a visual artist, started a biweekly reading group called the 'Black[1] Feminist Killjoy Reading Group' (BFK), inspired by the work of feminist theorist Sara Ahmed at Rhodes University in Makhanda. It was not limited to reading fictional and non-fictional texts but activated embodied modes of participation such as play, dance and dialogue that will be elaborated in further detail below. Zodwa Skeyi-Tutani continued the group in 2019, when Khan formed a new group at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). This article considers the value of harnessing black-African[2] feminist modes of interaction and socialising in academic spaces as a means to connect to and involve practices from outside of formal Higher Education learning spaces to activate theory through creative theorisation in the process of the social construction of black African Feminist thought. It attempts to demonstrate how the very structure of the BFK

1. This research utilises official South African racial categories established under apartheid and continued under post-apartheid, namely 'white' (persons of white European descent), 'black' (local indigenous black Africans), 'coloured' (persons of mixed race and descendants of Malay/Indian/Mozambican slaves and prisoners), and 'Indian' (persons of South Asian descent that arrived as slaves in Cape Town in the 17th century and, in the second half of the 19th century, first as British indentured labourers and then as merchants). Where the terms 'black' (lower case 'b') or 'people of colour' are used, they are used in preference of 'non-white' and include black, coloured and Indian South Africans also grouped under the term 'previously disadvantaged', which in the latter half of the 1990s constitutionally includes Chinese South Africans. These terms are also used to denote identification with blackness as a political self-affirmative project and stance.

2. This research uses 'black-African feminisms' to denote where black and African feminisms intersect/overlap as well as where they diverge in our usage. We draw on these different historical traditions and strains to speak to our very specific geopolitical context and varied bodies, also acknowledging where they do not serve us as well.

Note: Authors F.A. and Z.S-T. are PhD candidates in Fine Art, Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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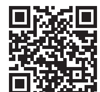

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emanates from and embodies black-African feminist methodologies that wrangle with the elitism of academic theory and yet might just affirm and strengthen marginalised identities. Finally, given these important considerations, we argue for a reconsideration of reading groups not just as extracurricular activities but as central spaces of learning and communities that enable the social construction of knowledge.

This article is written by the facilitators of BFK[3] and discusses the dynamics of both spaces, with self-reflexive writing by the authors (responding to prompts sent out by Khan).[4] We were also interested in the experiences of the former BFK group members and sent out via email to the BFK mailing list, a Google questionnaire with approximately 12 questions.[5] Some of those questions were as follows: How often did you participate? What activities stand out in your memory? Can you comment on how the meetings were facilitated that made them useful/enjoyable or not? Did you have any expectations of the group that were not met? What did you think of the combination of fictional, non-fictional and theoretical literature and artistic material to talk to lived experiences? Can you comment on the role of the group in the university environment for you? Any other comments/feedback on the Black Feminist Group and what it meant for you as a space? A total of six participants responded to the Google survey and two sent in WhatsApp voice notes in response to the questions. Most of the Google survey respondents were from Rhodes University, with one from Wits. We also include responses by four Wits participants who produced reflexive writings.

Almost all of the participants were from the Faculty of Humanities, with the majority from Fine Arts/Visual Arts/History of Art (with one student doing a major in Psychology as well), one from the Department of Literary Studies in English, one from Law and one from the School of Public Health. We purposely chose not to present respondents in a tabular manner as 'research subjects' that simultaneously distanced us from them. We have become friends with our fellow BFK co-participants over the years and we want to acknowledge the 'entangled' relationship we share and our roles as 'inside-outsider, outside-insider' (Trinh 1991) researchers. This idea is harnessed from Vietnamese-US American filmmaker Trinh T. Minh Ha (1991:69–70) who chooses to complicate the insider-outsider relationship, so as not too easily respect territorialised boundaries. This creates a complex 'inter-state' or shifting grounds for the researcher and from which she operates:

> She knows, probably like Zora Neale Hurston the insider-anthropologist knew, that she is not an outsider like the foreign outsider. She knows she is different while at the same time being Him. Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. (Trinh 1991:74)

As such, we see our work as continuing the dialogues we have with each other in this entangled state. Thus, we acknowledge that the task of evaluating the group dynamics as scholars and as co-participants invested in the BFK group itself will not be easy and will be biased. In the article, we will move between the third person, between 'we'/'us'/'our' and the 'I' of individual reflections. The reason for the usage of the third person is that BFK exists in two different geo-chapters, under different facilitators at two different institutions.[6] We were wary of the 'autoethnographic trap', where attempts to write collaborative autoethnography by staying close to representing and performing group processes can become biased by the desire to write a fixed text where participant's voices are edited and constructed to give it the appearance of a vibrant, ongoing dynamic interpersonal process (as discussed in Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez 2013:128–130). We, therefore, decided to follow Norman K. Denzin's (2018:5) call to use all the available modes of (particularly autoethnographic) qualitative research in this article as 'performative discourse', which is 'based on minimalist principles. It shows. It does not tell. Less is more. It is not infatuated with theory. It uses a few concepts. It is performative. It stays close to how people perform everyday life.' Thus, the reader is encouraged to experience the mix of moving between our voices of writing this article as facilitators, co-participants, co-authors along with the voices of our generous respondents whose voices we have tried to capture. We do not seek to hide the messiness of this dialogic process.

We want to primarily locate the above as a black-African feminist strategy that recognises the speech acts of black-African women and the value of dialogue for self and community. Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group, as we will discuss below, is built around such and the transformative power of giving voice to, and naming, one's struggles,

3. The article started out with a larger group of writers and a larger writing brief, but as it progressed it soon dawned that there were actually two different papers emerging and this article has now been focused into a larger survey of BFK over the years by the facilitators and the second one will be focused on the Wits chapter on the theme of 'biomythography'. All initial writers produced self-reflexive written pieces on their experience of BFK and these are used here.

4. While these writings may be positioned as autoethnographic writings and the authors value this methodology, specifically as it harnesses the possibilities of narratives, the authors prefer to frame them within a black-African and feminist discourse, as these traditions have a long tradition of validating the positioning of the speaking 'I', as well as the relational position of the 'I'-'we', and narrations with communities-of-colour.

5. The Google questionnaire was entirely voluntary and could be taken anonymously or with a pseudonym – this was important as we wanted anyone who responded to feel open to critiquing BFK. The initial data set was known only to Khan and anonymised by her before being provided to the co-authors. The participants were informed that although confidentiality could be guaranteed during the information gathering process and anonymised, because of the small setting of the reading group, anonymity could not be 100% guaranteed as remarks made during the initial group meetings could perhaps be recalled by those in attendance. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including all co-authors, and all who participated on the Google online questionnaire who first had read and acknowledged the Participant Information Sheet and signed the Consent Form giving various permissions. Permission had to be obtained from University of the Witwatersrand Faculty Registrar as the research still involved current staff and students (all participants from Rhodes University had completed their studies). The *Art on our Mind* (AOOM) team members, as part of their bursary conditions during 2017–2019, were obligated to attend BFK during that time period only and have no current ties to the project as the funded project ended – former participants were emailed in the same voluntary capacity as all other BFK participants without any further obligation. Ethics permission was obtained for the research via the Wits HREC Committee (Ethics Protocol Number: H21/01/09). No permission was required from Rhodes University or from their Faculty Registrar as all research participants who have participated in the Google questionnaire are no longer at Rhodes University.

6. We also have various members who have facilitated sessions over the years like Fouad Asfour, Rita and Anne.

shames, powers, histories, languages, creativities, and so on – and knowing that one will be heard. We harnessed that same power of dialogue and textured narrativisation here as a black-African feminist methodology and wrote reflective pieces in dialogue with the responses solicited via the Google questionnaire. In this text, we are trying to interweave these reflections with narrative testimonies. Textured narratives, according to Audre Lorde (1984/2000:118) and bell hooks (1991:8–9), do not aim at truth-telling and faithfulness or are entirely fictional but understand that memory straddles these nuances and, as such, encompass 'state[*s*] of a mind, the spirit of a particular moment' (hooks 1989:158).

Both the autoethnographic and solicited BFK responses were coded into broad categories that reflected common threads but also speak to black-African feminist theorisations we will discuss below: lived experiences, dialogue, game playing, literature, art, interdisciplinarity, reading group, safe space, self-care, intimacy and value. Extended dialogue and narrative-as-testimony are used because these are crucial to black-African feminist epistemological standpoints. Feminist Carol Hanisch (1969/2006) and black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000/2009:vii) have noted that personalised, implicated ways of knowing[7] contribute to women's and black people's knowledge through experiential modes of assessing knowledge, serving as a counter-point to Western academic knowledge, which can be both alienating and elitist in its abstraction.

By way of a brief introduction of the authors of this text, and the autoethnographic writings that we produced reflecting on our own experiences of BFK, here are some of our reflections on our previous experiences of reading groups before joining BFK:

> 'My experience … had been one of great disillusionment. Where in that space I had had to coerce the group into reading while also having the solo job of finding the books and then discussing them myself.' (Zodwa Skeyi Tutani, Rhodes University participant [2017] and facilitator of the 2018 Rhodes BFK)

> 'Throughout my studies, I felt that my life was placed outside of any curriculum on offer. I wanted to converse in my dad's language, and thought it would be best to enrol in a course of 'Arabic studies' at the University of Vienna. However, it did not offer spaces of critical reflective practice. In this context, reading theory and literature in BFK sessions opened up new perspectives of linking theory and practice.' (Fouad Asfour – BFK participant and co-facilitator [2016–2021])

> 'I had attended a few different ones while doing my PhD [*in London*] – some were good, some were bad, others irritating, while one or two were just life-affirming while being in foreign space. I realised that reading groups could be about so much more than just a coming together of minds and intellectual posturing but really this black feminist idea of a 'safe space' that could be nurturing while engaging, allowing for differing productive ideas.' (Sharlene Khan – BFK facilitator [2016–2021])

The above gives some indication of the mixed responses to reading groups as a learning and social space to academia and learning paradigms. For instance, part of the rationale for people to attend reading groups is to increase their knowledge capacity around a particular topic through an informal small learning space, but theory itself can often prove frightening for many. In his analysis of the history of 'positivism' in Western hegemonial knowledge and pedagogy, educational scholar Joe Kincheloe (2008:22–23) summarises the elements of epistemic violence[8] in education using the acronym FIDUROD (formal, intractable, decontextualised, universalistic, reductionistic, one-dimensional) as 'the basic features of a contemporary mechanistic epistemology that is used sometimes unconsciously to shape the knowledge that permeates Western and Western-influenced cultures'. Collins's (2000/2009:vii) perception of how theory can be seen as alienating – even within the academic space – persists as participant Sihle Motsa articulates, 'I had only attended a reading group once before joining the Feminist Kill Joy. I found that initial reading group to be somewhat elitist. The language used was verbose and the intellectual praxis practised therein disingenuous'. For various participants, joining a reading group was perhaps an attraction or a deterrent in terms of prior knowledge expectations of feminist or critical race theory but also the possibility presented for dialogues around shared interests. Initial meetings are usually some indication for members whether they would continue attending or not. Part of discursive alienation experienced by oppressed people is a result of their lived experiences, histories, culture and knowledges not being central to discussions. In developing her black feminist epistemology in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000/2009), Collins centralised black women's experiences in her analyses:

> In order to capture the interconnections of race, gender, and social class in Black women's lives and their effect on Black feminist thought, I explicitly rejected grounding my analysis in any single theoretical tradition. Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. (p. iv)

Even as the transformation of teaching and learning is highlighted in the policies and reports of South African Higher Education (CHE 2009:10), knowledges of the majority of society continue to be marginalised, not just in terms of historical redress and related content, but also of appropriate methodologies and curricula. South African black feminist Yvette Abrahams (2007) talks of the violence she experienced within the university academic space during her PhD while writing up the historiography of Sarah Baartman:

> … Khoekhoe women, were limited to one bodily part, used and abused in the 'othering' discourses on art history, taxonomy or postcolonial criticism. I was the only one in my university admitting consciousness, hurt, confusion and anger about this putative bodily part debate. It is the weirdest feeling when something in the historiography drives you to tears and most people don't seem to notice anything wrong; I thought I was the crazy one. (p. 426)

7. Implicated research calls for accountability and responsibility as a researcher and removes distancing 'objective' outsider researcher positionality.

8. See among others Spivak (1988:280–281) or Walter Mignolo (2007) who outlines how epistemic de-linking and disobedience can shift away from imperial epistemology towards a grammar of de-coloniality.

We see in Abrahams' words Ahmed's 'Feminist Killjoy', that is the woman troublemaker, upsetting the happiness of others. The killjoy is viewed as the originator of 'bad feelings', dis-ease, even to other feminists, stereotyped into the 'angry black woman' as identified by bell hooks (1984/2000), Audre Lorde (1984/2000) and Ahmed (2012). Ahmed (2010:67) says one can even be 'affectively alien' in that, 'your proximity gets in the way of other people's enjoyment of the right things, functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb an atmosphere'. In this situation, raising epistemic disjunctures and violence can often leave one feeling alienated and as the killjoy. Part of the rationale of BFK was to establish both a space and a curriculum that legitimised that one was 'not crazy', that one was 'not the problem' (Ahmed 2012).

It is, therefore, important to find one's own modes of being and doing. Collins establishes various methodologies for ways in which black women create and assess knowledge. We will discuss how BFK employs the following threads outlined in Collin's *Black Feminist Thought*: lived experience as a criterion for knowledge, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethic of personal accountability and black women as agents of knowledge (Collins 2000/2009:256). The first sections of this article will further detail how BFK was experienced by the killjoys that joined, and the methodologies employed by the facilitators, arguing for how creative theorisation allows women of colour to connect with theoretical texts and own them, thereby locating themselves as scholars and epistemic selves in the social construction of knowledge. It will then proceed to consider the value of how the black feminist notion of 'safe spaces' is paramount to establishing black-African feminist intimacy and building a community in a diverse university context, and how this then permits differences, debate and discomfort. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion on the importance of reading groups within university spaces (if we regard these as valuable South African imaginaries and not elitist enclaves).

Black Feminist *'Killjoys'*

The BFK was named after Ahmed's blogspot *Feminist Killjoys*[9] – Ahmed, herself, follows Ghanaian novelist Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 book *Our Sister Killjoy*, and our naming wanted to pay homage to both women and make obvious the influence of black-African feminisms. Ahmed observes that the feminist killing of joy alienates killjoys but also helps them find each other and 'form communities and solidarities of their own' and, thus, Khan wanted to 'reach out to other feminist and race killjoys within the academic space and the small town of Makhanda'.

While the number of both the Rhodes and Wits participants decreased quickly after initial sessions, they remained lively. The Rhodes University BFK was made up of between 8 and 15 staff, students and Makhanda community members over the next 3 years, and sessions were compulsory for Khan's *Art on our Mind (AOOM)*[10] research team. The participants mentioned a number of different elements they enjoyed about regular group meetings, as well as guest sessions (e.g. Gabeba Baderoon's poetry reading, Lynda Spencer's session on Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*):

> Rita: The openness of the discussions, the intensity … Analysis of texts
>
> Anne: Games – abandoned fun, discussions
>
> Lila: Performances and films influenced by the reading group
>
> Liyana: My favourite activities included discussing the different literature

Khan has a very different recollection of the Rhodes University BFK's engagement, remembering her initial disappointment that less than a handful of the participants read the texts until a participant one day told her: 'Look I didn't read anything for this session. I just came for my mental healthcare':

> Khan: 'And for me that was enough. That a busy student needed some kind of sustenance and thought to come to BFK for it. And, so I chilled out a bit after that and just allowed the Rhodes University space to be what it was.'

Shehnaz Muhshi notes this dynamic at the Wits BFK:

> 'I must confess that I didn't get through all the readings, but I felt welcomed in the space. The warmth, generosity and care in the group felt deeply nurturing. I appreciated the informality, yet the clear structure of the group.'

Khan's appointment at Wits University's Fine Arts Department led to her starting up a Wits BFK chapter in 2019. A crucial difference was that it was no longer possible to hold meetings after hours as the staff members and students had far distances to travel home (some came from as far as Pretoria to join), and attempts were made to find a space in which the wider citizenry would have access without needing staff/student cards (this wasn't always possible, however). Late afternoons and lunch-time sessions were experimented with and sessions were held inside and outside of campus. This still impacted some members who had to leave earlier as explained by Saajidah:

> 'Time was always against me in every meeting because I had to leave in order to catch the bus home. And so, I never got to sit until the end and enjoy those last few precious concluding moments.'

Wits BFK attendance started with around 25 people and steadied down to about 10 participants over the course of the year.

9. https://feministkilljoys.com

10. *Art on our Mind (AOOM)* is a research project initiated by Khan at Rhodes University in 2017 and is subsequently based at the Wits University Fine Art Department in 2019. It hosts a public creative dialogue series with South African women-of-colour women visual artists, which are hosted on the online platform https://artonourmind.org.za. Every four months, Khan and her research team selects a woman artist and spends approximately 3 months researching the chosen artist, before hosting a public creative dialogue in front of a live audience, during which the compiled questions are asked. The hour-and-a-half creative dialogue is video and audio recorded (and transcribed) and placed online on the *Art on our Mind (AOOM)* archive, along with all materials found on the artist.

With the Rhodes University BFK group, Khan changed the theme monthly, and the group only proposed texts when she was not available. At the first Wits BFK group, as usual, the opening text set was bell hooks' book *Art on my Mind* (1995) – an influential creative text for Khan. The first sessions, while being incredibly lively – with the large group eating, drinking, dialoguing and debating around topics that emerged from the texts and many more around their lives – left Khan with mixed feelings: How to harness the energies and the intellectual might of this new group and channel it to contribute to black-African feminist theories and creativities, without obstructing the safe space that allowed for support, venting and allyship? Khan next chose black feminist Audre Lorde's concept of biomythography as the theme for the term rather than rotating themes. The stimulating response of the group led to an extension of biomythography over the year.[11] While the Wits BFK became more text-orientated, creative productions remained central to the group.[12] As a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, both the Wits and Rhodes University BFK groups were placed on hold in 2020.

Considering Black-African Feminist Methodologies

From initiation, Khan determined that the BFK experiment would never strictly entail just theoretical texts but would move freely between a range of literary, visual, sonic and performative texts, as well as open dialogue and game sessions, dancing, eating and drinking. The combination of black-African feminisms and various other theoretical texts alongside creative productions across modalities has not simply been an attempt at interdisciplinarity although that has always been important to her. It is reflective of how important creativity, creative spaces and the imagination are to black-African feminists as articulated by South African black feminist Pumla Gqola (2006):

> My choice of technique is motivated, firstly, by my conviction that creative spaces offer an ability to theorise, and imagine spaces of freedom in ways unavailable to genres more preoccupied with linearity and exactness. I have become increasingly intrigued … by the creative theorisation in the arena of African feminist imagination. By 'creative theorisation', I intend the series and forms of conjecture, speculative possibilities opened up in literary and other creative genres. Theoretical or epistemological projects do not only happen in those sites officially designated as such, but emerge from other creatively textured sites outside of these. (p. 50)

One of the things noted by Collins (2000/2009) in her recuperative black feminist work, is that when black women's voices could not be found, they were often not being sought in the spaces in which they were being articulated. Thus, part of Collins's work has been to engage the various sites black women were articulating their lived experiences and in the modes in which they were doing so (which include blues, jazz and rap music; literature; poetry; religion; quilting; storytelling; everyday conversations and behaviour). Thus, part of Khan's modus operandi as an academic is to familiarise young women of colour with black-African feminist methodologies not just in a theoretical sense, but by practically demonstrating this. By showing young scholars examples of how black-African creatives and researchers have gone about their research gives them both discursive and imaginative markers. Providing theoretical texts and having participants directly talk *through* their own lived experiences, makes it real for them, and ties it to – and *centralises it around* – their own geo-specific, gendered, sexual, racial, cultural contexts. This is communicated by various participants:

> Lila: 'I think most creative work is linked to lived experiences that are either personal, collective, fictional or anonymous. I'm saying creative work because the choice of readings in the group had a lot of creative imagination work that made reference to issues that most of us in the group could relate to from different walks of life.'
>
> Saajidah: 'We gathered, discussed complex narratives and shared personal histories and stories while having tea.'
>
> Motsa: 'The intellectual practices revolved around our individual experiences both in the world and in the academy, and reflected on a subjectivity constituted through the nexus of blackness and womanhood. The basing of our research, writing and thinking on aspects of our own lives gave the reading group greater resonance. The readings circulated in the group encouraged us to position ourselves with the broader sphere of cultural production, to introspect and to generate critical insight on the challenges faced by women both in the art world and beyond.'
>
> Mbambo: 'I appreciated how we approached theories and texts – our text analyses were quite aware of the individual's presence in the theory, prioritizing the personal perspective over the generalized perspective/experience.'

Likewise, the co-author reflections foreground similar intersections in which BFK provided an informal learning space that concretised how personal, political and intersectional matrices of oppression play out in individual lives:

> Fouad Asfour: 'Discussing the readings throughout the meetings, what captured my attention was how this serious interrogation which scholars and writers like bell hooks, Mariama Ba, Nawal El Saadawi, Sara Ahmed, Ama Ata Aidoo, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, among others, brought about changed perceptions of reality. Not only a critical questioning, the first step of conscientisation, but also to be empowered by re-writing traumatic experiences and learning to claim a space of serious reflection to include seemingly marginal thoughts on marginalisation into scholarly work.'
>
> Zodwa Skeyi Tutani: 'I found a space that nurtured my academic growth experiences. I could, at last, partake on topics that added colour and depth of knowledge to my academic pursuits, and real engagement with other scholars that afforded me the ability to be able to articulate the black experience. I found the BFK group to be both formal and informal. It was formal in that there was an expectation to engage with others and the texts … It was also informal because there was room to veer off into other elements of the text that was being engaged with, a free flow experience where life meets fiction, meets academic theorisations and added to some of the group's creative outputs within the university space.'

11. The result was an article on biomythography that came out of these sessions.

12. The group has only had 1 year of interaction because of COVID-19. Khan has every intention of continuing the group's multi-modality nature as experimented with in Rhodes University BFK, which has also taken its own complexion post Khan's departure.

Each of the extended testimonies above brings home the importance placed in black-African feminist scholarship on dialogue and narrative. hooks (1989:6) defines 'dialogue' as the 'sharing of speech and recognition' and talks about the intensity, intimacy, joy and pleasure she experiences from seeing her mother, aunts and their women friends engage among themselves as peers. These speech acts between women of colour are not simply 'talking points', but they graft subjectivities, communities, histories and knowledges *in recognising each other, in being recognised*. Simultaneously, the speech act is translated back into the act of writing and the cyclical modes of grafting, authorising and sedimentation continues. Collins outlines four other areas of black feminist epistemology: dialogue – which permits debate and difference in a safe space – that allows for an assessing of knowledge claims (and Wits BFK debates could be vociferous), lived experience as a criterion for knowledge, the ethic of personal accountability, and black women as agents of knowledge which are all intricately bound to the dialogic.

Lived experience – which so often informs black and African women's research areas – allows black women to be agents of knowledge, and *should* allow them to be authorities on their bodies of knowledge.[13] Exposure to the kinds of black-African feminist research methodologies that BFK employs are meant not only to make them real and practical to those for whom it has the most meaning without running a 'methodologies' course, but to conscientise participants that social epistemologies are both freely accessible and not strictly determined by the formal curriculum. By making students aware that there are knowledges they can tap into, they become part of the practices of self-exploration and academic solidarity across intersectional concerns. For instance, participant Carrie who attended the BFK for years says one of the important features of it was, 'Open round table conversations/collaborative idea sharing, rather than being lectured at about a book'. Anne, an older pedagogue, returning for a second Master's degree in Art History, regards the BFK as doing the important work of a hidden curriculum in the best sense:

> 'So, it was a very important part of the curriculum where people could express themselves, they could bring what they wanted to and you were not obligated to participate, you could just sit quietly. Because, silence in itself is a language that we were exploring … And it wasn't even said 'this is for you', actually. It was for us to discover these elements of the curriculum.'

Participant Lila, another BFK regular, notes, 'I saw the Black Feminist Group as a space of community, learning and creativity. I developed some of my art-making processes from the meetings'. This is crucial for us at BFK as our idea of creative theorisation follows African Stiwanist[14] Molara Ogundipe's injunction that as Africans we need to theorise out of our 'epicentres of agency, looking for what is meaningful, progressive and useful to us as Africans' (Lewis 2002:6). This means that part of our discursive agency is looking for and establishing methods and modes for articulating and assessing our knowledge. This implicates both lived experience as a criterion for knowledge and the ethic of personal accountability – how does one know what one is speaking of and what is the position of the implicated researcher (do you care about that which you are speaking about and for whom)? In BFK, these questions of being the 'inside-outsider, outside-insider' and the problems/tensions that arise from such intersectional[15] positionalities but also the invested research that it produces, are constantly tussled with because of the very researcher that finds her way to the group. We do not attempt at hiding this messiness nor the hierarchies that come in relationalities between university staff, students and researcher talking to each other and about our communities. For instance, the complications of education being a class-propeller even while many of us may still have one foot in the working-class communities we originate from.

While BFK sessions could be incredibly intense, they could also be very light-hearted and fun and game playing and dancing featured prominently in Rhodes University BFK (these were largely absent from the Wits sessions). Khan and Asfour are firm believers in childhood game playing as forms of indigenous, feminist and decolonial knowledge systems,[16] as well as socialising mechanisms and were, therefore, promoted. Participant Anne elaborates on the value of play:

> '… [*P*]lay is a very important part of learning that we normally associate with children. But, in my work we find that, and you found that, and the BFK found that it really was an extraordinary way of just being.'

Dancing as well was regularly programmed with the black-African feminist understanding that it is a joyful practice. Similarly, drinks and snacks were sponsored by Khan and participant Lila remarks on how important a feature this was:

> 'Of course the snacks, drinks and finger foods made the meetings enjoyable. I mean it's in the afternoon when I'm thinking about going to my place and unwind, then you walk into the Black Feminist Group and feel at home:) and it's comforting.' [*sic*]

These various aspects – eating, drinking, dancing and playing – the facilitators brought to bear from their own communities-of-colour. For Khan, the term 'Black Feminist Killjoy' permitted the authorisation of such methodologies, which in turn authorised particular bodies and ways of being while also asking participants to reflect on their expectations before entering the space. Such activities may not have been initially comfortable for all participants, but those who stayed were Khan's target group: black feminist killjoys interested in

13. Collins (2000/2009:277) provides the caveat that experience is not used as justification in and of itself, but rather as 'useful embodied interrogation' (Mirza 2009) to assess and understand more abstract arguments.

14. African-centred feminism 'Stiwanism' (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) was coined by Nigerian scholar, critic, educator and activist Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie in her 1994 book *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*.

15. These issues have been highlighted by feminists like Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins and Ogunidipe-Leslie and in the South African context by Bessie Head, Pumla Gqola, Zoe Wicomb, Desiree Lewis and Siphokazi Magadla. It is most associated with Kimberle Crenshaw's term 'intersectionality' and her famous 1989 paper 'Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'.

16. For an expansion on decoloniality and decolonial aestheSis, see Khan and Asfour 2018.

decolonial praxis. This idea is shared by Skeyi-Tutani who notes that although BFK has always been open to anyone invested in black-African feminist thought, sometimes it is perceived as exclusive and people 'self-exclude':

> … [*T*]here is a tendency from others to feel excluded because they are not black or even woman. As though being feminist requires a gender or thinking through and with 'blackness' immediately closes the door for whiteness within the space. The BFK was not specific in who attended but was specific in what was discussed and why. … It was assumed that one chose to attend because they were interested in the theme and how it could benefit their own experiences and contribute to their *wellbeing* rather than because of their gender or race.

The BFK never set any gender stipulations, and it has been attended by several men who identified with these positions. We also have women who have dragged their boyfriends to meetings. The BFK follows a fundamental tenet of black/African feminisms in that our men/folk are integral to our lives and well-being, and to change society, men need to be educated about gender equality. Of importance to what Skeyi-Tutani identifies in the above quote, and what we try to establish throughout our text is that BFK aims at opening up a space where black-African feminist thought and practices can become social practices of alternative epistemologies that allow for the process 'of rearticulating a pre-existing Black women's standpoint and recentering the language of existing academic discourse to accommodate these knowledge claims' (Collins 1989:772). Skeyi-Tutani poignantly points out how knowledge, which can be so abstract and elitist (and we began this text with this thought), is used to contribute to a person's well-being, to change individual thinking. By extension, the question we want to raise here is how BFK, as an example of a 'reading group', can be viewed in terms of practising theory as 'liberatory practice' (hooks 1991), rather than through prescribed curriculum or policy, pulling on all of the ways we discuss above. However, just before this, we need to think through the importance of intimate discursive spaces and what they offer critical education.

Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group as an example of reading groups as trans-disciplinary, trans-curricular activity

Even as we present BFK as a space for women of colour to experiment and explore how to negotiate social construction of knowledge, we want to question what exactly does this mean given our post-'post-apartheid' wariness for calls of 'unity' and 'rainbowism'. This article approaches the concept of 'epistemic self' and 'academic identity' from the critical framework of black/African studies, which stay away from theorisation of sociological processes independent of personal experience. While the discourse around the social construction of knowledge is framed by social and policy research, it is also rooted in knowledge-making and social cohesion. Steven A. Rosell (1995) remarks that the concept is based not only on the analysis of social processes, but that of:

> [*B*]uilding shared values and communities of interpretation, … generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community. (p. 78)

For the BFK communities, these values have been loosely around the idea of 'black-African feminist theories' and creative imagination. Based at university spaces, it is obvious that it is the academic community that is primarily catered for, even as the general public is always welcome and discussions are held in everyday language so as not to be intimidating (a fundamental principle of many black-African feminists).[17] Reading groups offer such a platform across disciplinary boundaries, which can become 'non-curriculum-based unit[*s*]' (Mitoumba-Tindy 2017:78), for young academics as they bring together students to debate urgent questions around the positionality and agency of research and its relation to the larger South African society.

The role of Higher Education in transforming the conceptualisation of community, therefore, is significant. Sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (2011:172) states that:

> [*W*]omen belong and are identified as members of the collectivity in the same way that men are. Nevertheless, there are always rules and regulations – not to mention perceptions and attitudes – specific to women.

South African Professor of Psychology, Puleng Segalo (2015:49) continues that this 'may be perceived as "conditional belonging" where women are accepted as full citizens but with limited powers within the communities to which they belong'. Even though women of colour are increasingly becoming dominant within the university space in terms of numbers (Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh & Susuman 2016), they still feel marginalised and oppressed as has been articulated by several BFK participants.

As such, we want to highlight the possibilities of a platform like the BFK and how it might contribute to the social construction of knowledge in Higher Education in a meaningful way. As it becomes clear from the responses, the participants feel that they gained more than anticipated from decolonial, black-African feminist methods of learning. In the first instance, we want to argue that even within university spaces – which are seen as violent by oppressed groups – it is possible to create safe spaces and, therefore, safe spaces need to be located in a more fluid, contingent notion of 'community'. We learnt from the participants' responses, however, that it won't suffice to contour a safe space as one that prioritises the well-being of the members of that space by minimising risks of psychological or emotional harm while they're there. Usually, this avoided harm is one that the members come across often in their day-to-day lives because of their identity markers (e.g. being black, a woman, being differently-abled, queer, having little access to money, etc.). The BFK was safe not only because it was intimate, inviting, nurturing, structurally flexible, a space of refuge, group

17. See Collins (2000/2009) or the writings of bell hooks who (although not a black feminist) has been very influential to black feminist discourses.

identification, a constant attendance to their well-being, group investment in it, but also because it dared to imagine knowledge and meaning-making as healing. Thus, the reading groups experimented with decolonial approaches that were harnessed from the groups' various home cultural identities and, thus, became a vital factor in crafting reading groups as decolonial methodologies that aided non-formal continuous learning paradigms and was not afraid to change, to be fun and be serious too. At the same time, we were encouraged to take the black-African feminist methodologies further and accept that the various discomforts they experienced could be viewed as benefitting their learning and growth experiences.[18] Rather, we reiterate these to posit that we believe communities are not only created by attending to 'likeness' of experiences and identity formations but also in the *ways in which differences are safely negotiated and imagined*, and that they are jointly grafted through attending to interests, self-care, self-worth, knowledge-practices and other aspects of socialisation.

Khan holds the responses of the BFK participants dearly. For Khan, growing up under apartheid and experiencing racial contact only in her late teens, university (in 1995) became a space of possibilities. While she still lived in her Indian township, the university was the place for unlearning behaviour, for reimagining her life and social world, where she was introduced to black-African feminist, critical race and postcolonial literature. Critical education showed her that it was imaginable to be better, to do better. It harnessed the imaginary and allowed one to be with whomever one wanted, to be who one chose to, regardless of where one came from. Emerging from apartheid, it healed her from her own racial hauntings, hurtings and nightmares. She hoped to create spaces for other women of colour to talk freely, to know that they were the centre of their universes, that their imaginations and creativities were limitless, and that they were not alone. She believed in the power of dialogue, arts, sisterhood and community to support and even heal, sometimes (when too often universities do not have sufficient resources for the extensive counselling services that are actually needed).[19] This feeling is shared by others in BFK:

> Saajidah: '… for me these were like healing/therapy sessions I could have never imagined having in the community I from come because these are like forbidden topics to discuss.' [*sic*]

> Anne: 'You know, the fun part was so important because one thinks of it in many ways, but for me I find the word 'healing', you know the word 'healing', because physically you were releasing energy, running around in our games, laughing, clapping. So, in a way, it's almost as though we're activating awareness in our body to have not just a brain that is thinking, but a body that is thinking. You could begin to sit quietly and isolate your feeling, 'Oh, this makes my chest tight', you know. 'This brings the sourness behind my ears', etc.'

Anne, too, viscerally remembers the contours of apartheid, and the BFK meetings were never taken for granted as a space where diverse South Africans met and shared intimate details of our lives, allowing ourselves to be challenged, dancing, eating and drinking, laughing and crying together, as if it were normal. That it is also able to provide solidarities, friendships, sisterhoods and avenues of 'everyday therapy' in a black-African feminist community demonstrates why such meetings are valuable as part of the social fabric of academia, as a necessary self-care practice that is oft-spoken about, but little practised.

Conclusion

Thus, discussions on the role of extracurricular spaces such as BFK are necessary and includes interrogating patriarchal forms of social epistemology, which the university is based on – this amid the quandary that students find themselves confronted with of how to negotiate the limited time earmarked for pursuing a degree. Those of us who have been beneficiaries of extracurricular spaces may well argue for their value. But in situations where students are struggling with funding their education, how are they able to access, let alone enjoy the benefits of such spaces? One of our main arguments is that BFK can contribute to the formation of academic identities through acknowledging the process of the social construction of knowledge as 'epistemic becoming' (Barnett 2009) – how we all found ourselves and our research through intense engagements with black-African feminist theorisations and informal learning platforms.

We want to emphasise that reading groups can 'contribute to holistic academic development by giving them the platform and opportunity to think critically about disciplinary content and their writing processes and skills' (Mitoumba-Tindy 2017:78). They see the value of reading groups in the same way as we view writing groups: as providing non-curriculum-based learning and processing skills (and what is sometimes called 'peer-to-peer', 'lateral' or 'horizontal learning'), of giving recognition and legitimacy (to bodies and knowledges), of creating space for different kinds and modes of participation and of grafting space for belonging, being homed and for creating a space for inclusivity-exclusivity (which we set in the black feminist framework of a 'both-andness' (Collins 2000/2009:152) rather than as a binary). While some universities in the last decade have given more attention to academic writing circles and writing programmes, this support, recognition and investment have not been forthcoming to reading groups. We put forth that space (and resources)[20] in formal curricula be set aside for such activities – where students can voluntarily attend reading and writing groups, dialogue sessions and clubs that enhance the learning experience of individuals, thereby contributing to holistic individuals and communities. Part of learning has to be about 'learning to be'. Too often the refrain has been heard that education is a privilege in South Africa.

18.See, for instance, the volume by Grace Khunou, Edith Phaswane, Katijah Khoza-Shangase and Hugo Canham, *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (2019) where black academics discuss their struggle to legitimatise, validate and have their experiences of discomfort and racism articulated within the academy.

19.We are not advocating that avenues like BFK can replace proper counselling services, but university counselling services are often stretched beyond capacity and students and staff need regular community to talk to, to support each other and to reach out to (as opposed to when crisis intervention is needed). We are saying that both kinds of work need to be carried out.

20.Khan's research funding between 2017 and 2019 assisted in starting and supporting the BFK activities. Once funding ended Khan continued to pay for the BFK activities out of pocket.

However, if we start to regard Higher Education as a right that every South African is entitled to should they want it, then university becomes imaginaries of what is possible.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the *Art on our Mind* research teams at Rhodes and Wits University, all the Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group participants over the years. The authors also thank Prof. Lynda Gichanda Spencer for the unwavering support and presence.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Prof. S.K., F.A. and Z.S-T. equally contributed to the research and writing of this article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) (No. H21/01/09).

Funding information

The Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group was made possible through the National Research Foundation Thutuka Grant Funding, Rhodes University and University of the Witwatersrand.

Data availability

The data presented in this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author (S.K.). The data are not publicly available because of ethical restrictions.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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