Spring 5-2024

“It's More Than a Book Club”: Counterspaces and Bibliotherapic Wellness Among Black Undergraduate Women

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A thesis presented to
Washington University in St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts

May 2024
St. Louis, Missouri

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Seanna Leath, and my committee members, Dr. Brian Carpenter and Dr. Lori Markson for their dedication to seeing me excel as a scholar. I would like to offer thanks to the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity, and Equity for funding this project. Last but not least, I offer a special thanks to the women who participated in the study and graciously shared their wisdom and talents with the collective goal of cultivating a space where we could heal together.

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May 2024

Dedicated to my family, friends, and especially my son. Thank you for reminding me to stand fearlessly in the face of adversity.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by
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Master of Arts in Psychological and Brain Sciences

Washington University in St. Louis, 2024

Professor Seanna Leath, Chair

Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) face heightened vulnerability to general and race-related stressors, necessitating the identification of culturally responsive and alternative care approaches to complement traditional talk therapy and clinical assessment, given the associated adverse academic and psychological outcomes. The current study explores the utility of a Black women-focused book club as an inclusive and identity-affirming space for Black women attending an elite and private PWI. Additionally, we consider how this bibliotherapic and group-based approach offered a critical counterspace for participants. Over the course of a four-month semester, two Black women co-facilitators held a monthly book club series (Kitchen Table Talk; KTT) with four main elements: Black feminist books, online journal prompts, Black women speakers, and in-person group discussions. The current sample includes a subset of eight Black women who attended at least one KTT session during the semester. After the KTT series concluded, the co-facilitators led two focus groups and conducted individual interviews to gather insight into the women's perceptions of institutional climate, their existing wellness practices, and the significance of KTT as a wellness space. We used consensual qualitative research methods to identify thematic categories from the women's responses. In

response to questions about institutional climate, the women discussed three themes: a) culture of whiteness (e.g., racial tokenization); b) culture of productivity; and c) culture of incohesion (i.e., lack of unity among Black student organizations). The women highlighted that the primary way KTT functioned as a counterspace was that it built on their existing wellness practices (e.g., narrative identity work, and social support) in ways that bolstered their positive mental health. Finally, we analyzed how and why the programmatic elements of KTT were particularly useful in supporting their positive mental health. Overall, our study highlights the effectiveness of a bibliotherapic and group-based counterspace as a wellness tool for Black undergraduate women, emphasizing its positive impact on mental health.

Introduction

Black students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (i.e., PWI's) are particularly vulnerable to general and race-related stressors (e.g., racial discrimination) which have been linked to worse academic and psychological outcomes (Neville et al., 2004; Shahid et al., 2018). Thus, there has been an increased empirical focus on how to address these heightened rates of mental health challenges among Black college students (Griffith et al., 2019; Mushonga, 2019), particularly in thinking about culturally responsive and alternative forms of care that may complement traditional models of talk therapy and clinical assessment (Jones & Harris, 2019; Kodish et al., 2021).

Previous literature has attempted to identify ways to improve mental health for Black students. For example, there have been suggestions to shift the focus to positive mental health, to provide more culturally competent therapists on campus, and to reduce stigma around mental health (Busby et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2021; Peoples et al., 2022). This can be especially helpful when considering Black college women, who are more likely to experience poorer mental health (e.g., depression and anxiety) because of their intersectional experiences related to gendered racism and misogynoir (Lewis et al., 2017; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Thomas et al., 2008). Several studies have revealed that the gendered racism Black women face on college campuses can impede their academic persistence and performance (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015), as well as undermine their psychological well-being (Jones et al., 2021). Yet, there is still a dearth of literature on the ways various campus supports can play a positive role in Black undergraduate women's college adjustment and well-being.

In the current study, we explore the utility of a bibliotherapic and group-based approach for Black undergraduate women as a counterspace for wellness. Specifically, we consider how a Black women-focused book club functioned as a more inclusive and identity-affirming space for Black women attending an elite and private PWI.

1.1 Counterspaces and Sense of Belonging for Black Women in Higher Education

Black women's gendered racial oppression in institutional contexts has involved silencing their voices, ignoring their experiences, and discrediting their knowledge (Porter & Byrd, 2021; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). Patricia Collins states, "suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule…" (Collins, 1999, p. 5). Despite increased enrollment of Black college women in higher education, the undercurrent of systemic racism and sexism persists, hindering their intellectual growth and devaluing their scholarly contributions, particularly at PWI's (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Despite this challenge, Black women have pushed back against oppressive systems and constructed spaces where their experiences and ideas are valued - often amongst themselves (McClure, 2018). Within higher education, these types of identity-affirming spaces among Black women and other marginalized student communities have been termed counterspaces. Keels (2019) defines counterspaces as revolutionary settings in larger socially oppressive contexts aimed at disrupting dominant narratives and cultural norms. It is posited that these spaces can enhance an individual's well-being by challenging prevailing narratives through three processes: narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions (Case & Hunter, 2012).

Narrative identity work operates by identifying the creation and maintenance of oppressive narratives, resistance narratives, and reimagined personal narratives. Acts of

resistance involve collectively critiquing oppressive narratives and engaging in non-normative behaviors (i.e., behaviors that affirm identity or incite social critique). Direct relational transactions foster empathy, security, and the sharing of strategies to respond to oppression. Several of the outcomes of implementing these processes include the reinvention of misrepresented personal identities, reduction of psychological distress and isolation, and the enhancement of self-protective mechanisms. In relation to Black women at PWIs, narrative identity work may look like affirming experiences of oppression and reminding members in the counterspace of their resilience to overcome challenges (Case & Hunter, 2012). Acts of resistance may involve writing or other forms of creative expression and engaging in open forum discussions that critique social constructs that oppress marginalized communities (Case & Hunter, 2012). Finally, reimagining the personal narratives may include engaging in empowering programs that provide opportunities to develop new self-concepts that challenge deficit-based representations of Black women (Case & Hunter, 2012). To date, the importance of counterspaces for Black women's wellness is an understudied area of research.

For instance, these spaces can be especially important for building a sense of belonging, or a feeling of acceptance, inclusion, and connection with those around you (Booker, 2016). Sense of belonging has been associated with higher levels of self-esteem and positive affect (Leary and Baumeister, 2000), and specifically for Black college students it has been associated with higher GPA's (Gummadam et al., 2016; Walton & Cohen, 2011), and an increased persistence to earning their degree (Kuh et al., 2008). In a meta-analysis conducted by Porter & Byrd (2021) regarding developmental influences on Black women's success in college, it was revealed that sense of belonging and a need for counter spaces were among the themes that contributed to students' success. The authors highlighted how counterspaces provide space for

counter-narratives (i.e., centering the experiences of marginalized students), and how hearing other Black women's life stories and their experiences on campus increased their sense of belonging and engagement in college. In the current study, we review the programmatic elements and positive role of a Black-women-centered book club on a predominantly white campus, called "Kitchen Table Talk." Kitchen Table Talk (KTT) was co-designed by two Black women scholars (a professor and her doctoral student) to operate in a similar way to Black feminist kitchen tables as spaces of community and wellness (Lyiscott et al., 2021). While sitting around the kitchen table and wash basin at home, or within church pews and in college dorm rooms, Black women build friendships, affirm each other's experiences, and exchange ideas on how to live authentic and full lives (Howard et al., 2016; The Combahee River Collective, 2014). Additionally, we consider the potential benefits of KTT as bibliotherapic and group-centered approach to wellness that may complement or offer alternative forms of mental health support for Black undergraduate women. Below, we briefly review the psychotherapeutic approach to mental health support for Black women in college; then, we introduce and consider the benefits of some alternative forms of wellness support that align with the KTT program.

1.2 A Brief Review of Mental Health and Wellness Supports for Black Undergraduate Women

1.2.1 Psychotherapeutic Approaches

Psychotherapy is used to treat people who are experiencing psychological distress as a consequence of a myriad of issues (e.g., chronic stress and discrimination), and can come in many different forms (e.g., individual, couple, and group talk therapy). Its primary function is grounded in verbal communication between a therapist and client to work through psychological

distress by identifying sources of distress and offering empirically based ways to alter cognitive and/or behavioral patterns that, when implemented consistently, may contribute to improved wellness (APA, 2023). While many people benefit from psychotherapeutic approaches, including cognitive behavioral therapy (Hofmann et al., 2012), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR; Maxfield, 2019), and exposure therapy (Foa & McLean, 2016), there is evidence to suggest that certain structural challenges affect Black women's capacity to fully access the benefits of psychotherapeutic approaches. For example, in a comparative study of non-treatment-seeking Black and White undergraduate students, Black students preferred psychotherapy treatment in the form of group, family, and couples therapy over individual therapy (Charles et al., 2020). They also had a stronger preference for male therapists of the same race who were more directive and structured during the sessions. While these were their preferred forms of psychotherapy treatment and therapists' characteristics, the Black students in the study also reported that they were aware it was unlikely these preferences were attainable. Thus, while they were able to identify the type of therapeutic approach that would have helped them feel secure and comfortable in the setting, they did not think these options would be available. This is important to note, given that research has shown that weak therapeutic alliances have been linked to early termination of therapy (Sharf et al., 2010).

Similarly, prior research indicates that Black college students tend to exhibit a greater preference for group therapy as opposed to individual psychotherapy. In a study with Black college women examining the effectiveness of a culture-specific psychoeducational group intervention, results revealed that the women who were assigned to the group intervention experienced a decrease in perceived stress as compared to women in the control group condition, which did not receive culture-specific psychoeducation (Jones, 2004).

Additionally, this group therapy model employed literature (i.e., *sistahs of the yam: black women and self recovery*) as a way to "reach beyond the traditional methods of treatment to affirm and integrate the values and worldviews of Black Americans." Jones (2004) highlights how the culture-specific group promoted change through similar strategies associated with the processes of counterspaces (i.e., exploring oppressive stressors, validating experiences, and gaining problem solving skills to respond to oppression). These results are consistent with group therapy (i.e., group work models) research among Black women, which have been shown to be effective in providing a space where Black women can build sisterhood, embrace intersectional identities, and feel more personally empowered through the mutual sharing and affirmation that happens within group settings. Another culture-based group therapy intervention conducted by Jones & Johnson (2018) revealed similar findings among Black college women, suggesting that group therapy models are a viable form of campus support. Unlike the few studies that explore group therapy models for Black women, Jones & Johnson (2018) placed an emphasis on outreach efforts, recognizing that the socialization Black women experience regarding help-seeking (e.g., Superwoman Schema) may serve as a barrier to receiving mental health services when they are in need. Further investigation is warranted into the significance of cultural awareness in both outreach efforts and the group therapy space.

1.3 Alternative Models of Wellness Support

In recent years, more Black psychologists have been exploring innovative and culturally resonant ways to connect Black individuals to mental health supports. Based on the goals and format of KTT, we review empirical literature on the importance of community-based mental health spaces and expressive forms of wellness activities.

1.3.1 Community-Based Mental Health Spaces

One example of this is the culturally specific community mental health model of Psychohairapy. The theoretical concept was birthed from the mind of clinical psychologist and hairdresser, Dr. Afiya Mbilishaka and is an extension of the Africana womanism model (Mbilishaka, 2018), and is described as "outlining a realistic and workable approach to mental health and spiritual health for people of African descent through hair care." This idea essentially postulates that the hair care setting provides a safe space for Black women to be vulnerable and that the hair care setting in and of itself is a system of health care (Mbilishaka, 2018). Trained mental health workers partnering with and administering psychological prevention and interventions in community spaces like hair salons offer an opportunity to meet folks where they are in the spaces most comfortable to them, bypassing several barriers to mental health services this community typically experiences. In addition to partnering mental health workers with community hair care settings, Psychohairapy aims to address the lack of Black folks represented in the mental health sector by training hairdressers with basic skills to offer "mental health first aid," by gaining the skills to listen, process, and talk about mental health with their clients, and providing brief and skillful interventions when necessary (e.g., mindfulness practice). By positioning these community influencers as mental health advocates, more access is provided to a marginalized community in a setting that honors their culture. The mental health model outlined by Mbilishaka maps to prior literature in support of training community members to provide mental health care. For instance, in a meta-analysis conducted by Barnett et. al (2017), it was revealed that interventions that are administered correctly by lay persons can be just as efficacious as when they are administered by a trained clinician. Research has also documented

the role of pastors in Black churches, such that they often serve as informal mental health advocates, providing socioemotional support (Neighbors et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2000).

Additionally, digital counterspaces for Black women that promote physical and emotional wellness have recently begun to emerge (Velazquez, 2016). As an illustration, Cameron (2019) emphasized the positive impact of a popular Instagram page, Black Girl Yoga (BGY). This platform aims to create a supportive environment for Black women to engage in yoga, fostering community and visibility within a wellness culture that frequently overlooks non-white and economically disadvantaged women. In this empirical study, Cameron (2019) argues that the effectiveness of BGY in involving Black women in both physical and emotional wellness through yoga primarily stems from its creation of an affirming and inclusive environment across digital and physical spaces. Additionally, it shifts focus away from the oppression experienced by Black women.

1.3.2 Creative and Expressive Approaches to Wellness

Expressive writing has been researched as another way to provide effective and accessible care to treat psychological distress. Also referred to as experimental disclosure, expressive writing (i.e., the act of "disclosing information, thoughts, and feelings about personal and meaningful topics"), has broadly been linked to improvements in physical and psychological health (Frattaroli, 2006). For example, one study discovered that positive affect journaling was associated with less anxiety and depression symptoms and greater resilience in adults with elevated anxiety (Smyth et al., 2018). Positive affect journaling refers to writing about positive experiences, and participants in the study who were assigned to the intervention condition, were instructed to write three times a week for 12 weeks on a preselected positive affect prompt (e.g.,

what are you thankful for). An important finding in this study, not extensively explored in prior expressive writing research, is that participants reported feeling more socially integrated compared to those in the control group. As mentioned earlier this greater sense of belonging is associated with a number of positive outcomes (e.g., higher self-esteem and positive affect), suggesting that this intervention could be particularly useful with marginalized communities. Additionally, Kilgore et al., (2020) conducted a qualitative study with 25 Black women writers to examine how they use writing to cope with gendered-racial microaggressions. The results indicated that the women used a myriad of creative writing styles (e.g., poetry, journalism, and short stories) to cope, and that expressive writing empowered them to reflect, express themselves, and use their voice. Still, there is less research on how Black college women view the mental health benefits of expressive writing.

In addition to expressive writing, several scholars have examined bibliotherapy as an effective mental health support. Bibliotherapy refers to "the use of written materials or computer programs, or the listening/viewing of audio/videotapes for the purpose of gaining understanding or solving problems relevant to a person's developmental or therapeutic needs" (Marrs, 1994). While the research for its effectiveness as a stand-alone treatment for psychological distress remains inconclusive, there is consensus that it is most effective when accompanied by some form of psychotherapy (e.g., individual or group therapy) (Fanner & Urquhart, 2008; Marrs, 1994). A dearth of studies (Jones, 2004; Rawls et al., 2020) covering group therapy interventions among Black college students incorporated literature components and discovered that the literature served as "mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors" (Bishop, 1990). That is, the books allowed the participants to focus outside of themselves taking on new perspectives as well as see themselves in the authors or characters and ultimately each other. In both studies, the sample

consisted of Black undergraduate women, and utilized non-fiction books by Black authors (e.g., *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*, and *sistahs of the yam: black women and self recovery*). These various studies offer insights into alternative therapeutic approaches that may support Black undergraduate women's wellness outside the context of psychotherapy.

The Present Study

2.1 Aims

Thus, the present study builds on the existing body of literature in several ways. First, we aim to expand the literature on the gendered-racial experiences of Black undergraduate women, with a particular focus on the utility of counterspaces as identity affirming and supportive contexts for psychosocial engagement. In doing so, we will add to the small, but growing body of literature on the role of counterspaces as critical support systems for Black undergraduate women. Second, we aim to consider how an extracurricular learning opportunity embedded within an undergraduate psychology course, successfully incorporated elements of alternative therapeutic models, such as group discussion, bibliotherapy, and expressive writing. Our findings may offer important insight into how universities can leverage academic courses and partner with faculty to strategically expand their mental health and wellness services for students. Third, we aim to consider how the specific programmatic elements of an extracurricular learning opportunity align with Black women's existing wellness practices. We hope to provide useful recommendations for scholars and practitioners who are doing similar promotive and protective mental health and wellness work for socially marginalized students on college campuses across the country.

Methods

3.1 Participants

Over the course of a four-month semester, we held monthly Kitchen Table Talk sessions, and 18 Black undergraduate women participated in the program. The current sample included a subset of eight Black women who attended at least one Kitchen Table Talk session during the semester. Five of the women identified as Black, two women identified as bi-racial (i.e., Black and White), and one woman identified as Ghanaian American. At the time of data collection, two women were in their first year, three women were in their second year, and three women were in their third year of college. This sample consisted of participants who identified as cisgender (n = 7), and gender-queer (n = 1). Most of the participants (n = 5) were psychology majors, but the sample also included women majoring in African-American Studies, Education, Pre-Law, English, Chemistry, and one participant was undecided. Among the subset of women who participated in the interviews, three had attended one book club session, four had attended a few sessions, and one of them attended all four book club sessions.

3.2 Procedures

IRB approval was obtained to conduct the book club, and a separate IRB was obtained for the qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups that followed. The study focused on students enrolled in a Psychology of Black Women class during the spring semester. The professor of the course and co-lead of KTT invited all students to participate in the book club, and interested students signed up on a Google Doc form. Additionally, the professor emailed fliers to students in the class with details about the monthly book, the invited speaker, session location, and excerpts from the book. This information was shared before each monthly session,

allowing new and returning students to sign up if they were interested in that month's book. Each book club session had 8-10 slots allocated.

KTT was advertised as a book club series for Black women that would draw upon seminal Black feminist texts (e.g., *The Body is Not an Apology*). The book club convened once a month, typically during the 2nd or 3rd week of the month. Participants were provided with physical journals and copies of the selected books a few weeks before each session. Additionally, there was a secure online space for participants and co-facilitators to respond to journal prompts (e.g., How do you listen to your body? Can you remember a time when you ignored your body?). Each session followed a similar format; the co-facilitators brought food and snacks, a guest speaker facilitated discussion for about 45 minutes, and then the two co-facilitators discussed the journal prompts and books for the remaining 45 minutes.

In the Psychology of Black women course, the students had multiple options to receive extra credit (up to 5%) for attending events relevant to Black women's lived experiences (e.g., scholarly talks). Thus, women who participated in the book club were able to use their participation as part of that additional course credit. Leading up to each book club session, one of the co-facilitators sent out weekly reminders for the journal prompts and the monthly topic. These reminders included blurbs about the speaker, journal prompts, book excerpts, additional engagement suggestions (e.g., songs or videos), notes from facilitators, and details about the session. Two sessions were held in the PI's lab, one in a campus Living Learning Community (where some participants resided), and a large department room that was suitable for the women to spread out and practice yoga in the last session,

After the Kitchen Table Talk series concluded, co-facilitators led two one-hour focus groups and conducted individual interviews to gather feedback from women who were willing to participate in the research portion of the study. Participants also had the option to submit interview responses via voice memo, and one student chose this option. The interview protocol consisted of questions about intersectional identities and campus experiences (e.g., What are your intersections of identity? What have your experiences been like at WashU as a Black woman?) and questions about the book club series (e.g., Why were you interested in participating in the book club series? In what ways, if at all, did your experiences in KTT, encourage you to reflect on your wellness?). The women received $15 as compensation for their time and expertise. After the interviews, the PI sent the audio files out for professional transcription through Rev.

3.3 Coding Analysis

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) is uniquely suited to address exploratory research because it takes a discovery-oriented approach to addressing research questions that often yield nuanced data (Hill & Knox, 2021). In using CQR, researchers are able to create a taxonomy of the data through a largely constructivist approach (i.e., forming your own knowledge based on the data). CQR also requires a team of researchers to come together and provide their different perspectives on the data, to come to a consensus on what explanation best represents the data. The coding team was composed of four Black women; the PI and second author (involved in data collection, writing, and coding analysis), two graduate students (first author was a co-facilitator of KTT and involved in the writing and analysis; third author was a coding team member), and an undergraduate student (coding team member). Before coding, the first author conducted a thorough quality check on the transcripts and ensured that the transcripts

were accurate and aligned with the contextual nuances of each participant's dialogue. Subsequently, the first author pulled out excerpts from the transcripts that directly corresponded with the guiding research questions: (1) What have Black undergraduate women's experiences been like at PWI?, (2) How did Kitchen Table Talk function as a counterspace for Black undergraduate women?, and (3) What was it about the Kitchen Table Talk format that made it useful/promotive/protective for Black undergraduate women's positive mental health?

To organize the data, the lead author extracted excerpts in an Excel file with five columns: participant pseudonyms, raw data excerpts, first and second coder notes, and consensus meeting notes. The coding team collaboratively examined the first few excerpts together and took notes on what was expressed in the excerpt (e.g., finding some community sophomore year; feelings of self-alienation). After consensus was achieved on the thematic focus, the first author then allocated excerpts to team members, assigning each person as the primary coder (i.e., first coder) for a specific set of excerpts. The first coder independently reviewed their assigned excerpts, followed by a second coder who scrutinized the initial coding. We engaged in weekly hour-long meetings to collectively review first and second coder notes. Once notes were compiled for all excerpts, the team constructed a domain list that encapsulated meaningful themes that emerged from the interview data (Hill & Knox, 2021). The auditor (fourth author) carefully assessed the domain list and offered critique on title clarity, domain specificity, and potential overlap. Upon the auditor's approval, domains were assigned to the excerpts. Each coder line-by-line color-coded the excerpts, recognizing potential overlap where different parts of an excerpt could be associated with multiple domains.

During the weekly coding meetings, the coders collectively determined the most fitting domain for each excerpt (e.g., culture of whiteness and building on Black women's existing

wellness practices). The auditor played a pivotal role in reviewing the coded passages, ensuring clarity and consistency among the assigned domains. CQR, embodying an iterative process, engaged the research team in a continuous back-and-forth to develop themes that accurately represented the data. Theme validation occurred through an in-depth comparison with the original data to guarantee accuracy and representativeness. The final stage included member checking or sharing the preliminary results with participants to ensure the accurate reflection of their experiences.

3.4 Researcher Positionality

As researchers, our perspectives are inherently shaped by the diverse identities we embody, influencing our beliefs and approach to the work at hand (Roberts et al., 2020). Consequently, the authors offer insight into their various identities, both academic and cultural, as it relates to the current study. The first author is a queer Black woman and graduate clinical student whose research involves connecting the Black community to therapeutic interventions by utilizing art and creativity. Her experiences working with Black women and adolescent girls in both the academic and community setting guide her research and clinical practice. The second author is a Black queer woman and assistant professor with over a decade of research related to Black women and girls' identity development, academic achievement, and psychological well-being. The third author is a certified yoga instructor and doctoral student studying organizational leadership. Her professional, academic, and cultural work is rooted in using joy, creativity, and wellness as tools for liberating individuals and communities. A key component of her work is to help model sustainable wellness practices for Black women and girls in their respective work and academic environments. The fourth author is a queer Black woman and an undergraduate 3rd-year psychology student. Her academic interests are largely centered around child advocacy,

mental health, and social justice. Given the scope of this study, and our critical perspectives grounded in both Crenshaws (1989) intersectionality and Collins (1999) Black feminist thought framework, it is believed that the unique expertise of each of the authors makes us well-equipped to shed light on and contextualize Black women's experiences.

Results

In response to the first research question regarding campus experiences, we identified three themes relating to Black women's campus experiences: a) culture of whiteness (e.g., racial tokenization and institutional processes around DEI); b) culture of incohesion (i.e., lack of unity among Black student organizations and lack of spaces that support Black women's intersectional identities); c) culture of productivity. In relation to the second research question, the women highlighted one main way KTT functioned as a counterspace: building on Black women's existing wellness practices (e.g., narrative identity work and social support). Finally, in relation to the third research question on the programmatic elements (i.e., book selection, journaling, Black women facilitators, and group discussion) of KTT, we offer representative examples from women in the sample on how and why they found these particular elements useful in supporting their wellness. Below, we review examples for each research question, in order of reported frequency (i.e., presence or absence of each theme).

4.1 Research Question 1: Black Women's Campus Experiences and KTT as a Counterspace

Culture of whiteness

We identified three main themes around the women's campus experiences, and the utility of KTT as a counterspace. All the women we interviewed (n = 8) spoke of the culture of whiteness they experienced at their university; this climate included interpersonal interactions on campus, as well as broader university norms. White hegemony refers to the climate of white social, cultural, and ideological dominance (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). For instance, regarding her interpersonal experiences with a white roommate, Allie, who was a 3rd year, African-American woman, stated:

> For example, there was one instance where I was in the shower, it was a wash day [wash day - customary shorthand for hair wash day for Black women]. I was in a shower for 30 minutes, it was like nine o'clock at night. And one of the friends that they had over was like – I have to go to the bathroom. And they were like, why is your roommate in the shower? And they were like, she has been in there so long, what could she be doing? And then she came in there and asked me and I was like, oh, I'm washing my hair. And they were like – it doesn't take that long to wash your hair. And it was so strange because one, it was my house, so you can't tell me how long I could be in the shower at my home, and second – you don't know how long it takes me to wash my hair. I have a lot of hair. It takes me some time. And third – I don't have to explain myself to you on how long I take to wash my hair. So it was stuff like that where I would be, in extremely uncomfortable positions here. And the thing is if you don't find Black women, then there's not that much community.

In the excerpt, Allie highlighted the negative experience she had with her white roommates by Black students who share housing with non-Black roommates. Lack of cultural awareness from her white roommate and their friends resulted in Allie's discomfort in her own

home. Additionally, this example emphasizes the ideological dominance of whiteness, such that other students felt entitled to question Allie about what she was doing in her own space, imposing their own ideas regarding her hygiene behaviors. Some of the women also spoke of being one of the only Black women in their courses, which contributed to a sense of loneliness and isolation. Renee, who was a 3rd year bi-racial (Black and White) woman, shared:

> In any of my classes, I'm usually one of the only Black people. There are women in STEM (science, technology, math, and engineering), and I'm glad that there's that aspect of diversity. But I wouldn't say that any of them are in my courses, especially as a chemistry major. I know many Black people that are majoring in bio, but chemistry, I don't think I know anyone else. So that has been sort of difficult.

Similarly, Tina, who was a 2nd year, African-American woman, expressed:

> And then I got on campus and we got to know each other and that was very nice. And then I got to campus to be with the rest of the students and I was like, okay, we're at a PWI. You walk into the dining hall, you see all these white faces and you're like, okay, it's a sea of white. [laughs] I went to a boarding school so I remember I was around a lot of white kids too, but this is different, a bigger magnitude.

In both examples, the women discussed the literal physical and social magnitude of whiteness on campus. Their experiences resonated with other women in the sample, who also described how the transition to the whiteness of the broader climate was a challenge; even for women who attended K-12 schools with a similar racial demographic. Given the residential nature of the university, especially for the first year, the sense of racial tokenization and isolation also extended to residence halls and social settings. Tina reflected, "So we're all living on the same

campus together. I went into my house, which is traditional housing and there were like four Black people out of 60 people who lived in our house. And I was like, Oh my God." Taken together, the overwhelming social, cultural, and ideological dominance of whiteness led these women to seek out KTT as a counterspace.

Culture of Incohesion

In the second theme, six women emphasized the absence of inclusive spaces on campus that catered to their intersectional identities. Despite the presence of certain campus support groups or organizations for individual aspects of their identity (such as gender or race), these women thought that it was difficult to find organizational spaces that resonated with multiple aspects of their social identities and experiences (e.g., race and sexuality). In particular, six women discussed their challenges around finding supportive Black queer spaces on campus. Natalie, who as a 1st year, African-American woman, shared:

> In being a Black queer female, no, I've never been supported. Especially on this campus, I don't think that's something that's been supported, so it's kind of less important to me. Is that making sense? It's not less important, but it hasn't been explored much. I haven't been given the opportunity to explore it as much. And I find myself distancing myself from parts of my identity that I'm not being given the opportunity to explore as much.

Angela, who was a 3rd year bi-racial (Black and White) woman, disclosed how she felt frustrated that she was unable to find organizations that centered on her intersectional identities:

> I feel like I could only go to something for only one of my identities, maybe two, I don't know. During freshman year, I did try, WNMA [Woman and Non-Binary Multicultural

> Association], but it wasn't the space for me. And then I also have tried QUEENS, but I just wasn't feeling it. But that's also because I'm not a very social person. So that's probably why. But yeah, it just feels like I can only do one identity at a time. I can go to Black Student Association stuff and just focus on my Black identity, but not the fact that I'm queer or I have ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder] or whatever million other things there are.

She went on to say:

> One thing that makes me think of is my own queer identity of being a lesbian and asexual, which is very important to be. But one thing is that the queer spaces I've found, they're so focused on sex. And it's like when you're like me, I'm not even sex positive. I'm sex repulsive. So it's, I really don't want to be here to talk about sex. So I feel like there's pretty much no space on campus for me -there is the Ace&Aro [Asexual and Aromantic] club or whatever, but I'm pretty sure that's entirely white people, so I'm not going to that. But yeah, I feel like that part of my identity is the one that's I guess neglected the most in terms of finding other people around me who share in that identity.

Angela highlights the nuances of finding spaces that support parts of her identities, but never quite finding a space that where she can embrace all of her identities. Natalie and Angela both stress the need to sideline certain identities due to the absence of inclusive spaces on campus that support their intersectionality.

Jessica, who was a 2nd year Ghanaian-American woman, and the vice president of a multicultural gender-expansive organization on campus, voiced how within Black organizations on campus,

there is still often a dismissal of certain identities and a lack of organization and collaborative input among the group.

> I still wanted to get to know people who are not just Black, but of course most people in that group are queer, too. And that's something that's completely lacking in the Black space. We don't have any Black and queer spaces. And the ones that we do have, there are some, in my opinion, problematic people in there. And it's not even organized. It's like a two person show.

Culture of Productivity

In the final theme concerning campus experiences, five women discussed the overwhelming pressure they felt to excel in academic and occupational contexts. Specifically, they spoke about their concerns regarding how they had to sacrifice their wellbeing in order to excel academically. Elise, who was a 1st year, African-American woman, discussed the connections between her anxiety and sleep-related issues:

> I have the same thing with when I have stress or things to do, I can't do anything unless they're done. I don't know if anyone else had those weird anxiety dreams where your teeth fall out. I have those all the time. And that's how I know, I'm like, I've got stuff going on. Because I'll wake up and I'll be like, oh, that was a teeth dream. Let me reassess what's going on. And I wake up and I'm like, oh, they're all there. I also have the ones where I have alarms on my phone and I turn them off but they keep popping up.

Elise described her keen awareness of her sensitivity to stress, especially when faced with academic pressures. Increased anxiety from these demands often leads to sleep disturbances that affect her overall well-being.

Angela, who was a 3rd year bi-racial (Black and White) woman, shared how joining KTT was a promise to herself to read for pleasure again and to do something she loves, but ultimately her academic commitments impeded on her ability to fully engage with the book club.

> Yeah, I did three book clubs and it's kind of amazing to see the evolution of my reading. So the first time I read it two weeks beforehand and I read the whole book, had notes and everything. Second book, [I read it] a few days beforehand and still took notes. Third book. I was flipping this [flips quickly] through the poems to be honest. But that's why, it's just because of the same thing with all the schoolwork. I get so tired and I joined this book club because it was part of my whole promise to myself to start reading again. Because I used to be a big reader. And then I stopped when I started coming here. So I kind of noticed that this happened with all my stuff after spring break, literally I could not read words anymore. So I just think that it's because of everything this university demands of us, we have no time to ourselves to consume any other kind of knowledge or even media. I can't even watch TV now. [collective agreement]"

Considering the high level of productivity experienced by the women in their academic pursuits, the structure of KTT provided a space where they could participate without pressure. Additional supplemental materials (e.g., YouTube videos, films, and music) were made available to the women as an alternative means of contributing to the discussion if they were unable to engage with the book directly. Taken together, the shared campus experiences of the women provided

insight regarding why they gravitated towards KTT, that is it offered a distinct campus experience from what they were accustomed to and served as a counterspace for Black women navigating multiple intersectional identities.

4.2 Research Question 2: KTT Building on Black Women's Existing Wellness Practices

In regard to the second research question, we found that women in the sample talked about a range of ways that their participation in KTT complemented or enhanced their existing wellness practices. They described several current wellness practices, such as engaging in narrative identity work (e.g., compassionate self-reflection) (n = 8), surrounding themselves with social support from family and friends (n = 8), listening to music (n = 7), seeking out community on campus that affirmed their intersectional identities (n = 7), and personal affirmations (n = 2). KTT was composed of many of the wellness practices the women engaged in outside of the book club, such as community and social support with other Black women, journaling around personal experiences, and book selections that centered on Black women and their intersectional experiences. For example, all of the women discussed the ways they engaged in narrative identity work, which refers to how individuals with socially and structurally marginalized identities build community and validate their experiences of oppression and cultivate a sense of hope to construct identities that authentically represents who they are. The women discussed the ways they were actively reconstructing their individual identities (e.g., what it means to be a Black, queer, and spiritual woman) outside of dominant cultural narratives that were restrictive or limiting. For instance Hayden, who was a 2nd year, African-American woman who identified as queer, shared:

> I've been wanting to, maybe I could do it myself for my own community for Black queer people and also people who are looking to, I guess explore their spirituality and religion because I feel like those are very, not conflicting intersections, but intersections that aren't often taken into account.

Another woman expressed the difficulty she had in embracing the importance of self-care due to broader ableist narratives around productivity and rest. Renee, who was a 3rd year bi-racial (Black and White) woman stated, "I have a hard time differentiating between self-care and when I'm just being lazy," but ultimately resolved through compassionate self-reflection that "when I get in a slump, it's really hard to get out of. So I try not to let myself get into that slump. And that might mean I don't do any work for two weeks. I'm very behind, but mentally I'm okay." Renee's example of resisting ableist narratives and Hayden's example of envisioning a future that includes Black, queer, and spiritual spaces are reflective of the ways that the women we interviewed engaged in narrative identity work on their own and how it was fostered through the elements of KTT (e.g., journal prompts & self-reflection).

All women recognized the importance of seeking campus community for wellness, with the majority (n = 7) attempting to find inclusive and supportive spaces for their intersectional identities. Allie, who was a 3rd year, African-American woman, disclosed that her first year in college was more difficult because she felt disconnected from the campus community and she had a hard time making friends. She attributed part of the disconnect to COVID-19, but predominantly spoke about how the culture of whiteness greatly contributed to her feelings of isolation. She expressed that she began to seek out community in her 2nd year, stating:

> I started to find more Black people, I was more active. And we have QUEENS, I wasn't an executive or anything, but QUEENS is for Black women and femmes. So I went to a sleepover there. We had a big sleepover our first semester and I was just able to see a bunch of people and hang out with them and play games and stuff.

Similarly Tina referenced how she constructed her own "HBCU experience" by seeking out a program, classes within the program, and living spaces that supported her identities.

> Because my program's historically Black, so we're like, okay, and we'll be in this space. I'm like, okay, this is Black people, people of color, this is so nice. And that was my safe haven. So I think just staying in my own little bubble honestly around my first year, was just around other Black students as well as making friends in some of my smaller college writing classes. It was cool. And then my second year I lived in an LLC [living learning community], which was all Black student housing. So that was great because I got to meet new different Black people and create certain connections. One of my best friends now is in the house and I don't think I would've met her if I didn't live there and get to know her as well because she's very introverted. I think being in that kind of space and seeing each other on a daily basis in the house and doing homework together is really great. Literally living together.

Tina expressed that her ability to build out a "safe haven" of support for her identities on campus (i.e., department program, classes within the program, and living learning community) significantly contributed to her wellness. Thus, KTT functioned as a counterspace for the women by building on their existing practices, such that the elements of KTT provided opportunities for the women to engage in wellness practices that they described typically engaging in either alone

or with like-minded individuals. Within the context of campus support, the examples demonstrated how KTT offered Black undergraduate women the opportunity to show up and be among folks who shared similar identities and validated their experiences.

4.3 Research Question 3: Programmatic Elements of KTT and Black Women's Wellness

KTT involved four key components: the selection of books, prompts for journaling and self-reflection, Black women scholars and group facilitators, and engaging in group discussions and collaborative interactions among peers. We identified five areas of wellness within the women's discussions of the programmatic elements of KTT: intellectual wellness (i.e., expansion of knowledge and skills); spiritual wellness (i.e., expansion of sense of purpose and meaning in life); emotional wellness (i.e., coping effectively with life); physical wellness (i.e., recognizing the need for physical activity); and environmental and social wellness (i.e., occupying pleasant spaces and developing relationships with people that foster a sense of belonging). Often, several of the women spoke to how a programmatic element addressed multiple forms of wellness (e.g., book selection contributed to both their intellectual and spiritual wellness).

Book Selections

When discussing book selections, six women highlighted how this element contributed to intellectual wellness, three women highlighted how it contributed to their spiritual wellness, two women highlighted how it contributed to their emotional wellness, and two women highlighted how it contributed to their environmental and social wellness. For example, Hayden, who was a 2nd year, African-American woman, discussed the impact of the book "*This Here Flesh,*" on her spiritual wellness.

> I think one of the chapters that really stuck with me was the chapter on joy and just finding joy in all the things, little things, big things, and being able to carry that with you. And that's something that I feel like I really took away from that. And also, I think Lament was the other chapter, so also being okay with sadness and being able to just sit with your emotions. I feel like a lot of times when I'm feeling negative emotions, it's hard to sit with it. And I also just try to distract myself. So I've been trying to implement some of the things that she brings up in the book in small ways, just to, I feel it's helped a lot.

This excerpt specifically speaks to the shift in meaning making of what Hayden describes as "negative" emotions (e.g., sadness), and the choice she is making to expand her approach to both joy and sadness. Additionally, Tina, who was a 2nd year, African-American woman, voiced how "*The Body Is Not An Apology*" contributed to her intellectual wellness such that it made her more conscious of her interactions with others (e.g., body shaming). She expressed curiosity regarding how to integrate the information she learned into her interpersonal relationships. Tina stated, "I think coming out of the book club and after reading all those things and then seeing how everyone around me is perpetuating harm and I'm like, how am I supposed to check yall constantly? I was like, y'all are going to find me so annoying, I was like, that is not nice what just came out your mouth." In this example, Tina recognized the information from "*The Body Is Not An Apology*" as a valuable tool in reframing how she and those around her interact with each other. She also recognized that this new knowledge could make campus experiences more difficult as she challenges others on their behaviors that perpetuate harm.

Journal Prompts & Self-Reflections

Regarding the journal prompts and self-reflections, five women expressed that this element contributed to their spiritual wellness, five women shared it contributed to their environmental and social wellness, and two women voiced that it contributed to their emotional wellness. For example, Allie who was a 3rd year, African-American woman, shared how difficult it was to find spaces on campus that supported her identities as a Black, queer, and fat. She described how reflecting on the messages in the book "*The Body Is Not An Apology*" positively impacted her emotional wellness by leading her to consider the ways she could live more comfortably in her own body through making small adjustments. She stated, "like being able to walk around my room and feel comfortable. I don't have to wear a big sweater. I'm wearing some little shorts and a crop top and I was comfortable enough to walk around in this space. This is my body. I don't have to apologize for it." Through her reflections, Allie felt empowered to effectively cope with an anti-fat culture on campus through the intentional practice of embodiment. Moreover, Elise, who was a 1st year, African-American woman, expressed how writing in a group format with the journal prompts contributed to her environmental and social wellness. She stated that "when everyone else is sharing, it makes you feel more encouraged [to share] versus just typing it on the Google Doc like, okay, it's just there [collective laughter and agreement]. It was helpful to read what other people wrote too and then hear how they explained it or what they didn't put down, but talked about in the group." This suggested that at first there was trepidation about sharing journal entries openly within this forum, but then it became apparent that sharing journal entries fostered a sense of community and validation, which also influenced the group discussions.

Black Women Scholars and Group Facilitators

Concerning the element of Black women scholars and group facilitators, all the women spoke to how it contributed to their wellness, with seven women describing how the facilitators impacted their environmental and social wellness, five women shared how the facilitators contributed to their intellectual wellness, and three described how the facilitators impacted their physical wellness. The research and community initiatives led by the invited Black women scholars encompass a wide range of topics including mental health, wellness, art, and education, specifically focusing on the needs of Black girls and women. The last book club session ended with a Black woman scholar and certified yoga teacher, who led the women in a 45-minute yoga session before we began group discussion. This was at a time in the semester when the women felt particularly stressed and under pressure. For instance, Jessica, who was a 2nd year Ghanaian-American woman, stated:

> The yoga instructor – I absolutely loved. I think it was exactly what we needed at that time in the school year. And also her tone, like not telling you, you have to do this or making you feel bad for not going all the way. I really like that. And it honestly made me critique the dance classes I've been on here that proclaim self-care, but it's not the same. Black people just do it better.

In the focus group, there was collective agreement when Jessica shared this sentiment, with Elise, who was a 1st year, African-American woman, contributing, "I will always remember that it was the most fun time and very much needed relaxation and de-stress from this semester."

As for intellectual wellness, several of the women expressed how interacting with the facilitators led to the emergence of fresh perspectives on the potential forms of psychology,

research, and scholarly endeavors. In particular, Natalie, who was a 1st year, African-American woman, stated:

> I can go on and on about *The Beyonce Effect*. I didn't know that psych research could look like this. And then I want to say that they said that their [Dr. Ekeama Goddard-Scovel] thesis was about music, and I was like, wait, you can do that and you got a degree in psych? It's like, wait a minute, this is all cool. So I really appreciated being able to see someone in the flesh who was a doctor. And it wasn't like, oh, I did pipettes and chem stuff. It was a different type of research and different types of experiments. So I appreciated that.

This direct engagement with the facilitators who shared various ways to engage with scholarship while embracing their intersectional identities, is in almost direct contrast to the women's campus experiences (e.g., psychology courses being described as white and lacking context). The women were given the experience to broaden their knowledge and pursuits as scholars.

Group Discussion and Peer Collaboration

Finally, regarding group discussion and peer collaboration, six women discussed how it contributed to their environmental and social wellness and two women shared how it contributed to their intellectual wellness. Several women discussed their initial apprehension about engaging in group discussion and group journaling with others based on past negative experiences. For example Hayden, who was a 2nd year, African-American woman, shared:

> Yeah, I feel like I've been very trusting of people and I feel like I still am trusting of people. That's kind of how I am, I guess. But I also have experienced people taking that

> for granted and taking advantage of that. I feel like I'm less open about certain things just because I need to feel like I can trust the person. Trust them, but also just feel comfortable in that space. Sharing that specific detail of my life.

However, she also expressed that, “once other people opened up, I felt more comfortable and everybody was nice and stuff. And it was a small group, so I didn't feel like all the spotlight was on me the whole time.” Additionally, Tina, who was a 2nd year, African-American woman, saw the group discussions as an opportunity to be vulnerable with other Black women, stating, “I think it was a great space where everyone could just kind of quickly create a safe space in a way, or brave space. Because everyone was just vulnerable and talked about their own experiences. I learned a lot about my peers and that's great.” Collectively, these instances highlighted how the exchanges with their peers fostered an environment where the women felt comfortable being vulnerable, creating a sense of belonging through their openness.

Discussion

We integrated Case & Hunter's (2012) counterspace framework and the wellness wheel framework (Montoya & Summers, 2021) to reveal how a book club designed for and by Black women functioned as a critical counterspace for Black undergraduate women attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). In addition to the general changes associated with college adjustment (e.g., academic course load and making new friends), researchers suggest that Black undergraduate women at PWIs often experience challenges related to gendered racism (Lewis et al., 2017), racial underrepresentation on campus (Leath et al., 2021), and inadequate university mental health supports (Charles et al., 2020). Still, Black undergraduate women continue to find ways to support their academic, social, and psychological wellness – often by creating or seeking

out counterspaces on campus that promote their well being. In the current study, we explored the role of a Black woman centered book club as a wellness-oriented counterspace. Consistent with prior research (Case & Hunter, 2012; Jones, 2004; Rawls et al., 2020), we found that Kitchen Table Talk (KTT) encouraged the young women to engage in critical forms of narrative identity work. Although KTT was not a clinical intervention or sponsored through university mental health services, it offered valuable insight into how wellness-oriented counterspaces can support positive mental health for Black undergraduate women.

Black Women's Narrative Identity Work within Campus Counterspaces

Women in the study discussed the prevailing culture of whiteness at their institution, also frequently described in research literature as white hegemony (i.e., the dominance of white culture), stating that they often felt tokenized and silenced. This is a burden that many Black students who attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs) contend with (Shahid et al., 2018). The women described how the campus environment made them feel isolated, racially tokenized, and dissatisfied with the university's efforts towards diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). While college is typically seen as a time for self-discovery and forming connections with like-minded individuals, for Black women attending PWIs, race-related stressors often hinder their ability to fully engage in this process and feel a sense of belonging within the broader university community. Many of the women mentioned the desire and need to have spaces on campus that supported their intersectional identities because they recognized that singular oppressions do not exist for Black women (Porter & Byrd, 2021). The women disclosed that these types of spaces were difficult to find on campus, as many of the spaces that were offered implicitly silenced parts of the women's identities (e.g., being queer, asexual, and fat). KTT offered such a counterspace as it was underscored by Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework, which

acknowledges the interplay of overlapping social identities and oppression, Collins' (1999) Black Feminist Theory (BFT) framework, which strongly asserts that Black women experiences are inseparable from intellect and value, and can be heterogeneous, and Case & Hunter's (2018) counterspace framework, which they identify as "settings that promote self-concept in marginalized individuals."

The findings indicate that these experiences significantly contributed to the women's participation in KTT. In particular, KTT served as a counterspace where women could actively engage in narrative identity work, which refers to the identification of the creation and maintenance of oppressive narratives, resistance narratives, and reimagined personal narratives (Case & Hunter, 2012). Empirical evidence suggests that the stories we are told about ourselves and the ones we imagine for ourselves shape our personal identities (Rappaport, 2000). For example, Black college women experience greater traumatic stress symptoms (e.g., intrusion symptoms, negative affect, and increased arousal) when faced with gendered-racial microaggressions which refers to the "subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of race and gender" (Moody & Lewis, 2019). Conversely, studies that have been conducted to explore the utility of personal values-affirmation interventions have shown promise in combating psychological threat and stress (Creswell et al., 2005) revealing that when a person has positive self-resources (e.g., self-esteem) then that acts as a moderator between value affirmation and psychological stress. Similarly, a main goal in KTT involved affording the women the opportunity to affirm and explore their intersecting identities and experiences and find solidarity with peers who shared similar identities and experiences as Black women. The findings add to the counterspace literature, in that the women engaged in identity work through exploring their identities, including those perceived as privileged (e.g.,

being able-bodied) and those considered less privileged (e.g., being neurodivergent), reflecting on instances where they've both exerted and experienced oppression. This is a facet of counterspace research that remains inadequately explored. Case and Hunter (2012) questioned whether this dynamic would hinder the counterspace process, yet our findings among Black undergraduate women demonstrate that they leveraged this environment to reflect and share strategies for shaping their intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions. It may be difficult for Black students to engage in this type of identity work if they do not have clinicians who share similar racialized and gendered backgrounds and who can help them process their multi-layered experiences. This factor has been listed as an important element in Black students' decision to seek mental health services (Leath & Jones, 2022). In order to create this type of counterspace for narrative identity work, the co-facilitators were intentional about the reading material and group facilitators.

Curating a Black Feminist Experience: By Us, For Us, and With Us

Though there is still much to be discovered about how culturally relevant course materials support Black student's sense of belonging and academic engagement, extant evidence indicates that such materials can foster positive group and self-identity and promote self-affirmation among Black students (Lo, 2018; Mitchell, 2000). For instance, in a study with Black undergraduate women attending a predominantly white liberal arts college, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) identified the benefits of a course instructor applying Black Feminist Theory (BFT) to develop the curriculum. Specifically, the course integrated both fiction and non-fiction literature authored by Black women and examined themes of race, gender, and class. Additionally, the class explored texts by Latina, biracial, and White authors who shared comparable experiences with the students. The women in this empirical study revealed that the culturally relevant texts

validated their cultural language in the classroom (e.g., AAVE), encouraged self affirmation and affirmation of their goals. Similarly, four Black feminist texts were a central component of KTT; these texts were authored by Black women authors and while not singularly focused on Black women's experiences, they prioritized tenets like intersectionality and social power and privilege. Moreover, the texts included topics, such as feminism, privileged identities, and spirituality, which allowed the women to think about their social positioning as young Black women at their university and in the United States. When considering this research in conjunction with the benefits of bibliotherapy, like increased self-awareness and reduced anxiety (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005), it becomes clear how the bibliotherapeutic aspects of KTT amplified its role as a supportive environment, promoting positive well-being. For example, similar to the Sealey-Ruiz (2007) study, the texts in KTT validated the women's cultural experiences which increased their sense of belonging and community as demonstrated by their endorsement of environmental and social wellness. The texts also encouraged self-affirmation as illustrated by the women endorsing spiritual wellness.

Additionally, we invited four Black women scholars to facilitate our group discussions of each text and the lead facilitator for KTT was a Black woman faculty member at the university. In the current iteration of KTT, the Black women scholars had extensive research experience in mental health, wellness, art, and education. Their professional expertise and their lived experiences as Black women allowed them to engage the undergraduate women with care and understanding. This was consistent with previous research discussing the advantages of Black college students having supportive faculty who share their racial background (Beasley, 2021). Black students with Black faculty mentors demonstrate increased academic and social engagement in college, as well as higher GPAs and greater persistence in college as compared to

Black students who do not have Black faculty mentors (Beasley, 2021; Kuh et al., 2008; Neville & Parker, 2017). A recent study specifically investigated factors influencing academic and social engagement among Black college students. It found that Black faculty who were perceived as caring among Black undergraduate students, significantly predicted both academic and social engagement (e.g., completing homework and making friends in class; Beasley, 2021). Similarly, several women noted the type of care discussed in the Beasley (2021) by referencing how the co-facilitators of KTT seemed to take an interest in their wellbeing, through their active listening, and thoughtful consideration to their other commitments (e.g., offering alternative methods for involvement in KTT due to the heavy academic commitments). Additionally, the facilitators were open and willing to be vulnerable about the topics with the women in both the journal prompts and group discussion. Taken together, KTT provided opportunities for the Black undergraduate women to see their experiences of Black womanhood reflected in both text and through the facilitators. While they were supported in their multiple intersections of identities, they were also encouraged to think critically about the ways bodies enable privilege, the scope of feminism, and strategies to resist oppressive narratives. The intimate stories shared at our "kitchen table" by Black undergraduate women and facilitators have woven into collective stories that hold the power to influence both personal growth and social change.

Encouraging Positive Mental Health through Group Wellness Practices

Given the ongoing prevalence of psychological distress among Black women in the United States (Jones et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2008), as well as reports indicating that Black students are less likely to receive adequate support from university counseling services (Charles et al., 2020) it is crucial to consider how other services and programs on campus can support their wellness needs. For example, Black women experience improved academic and

psychological well-being when they feel a stronger sense of belonging (Porter & Byrd, 2021), and culturally responsive group therapy interventions have been found to enhance feelings of connection and alleviate stress among Black women in college (Jones, 2004; Jones & Johnson, 2018; Mitchell, 2000). In Jones & Johnson's (2018) process-oriented "Invincible Black Woman" group therapy intervention, they discovered that discussions centering identity and related experiences (e.g., gendered-racism and stress) were seen as most helpful in facilitating wellness. They also aimed to provide mental health services to Black undergraduate women who may not engage in help-seeking behaviors because of gendered-racial archetypes (e.g., Superwoman Schema). Though KTT was not a clinical intervention, the group journaling and facilitated discussions aligned with group therapy models from other intervention programs (e.g., self-concept and spirituality; Jones, 2009; Jones & Johnson 2018). The journal prompts and guided group discussions were developed to foster self-exploration through open conversations on culturally relevant topics. By integrating group journaling as a precursor to the group discussions each month, the women were able to engage in both intrapersonal and interpersonal connections to the texts and with each other. In reflecting on the journaling component of KTT, some women initially expressed apprehension about sharing vulnerable experiences with other women in the group, but they found encouragement and validation in witnessing others (including the KTT co-facilitators) openly responding to the journal prompts, as well. Additionally, women mentioned using the journal prompts as catalysts for discussions with family and friends beyond KTT – demonstrating its utility in facilitating important conversations around identity, relationships, and wellness.

Scholarly and Practical Implications

"Black women's ability to navigate the educational matrix was often connected to supportive relationships and environments wherein their identities and development as Black women were affirmed before coming to campus" (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Overall, our findings revealed how specific programmatic elements of KTT functioned in similar ways to other empirically supported therapeutic techniques (e.g., bibliotherapy, journaling, and group therapy). Moreover, the women in our study described how their experiences in KTT played a positive role in different aspects of their well-being, including but not limited to their emotional, environmental, and social well-being. The authors explore strategies universities can implement to help Black women establish and maintain supportive networks and environments during their time on campus.

Thus, we echo prior findings on the importance of culturally responsive outreach in connecting Black women to mental health supports and encouraging help-seeking behaviors (Jones & Johnson, 2018). Increased funding should be directed towards university counseling centers to enable them to prioritize outreach efforts and establish partnerships with campus organizations that service Black undergraduate women. Furthermore, college campus supports and counterspaces can enhance their effectiveness by adapting the format of KTT to service the culturally specific needs of diverse student groups. Counterspaces should consider expectations, such that facilitators ensure expectations are manageable alongside student responsibilities (e.g., coursework and jobs). We advocate for student programming to offer various opportunities for involvement, with the main objection simply being to attend. One notable aspect of KTT identified by the authors as a strength is its flexibility, allowing women to engage with the space in ways that suited their individual preferences and needs. In other words, participants had the freedom to participate in discussions to the extent they felt comfortable. Additionally, as

suggested in previous literature (Jones & Johnson, 2018) the co-facilitators of KTT offered supplementary materials like music, YouTube videos, or films to accompany the book selection for the month. This allowed women to customize the counterspace to their liking while maintaining a connection with the group. This structure proved particularly beneficial for the high-achieving Black undergraduate women in our study attending an elite PWI, suggesting that it may be a practical choice for similar students.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Although we present findings on the nature of counterspaces for Black undergraduate women, the following study should be considered in the context of its limitations. First, because our sample consisted of undergraduate Black women attending a PWI, there is limited generalizability. Our findings were informed by the attitudes and behaviors of Black undergraduate women who attend a university known for its academic rigor, and who exhibited great self-efficacy; this likely influenced their desire to participate in an extracurricular event like KTT. In thinking about making alternative wellness spaces accessible and relevant to more students, it is important to consider how counterspaces can accommodate students with varying academic, financial, and caregiving responsibilities during the emerging adulthood period. It was not within the scope of this paper to explore the programmatic barriers of KTT, however, the women in the study mentioned facing challenges in engaging with certain programmatic aspects of KTT (e.g., journal prompts and reading), because of coursework, employment, and time constraints. These barriers might not be exclusive to Black women, and other marginalized groups could also benefit from greater understanding of potential obstacles to alternative wellness approaches.

Second, the central element of Kitchen Table Talk was that it was a book club.

Bibliotherapy is a useful therapeutic tool that, when combined with psychotherapy, can contribute to enhancing overall well-being (Fanner & Urquhart, 2008). It has also been utilized as a means to encourage cultural competence in educational and clinical settings (Pehrsson & McMillan, 2005). Similar to bibliotherapy, KTT involved monthly book discussions that encouraged Black women to talk about their wellness practices in their daily lives. In general, this meant that Black women who were interested, able, and invested in reading texts in English were more likely to elect to participate in such a club. When implementing a similar format in other counterspaces, it is important to consider the setting carefully. Many adults struggle with literacy (Keene-Woods et al., 2023) and a counterspace focused on utilizing bibliotherapic wellness might pose a potential barrier. Furthermore, we primarily used written texts in the current book club, although some of the books were available in audio format. In thinking about universal design principles that prioritize inclusivity and access to learning materials, it would be important for scholars to think about multiple ways participants might engage with selected texts, such as audiobooks, texts with translations in multiple languages, or group read-alouds during the book clubs.

Finally, the books, speakers, and journal prompts were pre-selected prior to the women coming to KTT. While the co-facilitators did take deliberate effort to choose Black feminist text that they believed would be beneficial to the women (e.g., non-fictional texts that include intersectional frameworks), there may have been books or topics the women would have liked to explore that we did not offer. Future iterations of KTT or similar programs for Black women could involve a co-design or collaborative design model, where the enrolled participants select texts and recommend group facilitators. Moreover, in future group therapy research regarding Black women, it would be advantageous to investigate KTT as an intervention. Gathering both

qualitative data, such as individuals' subjective perceptions of its usefulness, and quantitative data, such as psychological assessments, would help assess the effectiveness of this format as a viable therapeutic intervention for Black women. Furthermore, research on the effects of journaling is still developing. Currently, there are limited studies examining this intervention with Black women or in a group setting. Researchers could explore the potential benefits of journaling for Black women, particularly within a group context.

Conclusion

The present study investigates the effectiveness of a bibliotherapeutic and group-based approach as a critical counterspace for Black undergraduate women enrolled at a PWI. This study is among the few empirical investigations into the utility of Black feminist texts and facilitators, alongside group-based journaling and discussions, to acknowledge and bolster the mental well-being of Black college women. Overall, the narratives shared by the women revealed that the structure of KTT fostered improvements in various dimensions of wellness, including intellectual, spiritual, emotional, environmental and social, and physical. Our findings also add to the growing body of literature on the importance of supporting Black women's intersectional identity development during the emerging adulthood period.We hope that our study offers actionable strategies for universities, particularly PWIs, to cultivate a more inclusive environment for Black college women.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Kitchen Table Talk Model

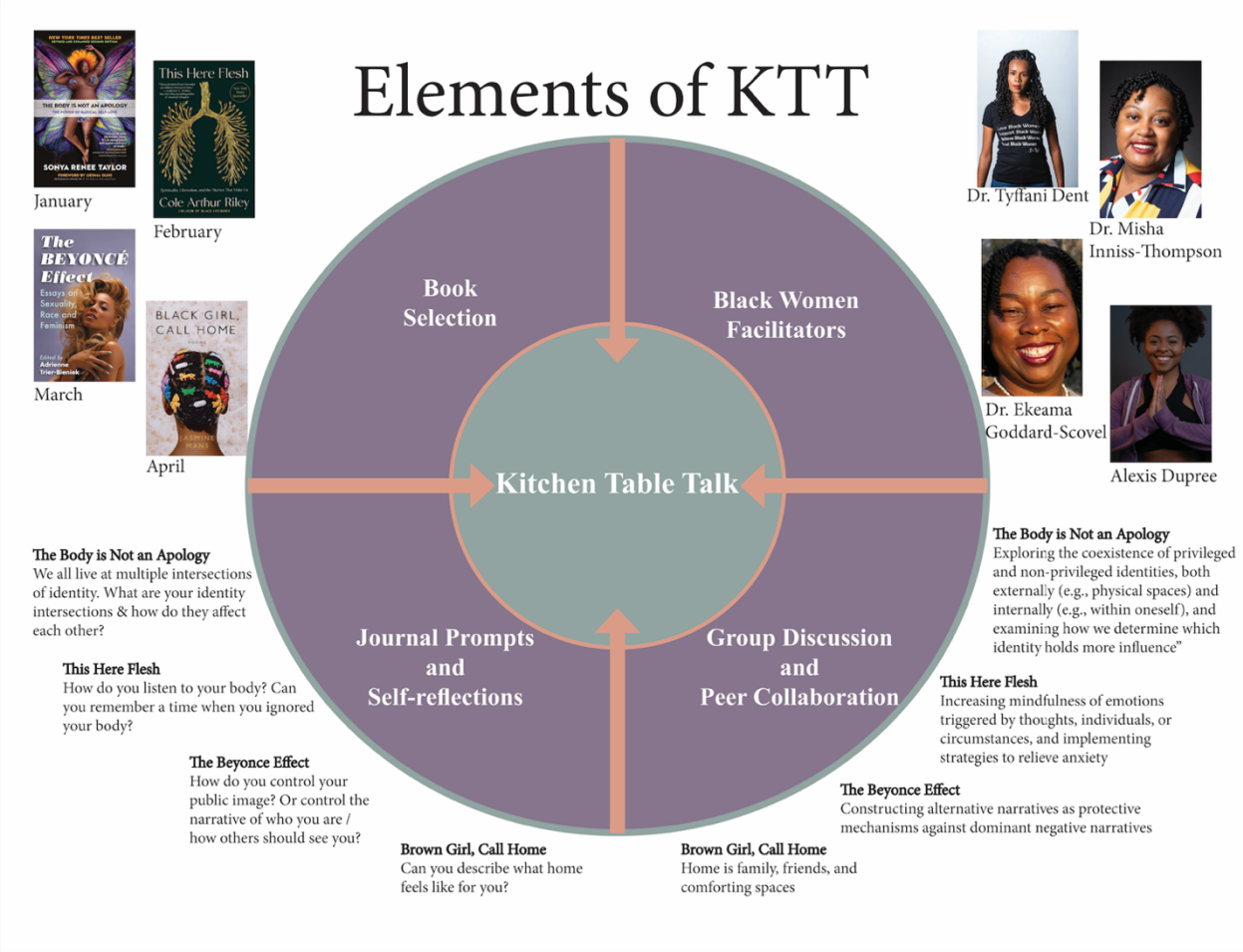

Figure 2. Kitchen Table Talk Infographic

Table 1. Thematic Categories and Definitions with Excerpt Examples

RQ1: What have Black undergraduate women's experiences been like at WashU?		
Theme	**Definition**	**Example Excerpts**
Culture of Whiteness (*N* = 8)	Refers to cultural climate of white hegemony on campus, including interpersonal interactions and broader university norms (i.e., racial tokenization, curriculum content, and institutional processes - or lack thereof - around diversity, equity, and inclusion)	Yeah, I would say the same in a lot of my classes. I think like last semester I was the only Black person in class. Sometimes only Black woman, but most of the time the only Black person. And that was just an interesting experience, especially in classes where we read books about Black people and it's like everyone's kind of looking to you to, I don't know, be an authority on the reading, which is awkward. (Elise, a 1st year African American student)
Culture of Productivity (*N* = 5)	Refers to women's sense of overwhelming pressure to excel in academic and occupational contexts; examples included pursuing multiple disciplinary majors, seeking out competitive internships and leadership positions.	I really like to read, so once I saw it, I was a little worried about the time commitment just because I am pre-med, and a STEM major and I was studying for the MCAT. So I would say those three. I am just super busy. So trying to find the time to budget to read was sort of difficult just because even just not even in the book club, I read a lot over the summer, but then when I come to school and I'm in school from August to May, I don't read at all, just because I just don't have time. I really love to read, but no. (Renee, a 3rd year African American and White student)
Culture of incohesion among Black Community (*N*= 6)	Refers to women's perception of little or no unity between Black organizations on campus; desire for more identity-affirming Black organizations on campus	Sometimes I feel like ABS is not even the space to talk about being a Black woman because some of current leaders, past leaders, whatever the case is like, or a majority of the people who do go to these events are very pro Black men in a sense that Black women aren't doing enough for them. So it's, it really is, you can only put up front one part of your identity in every space. And the only place to be your

		complete self is your room. [collective laughter] (Jessica, a 2nd year Ghanian-American student)

Table 2. Thematic Categories and Definitions with Excerpt Examples

RQ2 - How did Kitchen Table Talk function as a counterspace for Black undergraduate women?		
Building on Black women's existing wellness practices (*N*= 8)	Refers to enhancing Black women's other wellness practices; included narrative identity work (e.g., compassionate self-reflection) (*n* = 8); social support from friends, family, and like-minded individuals (*n* = 8); listening to music (*n* = 7); seeking out community on campus that affirms intersectional identities and experiences (*n* = 7); and personal affirmations (*n* = 2)	Yeah. One, I wanted to be in it because like I love to read, but I feel like with school I don't read that often. I read more in the summer during vacation or something than actually during the school times. But I wanted to be able to do that, so I joined it so that way I could, and I always wanted to read. I wanted a deadline, something to tell me to read. So that's one of the reasons why I joined Book Club… So I was like, okay, well I would love to join the club and see what happens and see how the environment is. Because I've never been in a book club. Even when I tell people, for example, I was like, I'll tell my girlfriend I was in it. She's like, y'all have a book club with only Black women? I'm like, yeah. And it's kind of cool. So able to, I wanted to be part of that space where I can do some nerdy ass thing like reading and enjoy it around other people and talk about it the whole time. Plus, I don't know, I just like to be in those type of spaces. I also just like being in spaces where there are Black women enjoying themselves. So those are the main reasons that I joined Book Club (Allie, a 3rd year African American student)

Table 3. Elements of KTT and Wellness Attributes with Excerpt Examples

RQ3 - What was it about the Kitchen Table Talk format that made it useful/promotive/protective for Black undergraduate women's positive mental health?		
Element	**Description**	**Example Excerpts**
Book selection	The use of written materials or computer programs, or the listening/viewing of audio/videotapes to gain understanding or solve problems relevant to a person's developmental or therapeutic needs *Addressed Black women's intellectual (n= 6), spiritual (n= 3), emotional (n= 2), and environmental & social wellness (n= 2)*	I think coming out of the book club and after reading all those things and then seeing how everyone around me is perpetuating harm and I'm like, how am I supposed to check yall constantly? I was like, y'all are going to find me so annoying I was like, that is not nice what just came out your mouth [laughs] (Tina, a 2nd year African American student, Intellectual Wellness)
Journal prompts & Self-Reflections	The act of disclosing information, thoughts, and feelings about personal and meaningful topics *Addressed Black women's spiritual (n= 5), emotional (n= 2), and environmental & social (n=5)*	Yeah, I really like the journaling. I like journaling in general. I feel like I don't do it enough, but I try to do little notes on my phone or just when things are in my head so I can keep them there. But yeah, so I really liked being able to reflect on my religious experience and growing up, my childhood and stuff. I feel like I hadn't really thought about that at all until this year. So that was really interesting. (Hayden, a 2nd year African American student, Spiritual Wellness)
Black Women Scholars & Group Facilitators	Guides group discussion and activities. Additionally, they foster a safe space for the group to communicate openly and vulnerably *Addressed Black women's environmental & social (n= 7),*	And also other than one other professor I have, I feel like this is the first time I've ever felt like a professor actually takes an interest in my wellbeing. Now part of that is because I never go to office hours at any point ever. But it's also just, I don't know, it feels like if something were to happen, there would be an actually good response.

	intellectual (n= 5), and physical wellness (n= 3)	(Angela, a 3rd year African American and White student, Environmental & Social Wellness)
Group Discussions and Peer Collaboration	Discourse on ideas and experiences related to various topics with an effort to understand shared and differing perspectives as Black women *Addressed Black women's environmental & social (n= 6) and intellectual wellness (n= 2)*	I also appreciated the converse opinion. We were kind of talking about the beehive and how Twitter, they're ruthless. I was like, okay, in here critiquing Beyonce. I like that we can have an honest evaluation of Beyonce's role in feminism and her role in capitalism and her role in the environment, in society. (Natalie, a 1st year African American student, Environmental & Social Wellness)

Note. We drew our wellness descriptors from the conceptual definitions in Montoya & Summers (2021).

Appendix

Appendix A. Kitchen Table Talk Journal Prompts

The Body is Not an Apology

We all live at multiple intersections of identity. What are your identity intersections & how do they affect each other?

In what ways have others tried to make you "the same" as them? What parts of your identity have they erased by doing so?

If you could share something with your younger self that would have given her hope, what would you have said?

Explore the social and cultural messages you've received about: fat bodies, bodies of other races, LGBTQ bodies, disabled bodies, and aging bodies.

This Here Flesh

What image of God do you hold in your mind and how does this affect how you view yourself?

How do you listen to your body? Can you remember a time when you ignored your body?

What kind of community have you found at WashU and how has it helped you navigate this space? Do you know how to create your own belonging?

What enrages you? How do you release rage?

The Beyonce Effect

As a Black woman, what do you think you 'owe the public' in how you show up in the world?

How do you control your public image? Or control the narrative of who you are / how others should see you?

When/where did you first hear about or experience concepts of feminism?

Is there space for a commercially mass-marketed feminism that could co-exist alongside radical feminism?

The Beyonce Effect

As a Black woman, what do you think you 'owe the public' in how you show up in the world?

How do you control your public image? Or control the narrative of who you are / how others should see you?

When/where did you first hear about or experience concepts of feminism?

Is there space for a commercially mass-marketed feminism that could co-exist alongside radical feminism?

Brown Girl, Call Home

Can you describe what home feels like for you?

What is your guiding light?

What is the thing you do/listen to/read that helps you ground yourself?

How would you describe your childhood growing up?

If you could give your younger self one piece of advice what would it be? Write a poem affirming your younger self.