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# In Search of Our Tiny Gardens: Adolescent Girl of Color Multiliteracies as Creative Praxis

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## ABSTRACT

This piece uses Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* as a conceptual framework to highlight the unique ways Girls and Femmes of Color (GFOC) create beauty and life amidst a backdrop of devastating oppression. In doing so, we emphasize the brilliance and beauty of GFOC and their multiliterate practices while also challenging the notion of "art for art's sake." This work will narrate our material and metaphorical relationship to their mothers' gardens, highlight literature and theory exemplifying GFOC multiliterate "gardening," and provides vignettes from our research collaboratives with GFOC to highlight their creative and transformative praxis born of their raced-gendered epistemologies.

In her essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), Alice Walker discusses the challenges and injustices faced by our foremothers who were, at their core, Creatives. She explains, historically, Black women artists' creative aspirations have been suppressed or denied through chattel slavery and white supremacy in favor of violently imposed domestic responsibilities. And yet, she persists, "all the young women - our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness" (p. 235). She goes on to describe the manifestation of her mother's creativity in her garden, which she describes as "work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (p. 241). Walker highlights how marginalized women (in this case Black women) create beauty and life amidst a backdrop of oppression. In doing so, she emphasizes the brilliance of these women while also challenging the notion of "art for art's sake." Like Audre Lorde, Walker is well aware that for women who have lived lives in the margins, poetry—and more expansively Creativity—is not a luxury (Lorde 1985); it is a means of survival, of living in an unlivable world.

Walker's metaphor of the garden as a creative and restorative space resonates across generations, offering a lens through

which we can explore how Women of Color (WOC) sustain and nurture life through creativity. Building on this metaphor, Jamila Woods, a Black woman singer, songwriter, and poet, taps into her own creativity to reimagine the garden in her song *Tiny Garden* (2023), weaving themes of care and growth into a contemporary context. She sings,

It's not gonna be a big production.  
It's not butterflies or fireworks.  
Said its' gonna be a tiny garden.  
But I'll feed it every day, I'll feed it.  
...  
Water us so we may rise deeper in ourselves each night.  
Listen close and listen right.  
Don't wanna bring anything from our past lives.  
...  
Watch all the purpose we place multiply slowly over time.  
The seed has all the information.  
...  
I'ma pull up right now and we celebrate.

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Woods's lyrics convey a message of growth and an abandonment of our "past lives" for a new one ripe with celebration. She emphasizes the need to nurture and water the garden daily and notes that, in order for the garden to flourish, she must trust the seed she's planted has all the information it needs to allow the garden to bloom in its fullest form.

We understand the above excerpts as celebrations of the artistic creations of Black women rooted in love, resistance, and joy. We extend these understandings to encompass Black girls and Girls and Femmes of Color (GFOC) whose artistry and creativity are equally profound. Like Walker and Woods, who challenge Euro-centric notions and purposes of art by framing it not simply as an aesthetic pursuit but as a means of survival in an unjust world, we understand the art of GFOC as a force that defies societal limitations, amplifies their voices, and (re)claims narratives and spaces. We recognize their art as a platform for critique, healing, and community building, allowing them to navigate this world while building another anew.

Throughout this paper, we demonstrate how, through artistic creations, GFOC challenge existing power structures, disrupt (mis)representations of their personhood, and create images of more just schools. In *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire* (2022), Walker (2022) revisits the theme of gardening in a collection of her personal journal entries, accentuating beauty amidst a world fractured, devastated, and charred by the ills of white supremacy, patriarchy, and other oppressions. Likewise, throughout this paper, we highlight how GFOC—including our own GFOC selves—continue to gather blossoms under fire, making beautiful what has been ravaged, as did their foremothers before them. Drawing on examples from two projects, *The Simmering Spices* and *Black Self-Love*, we highlight how GFOC engage in acts of artistry and advocacy, deeply rooted in cultural and generational knowledge. By centering their voices, we aim to illuminate how their practices disrupt dominant paradigms and offer possibilities for (re)imagining adolescent literacy learning. We conclude with insights and recommendations for practitioners to co-create spaces that honor and sustain GFOC brilliance.

Importantly, we understand GFOC are not a monolith; GFOC are incredibly diverse—racially, ethnically, culturally, and in regard to their gender expression, experiences, goals, and perspectives. Therefore, we do not claim *all* art created by GFOC serves the purposes of resistance or healing. Rather, we argue the art of the GFOC we feature in this paper—and many others like them—reflects a unique interplay of creativity, identity, and resistance shaped by their specific contexts. By grounding our analysis in the stories and examples shared here, we seek to honor their individual and collective experiences. We acknowledge that while some GFOC may create art as a purposeful act of resistance or healing, others may create simply for joy, self-expression, or curiosity. This is the complexity we seek to honor, recognizing that the motivations and impacts of their creativity are as varied and multifaceted as all the flowers in all the gardens. As such, we hope to cultivate a deeper understanding of the varied ways GFOC contribute to and (re)define the artistic landscape, reminding us that their

gardens—tiny or vast—are worthy of nurture, attention, and celebration.

## 1 | Women and GFOC Literacies: Theoretical and Empirical Groundings

Researchers and theorists have observed how GFOC cultivate—individually and in collectives—metaphorical gardens, spaces of robust learning, creation, and healing. These spaces are created sometimes at the margins of, sometimes within the folds of white patriarchal spaces and systems (Hooks 1990; Kelly 2020; Kynard 2010). And importantly, within these spaces, multimodal practices, rooted both in ancestral and contemporary knowledge-making, are often utilized toward "gathering blossoms"—toward beauty making for and amongst GFOC.

We define multiliteracies as sociocultural situated meaning-making practices that extend beyond text-based reading and writing (Serafini 2015; The New London Group 1996). We further contend that for minoritized youth, multiliteracies emerge from long-standing cultural practices hybridized with literacies generated from constantly evolving technology and popular and youth culture (Campano et al. 2020). For GFOC, these multiliteracies arise from their raced-gendered epistemologies and practices of meaning-making used to navigate their worlds and build new possibilities (Player and González Ybarra 2021; Muhammad and Haddix 2016). These literacies include raced-gendered practices emerging from feminized labor, arts, embodiment, and self- and future-defining practices.

### 1.1 | Feminized Labor

Some of the multimodal literacies utilized and developed by GFOC arise from raced-gendered labor repurposed as liberatory praxis. Feminists of Color have theorized that raced-feminized spaces like the kitchen have evolved as spaces of resistant, self-sustaining practices (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006; Hooks 1990; Villenas 2005). In her study with Black girls at a predominantly white high school, Kelly (2020) explored how they established "homeplace"—a concept defined by hooks (1990) as spaces—often connected to Black women's histories as domestic workers whose labor was often care-based—created by Black women for safety and escape from white supremacist structures. Kelly examines how Black girls created homeplaces where they shared skills and strategies through various literacies including dialogue, group chats, laughter, and care practices to navigate and resist the raced-gendered oppression they encountered in school. Peña-Pincheira et al. (2023) observed a collective of Chilean women who repurposed the feminized practice of embroidery to confront, critique, and resist oppressive contexts of their world and take part in the 2019 Chilean social revolution. Building on Chilean women's tradition of embroidering political statements during the 1970s, contemporary Chilean women developed a collective practice of posting their embroideries on the Instagram account, @bordasusojos, transforming a historically private practice of decorating the

home to a public practice aimed at advancing a Latin American feminist agenda.

## 1.2 | Arts

It is often the multimodal literacies used in creative practices born of marginalized communities (Coles and Player 2024) that are evolved and utilized by GFOC and WOC to cultivate their “gardens.” In their analysis of women hip hop deejays, Craig and Kynard (2017) situate them as foundational to evolving hip-hop culture, music, and aesthetics, transforming gendered hierarchies within and beyond the context of the often masculine-centered world of hip hop. Elsewhere, Autumn (Griffin 2022) analyzed the “parading” practices of Black girls in a digital space created by a collective of Black girls. She observed how their utilization of multimodal literacies reflected the Black practice of joyful and celebratory parade in the face of grief; Black girls create their own literate spaces that rebel against and interrupt the intersecting violences they face while simultaneously centering and celebrating their genius, beauty, and care. So too, Grace (Player et al. 2023) explored how one Black girl defined herself and the world she deserves through self-portraiture—in the modes of poetry, photography, drawing, and mixed media—rebellious against white dominant ideologies. Art, here, is not “art for art’s sake,” but, rather, a sophisticated mechanism that transform the world to match the vision of GFOC creators.

## 1.3 | Embodied Practices

Importantly, as a product of their raced-gendered experiences, GFOC develop embodied literacies through which they make and interpret meanings. Feminists of Color have theorized the body as a site of power for GFOC and WOC (Cariaga 2019) and invite more expansive understandings of how we know, critique, heal, and relate through embodied praxis (Anzaldúa 2015; Lara 2002). Cariaga (2019) explains that when critical and embodied pedagogies are integrated to form what she calls pedagogies of the mindbodyspirit, WOC can engage in self-recovery from ongoing material and epistemological harm done in and beyond schooling. Grace’s (Player 2022) exploration of Asian Girl’s embodied literacies found that in spaces that honor GFOC literacies, knowledges, and lives, GFOC embody meaning-making practices that resist constricting, shortsighted, and patently wrong stereotypes. In doing so, they find opportunities to collaborate, relate, and celebrate self and other toward transformation and resistance.

## 1.4 | Self and Future Defining Praxis

Researchers have also found that GFOC utilize multimodal practices toward imagining and building futures that hold GFOC as precious, safe, and existing across time and space. Toliver (2021) contends that Black women and girls’ Afrofuturist aesthetic praxis serves as space to define their own existence in numerous and nuanced ways, “dig[ging] behind societal ideas about what it means to be Black and female, and creat[ing] room for Black women and girls to define their

own existence in numerous and nuanced ways” (p.154–155). Turner (2023) explores Black girl speculative design as a space where Black girls leverage multiliteracies to engage intersectional self-celebration and future-building. Through speculative design, Black girls affirm themselves and their futures; allow for tenderness, or what Turner calls “sweet work;” and center Black livingness. Autumn (Griffin 2020) has described how Black girls utilize their multiliteracies to create career dream boards and drawings, inscribing themselves into the future, and rejecting the limited dominant imagination of who Black girls can be.

In all, these multiliterate practices built on raced-feminized epistemologies and material realities contribute to the wealth of resources WOC and GFOC utilize to cultivate bountiful gardens in worlds that do not value their livingness. In what follows, we will explore two examples from our research reflecting the multiliterate ways that GFOC “gather blossoms under fire,” creating spaces and practices of love, healing, and beauty-making in a fractured and violent world.

## 2 | Positionalities: Our Herstories of Gathering Blossoms Under Fire

We understand, like Alice Walker, our tendencies toward creating beauty, toward tending our gardens, are intimately connected to our mothers’ practices of beautifying their worlds. Walker (1983) said,

so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded (p. 240).

Thus, we tell our positionalities through the lens of our mothers’ gardens and what they’ve allowed us to cultivate in our practices as creators, educators, and researchers.

### 2.1 | Grace

I remember my mother’s garden at my childhood home in Orlando, Florida (see Figure 1), marveling at the overgrown, yet beautifully cultivated, abundance of tropical plants. I remember greens—ranging from deep and dark to fluorescent—vibrant yellows, potent reds. I am, indeed, a child of my mother’s garden. My mother, a Japanese Brazilian migrant woman, married a white man from the Southern United States, mothered two mixed-raced daughters. She, for much of my childhood, worked two jobs—a secretarial job from 9 to 5, and a weekend job at a mall department store. By the time I was a teen, my father, a therapist, only saw a few patients a week, claiming he wasn’t interested in working with anyone who wasn’t “intellectual” enough to do “his kind of therapy.” His evaluation of intellect was, no doubt, delusional, racist, classist, and sexist



FIGURE 1 | Grace in her mother's garden.

nonsense—nonsense which also translated to his abusive relationship to his wife and daughters. It also made it so my mother worked back-breakingly at two jobs, while caring for our home and her daughters.

However, it was in her care for us, our home, her tending to the garden, where so often her creative spark ignited. My mother, who once dreamed of being an interior designer, who has impeccable aesthetics, who dresses beautifully, who is beautiful, found ways, despite her circumstances, to maintain her creativity so that our house was full of plants and flowers, so our garden was a tropical explosion of monstera, palms, hibiscus, passion flowers, and crotons. Now, in the smaller apartment where she moved after my parents' divorce, she tends to cacti and orchids, lined in pots along the windows. "I'm so happy," she said when I visited her last, "see how many flowers my cactus has now?"

My artistry is part of her legacy. Creating beauty has become something I dedicate my life to, largely because I know I have the possibilities—as a middle class, over-educated, child-free, forty-one-year-old professor—to live her legacy, to transmute the beauty she created for me and my sister into my work as an educator, researcher, and advocate. So, it is with her spirit that I create gardens and gather blossoms with and for GFOC.

## 2.2 | Autumn

Recently, I visited my parents in my childhood home in Easton, Pennsylvania. While there, my mother and I spent much time talking and reflecting on the past. As we both grow in age, I've become more intentional, like Walker, about gathering stories each time I'm in her presence. I want to know more about who she was before she was my mother, what she was thinking while raising me and my brother, and who she aspires to be in this new season of life.

This time, we reminisced about Auntie, my aunt who passed in March of 2023. She was my dad's uncle's wife and close in age

to my parents. It wasn't until she passed that I came to understand the depth of the relationship between her and my mother. As we grieved together, my mom shared with me that she was in Auntie's wedding as a bridesmaid, that she remembered the birth of my cousin (Auntie's oldest daughter), and that as someone with no biological sisters, my mother appreciated having someone to raise her kids alongside. And that they did. My cousins, my brother, and I were raised more like siblings than cousins. So, when she passed, it left an immeasurable hole in our family.

"I still have the orchid she gave me," my mother said to me while we were in the car together on this last trip.

"The one in the family room?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's from Auntie. She gave it to me years ago as a gift. It never blooms, but I still tend to it. I water it and cut its leaves. And it still grows. It just never blooms."

I never knew. I had passed the plant many times, but never knew it was from my aunt. Never realized that it never produced flowers. And I never knew how much she continued to care for it in spite of that fact. But my mother's love is like that.

My mom, a Black woman, raised in the 60s and 70s and witness to the crack epidemic of the 80s, loves with a type of love that knows no depths. The way she tends to the orchid is how she loves everyone around her, and I am a product of that love, that care, that nurturing.

At 30, when she gave birth to me, my mother gave up her career to care for me and later my brother. Although she had a college degree and the potential to be our family's breadwinner, she felt it more important to be present with us, and so she was. As we got older, extracurriculars became more expensive, and when finances tightened at home, my mother returned to work, taking on both a full- and part-time job to ensure the bills were paid, food was on the table, and my brother and I were supported financially and academically, all while still allowing us to do the things we loved.

Her creativity bloomed, not only in how she cared for us, but in how she cared for herself. She worked and continues to work diligently to "[order her] universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (Walker 1983, 241). To this day, my mother keeps a sharp cut, a fly coat, and a beautiful wardrobe of the most stunning clothes you've ever seen. Our home is decorated pristinely and could easily be the centerfold for the top interior design magazine in the country. Her collection of houseplants is but one aspect of where she finds and tends to her creative soul.

Although I'm not yet a mother, I know, from listening to elders and friends, that mothering can often be a thankless job. And yet, so many mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and other mothers continue to love on, care for, and nurture their and other people's children. And I'm sure that in the same way they aren't always sure if or how the flowers in their gardens will bloom; they aren't always certain of who their children will become. So much of who I am today is owed to my mother, who I write about often and love deeply. It is only because



**FIGURE 2** | An image of Autumn (right) and her mother (left) in full bloom.

of her that I get to be the researcher, educator, creative, and human that I am. It's because of her tending that I get to follow my passions, make moves she may have never dreamed of, and create worlds that reflect justice, joy, and celebration alongside Black girls and in fellowship with my sistas. And while she may never see the orchid bloom, I know that her care is not for nothing, and that someday, when it is ready, the first flower will begin to bud (Figure 2).

### 3 | Gardening With GFOC: Examples From the Field

We have both long done literacy-based, youth-engaged (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Caraballo and Filipiak 2020; González Ybarra 2021), and practitioner-based (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009) research in coalition with collectives of GFOC to establish “gardens” as beautiful spaces of celebration and growth. We both draw from a “mosaic” of data—fieldnotes, artifacts, transcripts of interviews and dialogue, reflexive memos—that reflect the complexities and multilayeredness of GFOC lives, knowledge, and creation (Evans-Winters 2019). Furthermore, we both used Feminist of Color lenses shaped by our own WOC epistemologies to make sense of the data, resisting analytic processes that rely on a white-centric masculine gaze (Evans-Winters 2019).

Our engaged methods allow us to co-create and co-analyze spaces that centralize GFOC multiliteracies, born of feminized labor, arts, embodiment, and future-gazing to engender

criticality, build relationships, and heal with one another outside of the purview of whiteness and masculinity. Below, we explore artifacts from each of our projects, expanding visions of how GFOC purposefully creates beauty for themselves and others, building on the wisdom, ingenuity, and creativity passed down from their foremothers and reinvented for their current contexts.

#### 3.1 | Putting Some Spice on It

The Simmering Spices are a collective of five GFOC curators, ages 16–20 and proudly claiming Black, Latina/e, and Asian identities. As part of a youth- and practitioner-engaged research project developed by Grace in the summer of 2023, Leah, Blanca, Mikayla, Sanjana, and Aliana worked together to curate online and in-person art exhibitions featuring the artwork of ten GFOC exploring concepts of educational justice. This group became a tiny garden, a resistant marginal space where they engaged in *collective radical curation* (CRC) as a method to center GFOC multiliteracies to create beauty, learn, and teach critically toward liberation.

CRC is built upon Feminist of Color refusal of the white heteropatriarchal control and gaze and, instead, values the liberatory practices of (arts)spacemaking developed and shared by WOC and GFOC (Whittle 2019)—practices of metaphorical gardening. It is a practice of caring for marginalized people and their artistic narratives (Wade 2021; El-Hadi 2015)—in the case of the Simmering Spices, the narratives of GFOC. As discussed by El-Hadi (2015) and by the Simmering Spices' curatorial advisor, Tricia Kim, during the Simmering Spices meetings, the word “curation” comes from the Latin root “cura”—to care. And, as I've found through this project, this carework can be a mode of community-engaged and arts-based research methodology in education research. Curation involves collecting; research; critique; thematic approaches; discerning patterns; believing in the arts as transformative; questioning the status quo; writing, speaking, and organizing visuals with criticality; and the communication of these ideas to a public (Smith 2012). Taking on CRC as a research method invites participants to a praxis of collaborative meaning making that centers art and the study of art to reveal new and layered knowledges obscured by an overly technological and mechanistic tradition of data collection, analysis, and writing (Haywood Rolling 2018) while simultaneously engaging youth in a radical process of investigating issues that matter to them through the utilization of multiple literacies (Filipiak 2020).

Of course, curation is not a neutral process and has, across history, been used to do harm, to reify colonialism, to steal from marginalized communities and nations, and erase contributions by BIPOC (Dávila 2020; Raicovich 2021; Whittle 2019). So, it is amongst communities of Color where alternative practices of curation have arisen—practices that embody care, celebration, and healing—to create artspaces for and by BIPOC (El-Hadi 2015; Wade 2021; Whittle 2019). These are practices and spaces that value collaboration, congregation, relationality, and the beauty of BIPOC community. This is work that allows curators, artists, and audiences to “gather blossoms under fire.”

The Simmering Spices engaged CRC, starting in the Summer of 2023, when we had a three-day retreat and extending through the Summer of 2024 when they held their in-person gallery exhibition in Brooklyn, New York. Across the work, the Spices worked diligently to learn about curation through a series of workshops with working gallerists and curators; learn about educational justice; visit galleries and museums; write; create art; engage in dialogue with one another; commune over food, laughter, and conversation; write a call for art; collect artworks; design the gallery and the accompanying texts; and run the exhibition, including hosting an opening night event, a panel discussion, and arts-based workshops for attendees. Data was collected from interviews, fieldnotes, photographic documentation, and artifacts including their writing, drawing, website, social media, and the artwork submitted to the gallery.

### 3.1.1 | The Simmering Spices Art Collective Statement

The Simmering Spices' Feminist of Color "gardening" practices become clear through the collective statement they wrote to

explain their vision of themselves and their CRC (see Figure 3; also found on their website, [www.simmeringspicesart.education.uconn.edu](http://www.simmeringspicesart.education.uconn.edu)). They wrote this document over the course of three meetings in the fall of 2023, after having established relationships with one another, studying curation, visiting several galleries and museums, and partaking in conversations about their goals and desires for their galleries. To co-write this document, they split up the sections and then went through rounds of peer feedback and revisions. The curatorial advisor, Tricia, and I gave some feedback, mostly regarding issues of clarity and writing for genre.

### 3.1.2 | Reflections

The Simmering Spices speak to their cultivation of a tiny garden—a space of learning, resistance, criticality, and care. In discussing their statement, it is important to, first, highlight the naming of the group—"The Simmering Spices"—and the accompanying metaphor they trace throughout their collective statement. The Simmering Spices' name emerged as the



FIGURE 3 | Pages from the simmering spices' gallery catalogue.

girls pondered how they would develop a group identity, what they wanted to convey through their name. They considered names like “The Whisper Network,” “After It Rains,” “The Herbal Collective,” and “The Ripple Effect.” They settled on The Simmering Spices, resonating with what it reflected about their various cultures, what the kitchen meant to them, and the nourishment and beauty of their people’s food, each so intricately flavored. Indeed, this naming is a representation of the knowledges and creative power passed down through their matrilineages.

Through this metaphor, they present themselves as comforting, beautiful, attention-grabbing, complex, and warm. They tap into a host of multiliteracies and knowledges born of their experiences as racialized and gendered people to explain who they are against dominant ideologies. They name their “open mindedness, thoughtfulness, intelligence, observance, and curiosity” as inspiring. Furthermore, they refuse racist and sexist ideas that diminish GFOC power, and squarely define themselves as passionate advocates for GFOC and the centrality and celebration of their artistic narratives. Of significance, they defiantly define themselves as containing multitudes and celebrate their differences, refusing the flattening so often applied to the very broad category of “Girls and Femmes of Color.” They refuse a “melting pot” metaphor that would erase their individuality or their cultural lineages, and, instead, allude to how in any beautifully-made dish, each spice stands out and brings its unique flavor, while complementing one another, creating something new and delicious.

By naming themselves the Simmering Spices, they also imply that they, their knowledges, their ways of knowing, their ways of storying “spices up” the blandness of white supremacist and masculinist teaching and learning. They show a deep consideration of the multiliteracies available through art as powerful, exploring, again, the range of GFOC storytelling, its varying tonalities and pitches: “Sometimes storytelling is loud and vibrant. In some instances it is painful and silent. Maybe the silence is the story itself.” Furthermore, they attend to the multitudes of knowledge sources they have, naming emotion on equal footing as logic and expressing the importance of their capacity for empathy and connection. Like so many feminists of Color before them, the Simmering Spices articulate their literacies as multiple—as textual, artistic, aesthetic, nurturing, relational, emotional, and embodied. They beseech their audience to see GFOC art as purposeful, political, and beautifully transgressive.

Importantly, the Simmering Spices view the practices of their ancestors, particularly the women in these lineages—including their feminized labor, creative practices, and embodied expressions of emotion—as acts of beauty, resilience, and art. Through dominant lenses, the art of cooking, of combining spices, of building flavor, particularly when done by WOC and GFOC, is not framed as art, is not seen as revolutionary; the domestic is not viewed as art or as intellectual. However, what the Spices present here is the gorgeousness and genius of the kitchen as foundational to their own work as artists and curators. Like Woods (2023) croons, there are not necessarily “fireworks” as recognizable to the dominant eye, but, rather, “tiny gardens”—simple bits of beauty from the everyday lives of GFOC. The Simmering Spices, then, inflect “curation” with new meanings born of Girl and Femme of Color identity, tradition, and politics.

By making a metaphor of kitchen creations, they honor the marginalized and invisibilized culinary arts of their mothers and grandmothers and use this beauty to inform their own work as revolutionary and liberatory curators.

The themes of creativity, resilience, and the reimagining of identity by the Simmering Spices echo broader movements among GFOC. These ideas find resonance in the work of another group of young creators, the Black Self-Love collective, who use their voices to (re)claim power through poetry.

### 3.2 | (Re)writing Black Girl Anger: (Re)claiming Narratives of Black Girlhood Through Self-Love Poetry

Just as the Simmering Spices (re)present themselves through their art statement and their collaborative naming practices, the Black Self-Love collective engages poetry to (re)write their narratives. Through poetry and community practices, they craft spaces of self-love to create art that is as revolutionary as it is personal.

Autumn draws on her involvement with Black Self-Love, a collective of nine Black girl multimodal writers, ages fourteen through seventeen, to highlight how they use art as a tool for cultivating their tiny gardens. The group was formed as part of a youth-led literacy collaborative held at their school in the spring of 2019, during their school’s “family time.” Autumn worked closely with the girls to create a space where they could explore and engage with Black girl self-love through various literacies. The group, which was selected based on their ongoing engagement with digital communities and recommendations from the principal (a Black millennial woman), met weekly to read, write, listen to, and discuss works by Black women and girls, including people like Maya Angelou, Lizzo, and Marsai Martin. Their collective work culminated in the creation of poems that challenged societal stereotypes of Black girls and (re)wrote their narratives on their own terms.

To curate this work, Autumn collected the girls’ written poems and reflections throughout the collaborative process. Their engagement in the project was not only about writing, but about cultivating community, discussing shared experiences, and learning practices of self-love rooted in Black ancestral traditions. The poems featured in this paper were part of a larger research project (Griffin 2020) that explored how Black adolescent girls use their digital literacies and multimodal renderings as acts of self-love, celebration, and healing. The girls’ work was analyzed with an understanding of the fullness of their lived experiences and the socio-political challenges they face, particularly within the context of a school located in a gentrifying neighborhood, a country with a fascist leader, and a world that upholds racist, sexist, patriarchal values. The curation of their voices in this paper aims to honor how their creativity disrupts harmful portrayals of Black girlhoods while highlighting the beauty, intricacy, and power of their self-authored narratives.

The topic of self-love and the poetry the girls wrote galvanized their voices and facilitated space for them to nurture and more deeply fall in love with themselves—their minds, their voices, their

histories, and their futures—each week. The space provided room for them to flourish and blossom in ways that the white supremacist and patriarchal nature of schools often attempt to quell. For Black girls, writing is an act not only reserved for schooling, but for survival, self-negotiation, and to take hold of their own stories while envisioning new ones (Kaler-Jones 2022; Lorde 1985; Muhammad and Womack 2015; Toliver 2022; Turner 2023). Thus, Autumn invited the girls to write poems that presented an opportunity for them to define their narratives on their terms, offering Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2013) example for “You may see..., but I am... and I love that about myself” as a guide. The poems are written to challenge societal (mis)representations imposed on Black girls, providing space for them to author their own narratives, their own lives.

Within the framework of Brown’s poetic structure, the girls are able to reject preconceived notions about their emotions, attitudes, or appearances, asserting their personhood beyond these limiting perceptions. Through the very act of writing, the girls are pulling the weeds of damaging stereotypes and (mis)interpretations of their personhood, and sowing seeds of truth, love, and honor. Three of the girls chose to highlight their perceived anger, challenging how the world understands Black girls’ emotions (Figure 4).

These three poems challenge the stereotype of anger often associated with Black girls. Each girl acknowledges the external perception that others may have of her but asserts her own voice as a means of self-love, and in doing so (re)stories her identities on the page (Thomas 2019) and provides insight into her own self-perception. In the first poem, Aaliyah confronts the assumption

that Black women are angry. She challenges this stereotype head-on, stating “you see black women as angry,” calling out this violent stereotype. She then moves to highlight her own authenticity and refusal to diminish or hide her feelings, as have other Black women before her (“I am authentic and appreciable”; Lorde 1997; see also Solange Knowles and Wayne 2016). Similarly, in the second poem, Janelle addresses how others perceive her as looking angry. However, she counters this perception by emphasizing the open-mindedness and sweetness she sees and values in herself, showcasing her refusal to conform to stereotypes imposed upon Black girls that because they are not always smiling they are angry or ill-tempered; a perception that often has more to do with society’s attempt to control Black women’s and girls’ bodies and emotions for its own comfort than honoring their feelings or humanity. Similarly, Gabriella acknowledges being seen as someone with an attitude, but asserts that she is actually nurturing to those people and things she deems worthy of her care, thereby reclaiming her care for her own purposes rather than that of white-centric demands.

By expressing love for these qualities about themselves, the girls challenge assumptions made based on external appearances and instead tend to their internal gardens. Collectively, these poems disrupt stereotypes associated with Black girl anger and center their narratives of self-love and self-celebration against society’s tendency to label or (mis)judge based on ill-perceived race-gendered readings of their personhood. Through their words, these poets reclaim agency over their identities and appearances while putting forth a more nuanced understanding of Black girlhoods beyond limited perceptions or biases.

Through Brown’s (2013) framework the girls make four distinct moves in their poems. First, they name themselves, asserting their own humanity by calling themselves by their names. In doing so, they establish agency over what they *shall* be called and position themselves as central to their narratives. Second, they acknowledge the impact of the white patriarchal gaze in society’s perceptions of them, and expose these oppressive forces as a step toward dismantling them. Their poems reveal an acute awareness of the white-dominant society’s preference for traits associated with white femininity, which they publicly call out to uproot and replace with something new. Third, each girl uses Brown’s (2013) framework to disrupt what society “sees” and in using the word “but” pulls the weed out of the ground, unearthing and rejecting these distorting views from the root. And fourth, they (re)define themselves (authentic, open-minded, loving, etc.), planting a new seed in the ground and nurturing this new identity with the affirming conclusion, “and I love that about myself.” Like their foremothers, the girls use their words beyond the purposes of art alone; they engage poetry to disrupt current worlds and rewrite new, more beautiful, more generative ones that more fully honor all of their radiance, vibrance, and everything about them that is in bloom.

#### 4 | Conclusion

The GFOC with whom we work cultivate metaphorical tiny gardens that spill forth blossoms in spaces where they were meant to be choked out by weeds. By tapping into knowledges handed down by their artistic, literary, and activist foremothers—both biological and those connected by culture, identity, and



FIGURE 4 | Black self-love poems.

spirit—they gorgeously rebel against the notion that they are not deserving of educational spaces that honor their multiple ways of knowing and being. They gather blossoms, they gather each other, they gather themselves, and they gather their educators to do the work of beautifying the world with their words, arts, and magic. They dispel ideologies that diminish their arts as trivial, neutral, or marginal. Instead, they show that their multimodal expressions are powerful tools of transforming the way the world sees them, as they see themselves, and as they see each other.

But, GFOC should not and cannot continually be the only ones to lead this labor. Educators and advocates for youth must (re)imagine the way they construct educational spaces, curriculum, and pedagogies to allow GFOC to do this work without restraint or punishment, without stunting their growth. Thus, we call on educators to deeply see GFOC as creators and geniuses who are always in bloom, understanding their creativity and genius beyond white masculinist paradigms and seeing the complexity, richness, and subversiveness they've cultivated from what they've inherited.

We encourage educators to create classroom environments that make room for creative, multimodal projects where GFOC brilliance can take center stage. For example, if we borrow from the concept of open studios, classrooms might become spaces where students freely explore their thoughts and interests through art. We also challenge literacy educators to collaborate with local community organizations to provide mentorship, materials, and support for the cultivation of these spaces and amplification of GFOC creative work. Together, with educators, we ask *How might we cultivate more reflective spaces where GFOC can share their lives and their artwork in loving, supportive environments?*

We also invite literacy educators to turn to community-based spaces that GFOC *already* occupy and create. Talk to GFOC. Talk to their mothers and other mothers. Observe their ways of learning, creating, and making space, their ways of transferring knowledge. Acknowledge their knowledge-making practices and allow these insights to inform classrooms and pedagogies. How might you collaborate with local artists, parents, or cultural organizations to co-create events that nurture the creative practices of GFOC? How might you build more reflective and restorative spaces where their voices are centered?

It is time, now—it's *been* time—for GFOC to be given the space to plant their gardens, to gather their blossoms, to tend to themselves and each other, without also having to put out the fires too often left ablaze around them. Let us, as educators and researchers, commit to cultivating these tiny gardens with our beautiful and deserving GFOC. And,

Every day, we will feed them, we will.  
Every day, we will feed them, we will.  
Every day, we will feed them, we will.  
Every day, we will feed them, we will.

(adapted from Jamila Woods 2023).

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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