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Learning and Healing Through the Teachings of the Girasol

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how the *Girasol* youth leadership development program is interwoven with *feminista* ethnic studies pedagogies as a means of dismantling oppressive paradigms and enabling BIPOC femme-identified youth to seek their sacred selves through ancestral-based teachings and *conocimientos*. In navigating this research, I intentionally used methods and frameworks that reflect decolonial processes to center the experiences of the youth participating in the *Girasol* program. I also intentionally used methods and frameworks that would allow me to be my most *authentic* self as I navigated multiple roles: as a researcher, mentor, community member, and a new mother to an infant. Examining how the *Girasol* program impacts the lives of Latinx youth illustrates the importance of culturally relevant programming, especially for system-impacted youth. I also share the founders' intentions and intersections between the *Girasol* program and *feminista* Ethnic studies pedagogies. In conclusion, I propose the *Girasol Epistemology*, a framework to capture the *Bodymindspirit* transformation youth undergo as a result of the *Girasol* teachings.

Keywords: Spiritual Activism, Ethnic Studies, Femme-identified Youth, Healing, Youth Programming, Conocimiento

Introduction

> "If you don't understand yourself and how to heal, you will repeat mistakes and not advocate for yourself." -Youth Participant in the Girasol Program

During one of our *Girasol* ("sunflower") sessions, a youth shared the quote above in response to a group question. I was inspired by her comment because it illustrated how healing is not only a means of understanding and (re)finding oneself; it is also a means of equipping oneself for a better future (where one does not repeat the same mistakes and can advocate for oneself). Her comment captures why the Girasol program is vital to the future of our youth. The Girasol program is a healing-centered, culturally and Indigenous-based youth leadership development program, it serves as a rite of passage to support and guide our young women and femme-identified youth to seek their sacred selves. After observing the program in 2021, I was invited to complete the program and graduate along with the youth. Following that, I attended the National Compadres Network (NCN) training through the Denver Healing Generations Network (DHGN) and received my certification to teach Girasol. Through co-facilitating several groups (including my own Girasol group), and observing over 60 participants complete the program, I can confirm that Girasol has a positive impact on our youth. For this reason, I believe that programs like Girasol can impart and

guide youth to enact *spiritual activism* because when youth are embraced in the community and are exposed to ancestral-based teachings and *conocimientos*, they take on specific ways of thinking and being that reflect what I term as the *Girasol Epistemology* (Anzaldúa, 2002; Knecht & Aviña, 2023). The *Girasol Epistemology* draws on Gloria Anzaldúa's seven stages of conocimiento, to frame and capture the *bodymindspirit* transformation youth (especially those who are system-impacted) might undergo as a result of the Girasol program.

Background

More than half of Girasol's participants (54 percent) know someone close to them or are personally involved in the criminal legal system.[21] Pasko and Denious (2021) bring forth the experiences of Latina and white girls inside and outside the criminal legal system (i.e., pathways to delinquency, court involvement, and diversion programming) and contend that, despite their high visibility in the criminal legal system, Latina girls are neglected in research. Looking into scholarship on this particular experience, I recognize the paucity of research (Belknap, 2021; Cotto, 2006; Flores, 2016; Lopez & Pasko, 2021). As Flores, Santos, and Camacho (2021) point out, feminist scholarship and research on young women of color overlook Latina experiences in the criminal legal system.[22] As a result, these authors challenge the Black-white binary[23] in academic literature by highlighting the gendered, socioeconomic, and racialized experiences of Latinas who have been involved in the criminal legal system—especially Latinas who go "on the run" from legal authorities in the Southern California area. Flores's (2016) research identifies that Latinas' first interaction with police is usually a result of their experiences and challenges at home. He contends that wraparound services, like formal probation, lead to the girls experiencing more sanctions; which, in turn, results in girls spending more time at El Valle Juvenile Detention Center. As of 2024, Latinos account for 19% of the U.S. population and, within correctional facilities, they represent 20% of the population (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024).

In *The Invisible Women: Gender, Crime, and Justice*, Belknap (2021) discusses the factors that we must consider in understanding how women and girls become criminalized and end up in the criminal legal system. She suggests that instead of having specific programs (i.e., on sexual abuse,

[21] I utilize the term Criminal Legal System instead of Criminal Justice System to ensure that the language I utilize reflects how I see this institution not as a justice peace maker, but instead, as a project designed to protect and prioritize colonial logics and white supremacy. Recommend reading: Bryant, 2021; Cardoza, 2022.

[22] Flores, Santos, and Camacho (2021) and Pasko and Denious (2021) are chapters in "*Latinas in the Criminal Justice System: Victims, Targets, and Offenders*," they use the term *Latina* women and girls to reflect the term used by the contributors and those they work with who are system-impacted and system-involved. Within my research, I utilized the term femme-identified youth, unless the youth specifically identified with another term (like Latinx or Latina). The Girasol curriculum believes in "*In Tloque Nahuaque*" a Nahuatl concept that embraces and honors all people just as they are: it represents and creates safe spaces that speak on behalf of the needs and identities of all people, including members of LGBTQ2S community. Femme-identified youth can be of any gender. Femme-identified can be considered someone's gender and/or gender expression.

[23] This by no means negates the fact that Black women have shaped the field of carcerality—in fact, abolitionists like Angela Y. Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Beth E. Richie, Mariame Kaba, and Treva B. Lindsey (and many more) have contributed immensely to our understanding of the prison industrial complex, the importance of community programs (Project NIA, INCITE! and so forth) and our understandings of abolition as a theory and daily practice!

childhood trauma, Intimate Partner Abuse, etc.) for women and girls *already* in the system, it would be "preferable to have a society and network of agencies that are educated about these gendered based abuses and other traumas to deter their occurrence and encourage earlier reporting by victims" (p. 406). This emphasizes the significance of education as a preventative measure and the importance of community. In addition, Belknap (2016) identifies three primary factors that contribute to the role that labeling plays on women and girls' potential and actual criminalization. First, the intersections between gender, race, class, immigrant status, and mental illness as "potential risks for being labeled a delinquent or adult offender and/or being placed in a situation of being coerced or forced into violence (often self-defense) or criminal activities" (p. 406). Second, how institutions and agencies work together (or don't) to worsen the situation of marginalized women and girls. Lastly, the impact of parental and/ or peers' parental incarceration increases youth's risk of offending.

Mental health is a crucial component in understanding the experience of system-impacted youth as "researchers estimate that between 67 and 90% of detained and adjudicated youth meet criteria for at least one mental health diagnosis, and almost half for two or more comorbid psychiatric disorders" (Desai, 2019, p. 640). Justice-involved youth are 30% more likely to have PTSD compared to the general population, up to 93% have experienced trauma, and 70% will meet the criteria for a mental health disorder (Abram et al., 2004; Desai, 2019; Dierkhising et al., 2013). System-involved youth are more vulnerable to system-generated trauma, i.e., trauma directly caused by the legal system (Ryan et al., 2006). Desai (2019) argues that the juvenile justice system is a socially toxic environment and that, "being system-involved takes a toll on a person's spirit, body, mind and context […] and system-involved youth are struggling to find wellness and well-being" (p. 652). He suggests that programs that are culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and holistic[24] possess the ability to counter the negative experiences youth suffer as a result of the current criminal legal system.

With these realities in mind, research and praxis on the experiences of system-involved Latinx women and girls is not only necessary—but crucial—in understanding the importance of collaboration in envisioning an abolitionist[25] future. Girasol supports this effort by offering youth-

[24] Desai (2019) employs the Native Relational Worldview model of wellness, that centers on spirituality and balance to understand how trauma affects system-involved youth by disrupting their emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical well-being. Their findings were based on a YPAR project with system-involved youth and their allies.

[25] I define abolition not with the goal of a utopian world (our world is non-liner and is based on patterns, that is, a place of constant change) but instead, as an ongoing process, where we re-envision our ways of relating to one another and all of our relations (humans and non-human relatives). It's about building anew. I don't see prisons closing tomorrow, or even in my lifetime, but I do see us creating new relationships and ideologies that address the root causes of violence and harm, through accountability and responsibility. This in turn, will establish structures of care, support and healing– away from the institutional process of *disappearing* people. Cherise Morris, a Black spiritualist and poet, believes that we should look towards Indigenous cosmologies and practices to guide us in revisioning a future without prisons and policing and does so through the example of the African cosmology of Bântu-Kôngo. The belief system of the Bântu-Kôngo viewed "crime" as a *symptom* of a failing system– it meant that someone in the community was suffering– and therefore–the whole community suffered. The Bântu-Kôngo did not have systems like prisons or policing, they depended on systems of collective care, "It was the community's responsibility to support the economic, social, mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of all community members, to engender a sense of belonging and being that opposed the sort of systemic violence and exploitation which creates crime in the first place"

specific teachings designed to remind youth they are sacred, that is, that they have a purpose in life. To achieve this, we create a healing space where femme-identified youth (ages 13 through 18) can embrace their culture, ancestral histories and teachings, and engage in creative movement and art projects.

Girasol: "It showed me how to heal"

> "Not enough people my age know how to heal themselves, including me. Therefore, it's needed. Especially in people of color my age, I just feel like we're more lost." -Girasol youth participant (at the start of the program)

Situating the Girasol Program

The Girasol curriculum was developed by Maestra Debra Camarillo, Maestra Susanna Armijo, and Maestro Jerry Tello. Their work is supported through the NCN[26] whose mission is to, "strengthen and re-root the capacity of individuals, families, and communities to honor, rebalance, and redevelop the authentic identity, values, traditions, and Indigenous practices of Chicano, Latino, Native, Raza, and other communities of color as the path to the honoring of all their relations and lifelong well-being" (National Compadres Network, 2024). Although the NCN is based in Northern California, it currently has strong connections to Colorado through Frida Soto (who is well known for conducting Girasol programs), John Perez and JoJo Padilla at the DHGN, and other Denver-based non-profit organizations. The Girasol program was implemented and conducted in Denver, Colorado in 2021. Since then, it had not been offered in the Boulder County area (that includes regions of Colorado from Longmont, Boulder, Lafayette and so on) and I saw an opportunity to expand its offerings to the Northern Front Range as the basis of my doctoral research.

Girasol, the name of the program, was chosen intentionally and is the basis for the first session. The Girasol has the ability to be able to transform and absorb radiation and toxic metals from the soil, as seen done after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. For Girasol participants, this symbolizes how they too can transform the harms of colonialism within themselves, at home, and in their communities. As a heliotrope flower, the Girasol is always seeking the sun. Girasol participants are taught to seek the "light" in their lives and follow the teachings when things get tough. The Girasol is also an edible, medicinal, and a sacred element to many Indigenous communities. For example, the Mexica people used the Girasol (*chimalxochitl*) as an offering to the war and sun god Huitzilopochtli; Native Americans used the seeds to make cake, mush, or bread (Mexicolor, 2024; National Sunflower Association, 2024). Originating from North America and Mexico, the plant was domesticated sometime during 2600 BCE and is still considered an important plant to this day (Mexicolor, 2024). Girasol participants are taught that many of the plants and foods we eat and use medicinally were cultivated by their ancestors and carry teachings. I find that our youth gain strength and healing in knowing their history and their connections to all that is around them.

(p. 10). Morris's example can guide us in understanding that abolition was once experienced and therefore, can be experienced again. Abolition is hope in action. Abolition is embracing and living-in-love.

[26] Please visit the National Compadres Network for more information: https://nationalcompadresnetwork.org/misson-purpose-history/

The program's curriculum is premised upon the healing philosophy "*La Cultura Cura*," (culture cures) a framework that engages with the teachings of our Latinx and Indigenous ancestors who emphasized the importance of sacred values, traditions, and interconnected relationships as the foundation for cultural healing, identity, and strength. More specifically, the Girasol curriculum is situated in Mexica/Nahua spiritual ways and Native American traditions; an example of how teachings have been shared across tribal and linguistic lines. Girasol draws upon the knowledge of elders and relatives from the First Nations of the Americas to remind our youth of their vital role within our communities and families.

Pláticamos with the Founders of the Girasol Program

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the intentions for Girasol, I reached out to Maestra Debra and Maestra Susie and Maestro Jerry for a Zoom *plática* (the creators of the Girasol program) and have summarized what they shared in the next excerpts.

Maestra Debra Camarillo

Maestra Deb shared that for her, it was after the *National Listening Tour*, during which she got feedback on a previous curriculum she created and learned what the curriculum did not address. Maestra Debra wanted to create a curriculum that could speak to and support women and girls, no matter who they were, so they could direct their own lives and be prepared for life's challenges. Maestra Debra shared that if one does not know who one is, then life can be difficult, which is why she felt that the Girasol curriculum had to start with the foundation of "*Yo Soy*" (I am). She elaborated that these teachings are “ceremony” and must begin with the self–which is inextricably linked to our ancestral past. In many communities, like Chicanx communities, the colonial process of de-indigenization has resulted in youth struggling with their identities. Maestra Debra described this by sharing that, “they (youth) don’t have a sense of who they are and not because they don’t want to, but you know because there's a lot of distance between traditions and them” (personal communication, June 16, 2024). For her, Girasol is embracing the concept of reciprocity, that is, honoring who we are and our Indigenous ways; it is important to remember and embrace that we are always in relation to everything around us.

Maestra Susanna Armijo

For Maestra Susie, three events inspired and brought her to co-create the Girasol curriculum. First, in creating healing spaces for women and girls, Maestra Susie was inspired by her own experiences as a young person who needed a safe place and space to guide her through difficult times. In Girasol, her own experiences are interwoven with the teachings and serve as an example of healing for the youth. She also shared that she noticed there were constant themes coming up during her counseling sessions with different facilitators, and stressed the need to develop something to address the issues of today, to address the “*Present* Traumatic Stress Disorders,” and used this as a guide to what Girasol needed to teach (personal communication, June 16, 2024). Girasol became the *medicina* to remedy the issues of today.

Lastly, Maestra Susie danced as a Mexica dancer for the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates in Rome in the early 2000s. This coming together was centered around "a call for peace," where drums and dances were featured from around the globe. During our plática, she described this lovely experience and how the Native American drum, African drum, Japanese Taiko drum, Aztec drum,

Celtic drum, and more, were all present, and when the drums started playing together, everyone came out and began dancing in a circle to their own rhythm. She described that she could hear her drum despite the symphony of all the drums playing, "all the beats blended, it was so miraculous! I will never forget the feeling of looking around that circle and seeing everyone represented and everyone dancing in harmony together to the heartbeat of their own drum. I was like you know what, we *can* get along. We *can* come together and see each other, meet each other, share, and dance together. It's *not* an impossible dream. It is possible! If everybody is on the right page dancing to their rhythm and being willing to come and dance together" (personal communication, June 16, 2024). Maestra Susie's experience speaks to the possibility of solidarity when we are able and willing to come together and honor who we each are as individuals and as a community.

Another great example of how beauty can emerge from working together in unison is how both Maestra Susie and Maestra Debra shared how much gratitude they had for all the guidance and support Maestro Jerry (renowned for introducing "La Cultura Cura") had provided during the creation of Girasol. As a group, they worked together to create Girasol and ensure that this medicina would bring healing to our communities.

Curriculum Structure and Content

The Girasol curriculum consists of thirteen sessions lasting around two hours each (I always stayed an additional thirty minutes to catch up with youth who stayed after the program). Girasol serves middle to high-school-aged femme-identified youth. Youth from all backgrounds are sought for the program, and in my specific Girasol group, I had youth of Mexican, Chicanx, and Indigenous (Native American and Mayan) backgrounds. To maintain the fidelity of the program, Girasol groups are suggested to be capped at fifteen youth. In my research, I found it difficult to turn away interested participants and graduated sixteen Girasol youth (at points of the program we had 18 youth participate). The number of interested participants in my particular Girasol group demonstrated that youth in the Boulder County area are seeking culturally relevant programming and want to heal![27]

The curriculum is organized into four sections: Teachings from the Heart, Teachings of the *Pañuelo*, Intergenerational Teachings, and *Roboso* Teachings. Each session emphasizes the four core values of the program which consist of ***Conocimiento****:* Acknowledgment and Positive Cultural Identity Development (Dignity)*;* ***Entendimiento****:* Understanding of their Sacred Purpose (Respect)*;* ***Integración****:* Integrating Bilingual/Bicultural values (Love)*;* ***Movimiento****:* Safety, security, and Interconnectedness (Trust) (Camarillo, 2020).

[27] For this Girasol group to exist, it was necessary to work alongside community practitioners who shared their resources and believed in this work. I had immense support from teachers, like Dr. Martinez, who let me sit in her class and share the background of Girasol with her students. I also want to give a huge shout-out to Jennifer Diaz-Leon, Hernando Perez (TĀP PĪLAM COAHUILTECAN NATION), Maya Padilla (Northern Arapaho and Mexica), and Jessica Perez (Afro-Indigenous), who ensured that our group had a space to meet and supported the youth at their graduation. I would not have been involved with Girasol had it not been for my dear friend, Frida F. Soto, a*chingona* in all the ways possible. John Perez and Jojo Padilla also supported this Girasol group immensely and made sure I was certified in teaching the curriculum. Many blessings to you all. It takes a village to care for and support our youth in their healing journeys

Each session begins by forming a *circulo* (talking circle), a pedagogical practice done in many Ethnic Studies spaces as a way to honor every voice in the circle. Sitting in circulo "symbolizes and encourages sharing of ideas, respect of each other's ideas, togetherness, and a continuous and unending compassion and love for one another. The circle symbolizes equality of members in the circle" (Bagele, 2020; Camarillo, 2020; Huton, 2011). To begin, we passed around a sacred object to symbolize a "talking stick"— in our Girasol group it was a sunflower, and it indicated when someone had the *Palabra* (credible word/oath). The talking stick also symbolized our collection of knowledge, it represented our group and our journey together; the talking stick holds power as it is passed around from youth to youth (Bagele, 2020). Having the Palabra signaled to the rest of the group to focus on what the speaker was saying and to show respect to our fellow Girasol by listening and responding when necessary. The practice of sitting in a circulo and passing the talking stick is inherently an Indigenous practice, and in my research, it reinforced a decolonial method and methodology (Bagele, 2020; Fierros & Bernal, 2016). One youth shared how the circulo made them feel:

> It feels like everyone is listening to you way more and that you also hear and learn way more being in a circle because you guys face each other and pay attention.

Our introduction of sitting in circulo and starting each session with checking in with each other established a safe space for our youth; it created a home away from home. One youth shares what these practices meant for them:

> This program was different by showing you are welcomed, keeping a safe space for us to have fun and learn new things every day, it made you feel like it was home and even make new bonds.

This kind of testimony serves as a reminder that some of our youth have limited spaces and places where they feel "safe" and can have "fun" and "learn things every day" and illustrates how these teachings create healing spaces we desperately need. To further illustrate these teachings, I have included a short sample of Session 6: "Healthy Healing Waters," to explain how we teach the youth to "water" their *bodymindspirit* (Camarillo, 2020; Lara, 2002).

Session 6: "Healthy Healing Waters"

The Conocimiento for this teaching is to explore our connection to water; given that sixty percent of the adult body is water, we explore the implications this has for our bodies, the earth, and all our relations (Water Science School, 2019). It is important in this session that we as facilitators articulate water not only through scientific means (protective waters for the embryo in the womb, bodies of water on earth, as a cultivator of growth, to survive and so forth) but also as a sacred symbol and ancestral relative. We begin each session by asking the youth, "How did you water yourself this week, and if you didn't, did someone else pour into you in a good way?". We ask this question at each session as it allows us to reflect on our self-care (or lack thereof) for that week. It is also an opportunity for the group to hear how other youth care for themselves or are cared for by the people they love. The following are some examples of what the youth shared when asked how they watered themselves (March 13, 2024):

- "I watered myself this week by going to the gym."
  (this youth started going to the gym and was always excited to share her progress with the group)
- "I watered myself by going to all my classes this week."
  (this particular youth was struggling with truancy at school and made it her goal to graduate)
- "I watered myself by quitting choir."
  (the group laughed at this response since this youth made this statement so proudly. We were shocked, but she went on to explain how the choir teacher was toxic and she could not stand him anymore. Instead, she joined the school band, where she now plays *Mariachi* music. The rest of the group shared their excitement for her– as did I)

The *Entendimiento* for this teaching is to examine how the *Body Keeps the Score*, that is, how our bodies store our experiences and what manifests as a result (Van der Kolk, 2014). We share with youth the idea that their inner emotional and mental state can be seen as "water" flowing within them. We explain how this water can become stagnant, frozen, or toxic, and how that can affect their well-being. We then encourage them to reflect on how they can restore balance and get their waters flowing again, especially during challenging experiences like loss, a breakup, or an act of racism. It is in these *pláticas* that they open themselves up and share what they have been through and how they move (or are moving) through some of the tough times in their lives. As part of the session, we provide teachings and *medicina* so that youth can incorporate them into their lives, in hopes that they (re)gain balance; a practice we hope they use and share moving forward.

A worksheet is then passed around where youth identify and write down what in their lives causes their water to boil, be toxic, be cold, or be nourished (see Figure 7.1 for an example of one young participant's response). The worksheet encourages them to first reflect on their own and then share as a whole group. After everyone shares, we move forward to discuss how *healthy pride* can support us in bringing our water and *bodymindspirit* back into a healthy balanced state[28] (stepping away from ways that further harm us) (Lara, 2002).

The *Integracion* for this teaching is creating *Agua Florida:* an ancestral medicine used to open our hearts, comfort us in sickness, reset one's energy, cleanse a space, raise our vibration, and cleanse our altar (Camarillo, 2020; Seidelman, 2019). Each youth makes their own *Agua Florida* and takes it home (please see Figure 7.2 for an example of their healing waters). One youth shared their feelings about this session:

> When we did the healing water it was so amazing because it's something new, it was a totally new experience. Looking for the ingredients and what it helps for was amazing.

[28] Healthy Pride (Camarillo, 2020): Purpose (You have a sacred purpose); Responsible (You have the ability to respond in a healthy way); Interdependency (You can connect with others–walk where you are loved); Development (You will experience new ways to old wounds); Enthusiasm (You come from a greater source and you can accept support if you allow it)

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Figure 7.1. "Our Waters" is one youth's worksheet for Lesson 6.

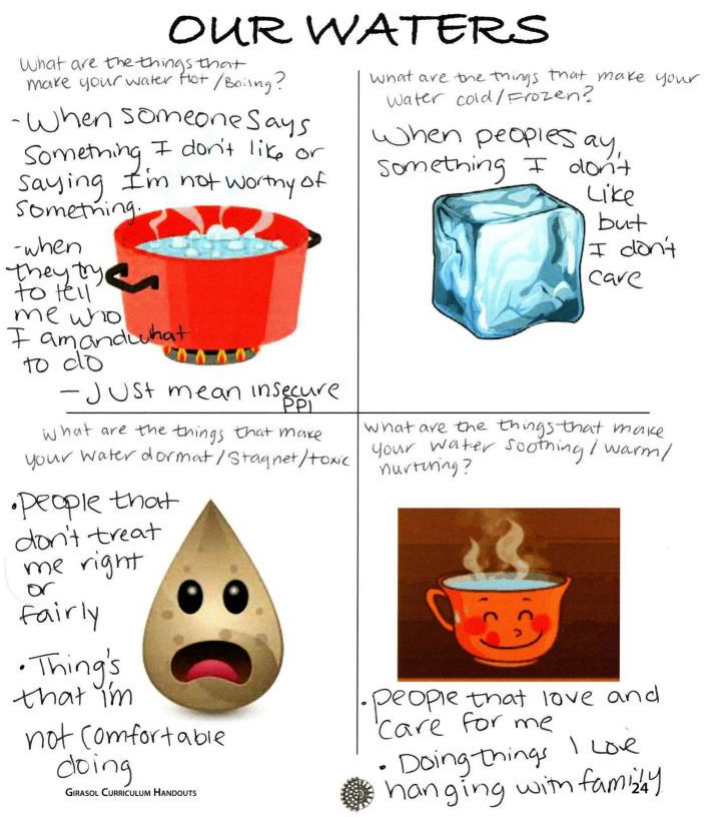

Figure 7.2. The Agua Florida made by youth in Lesson 6: "Healthy Healing Waters." The house above the waters is from a different teaching.

The Girasol Epistemology: Nemachtilli and Feminista Ethnic Studies Pedagogies

> "I am most likely keeping this [Girasol teachings] with me and my life and teaching this to my future kids." -Youth Participant (at the end of the program)

Not a School Program

In many cases, schools and classrooms are not creative and imaginative spaces, but places where many of our young people, more specifically BIPOC youth, will first interact with the criminal legal system (Flores, 2016; Morris, 2016; Rios, 2017; Sojoyner, 2016). Schools have become an institution where youth's opportunities are so often "enclosed" through oppressive ideological and physical structures of control (Sojoyner, 2016). In this light, I believe Girasol attracts youth because it is not a traditional after-school program; it is a community-based program that offers teachings that engage with culture, creativity, history and spirituality. Youth are connected to Girasol in a meaningful way and name their tensions with traditional schooling by referencing how the program makes them feel:

> One youth shared:
> "I feel connected to it [Girasol] in many ways and it doesn't feel like a class."
>
> Another youth shared:
> "It [Girasol] teaches me about my ancestors and so much more stuff that other programs don't teach."
>
> Similarly, another youth shared:
> "I feel like this program feels more like a group of mutuals. It feels more comfortable than being in a class."

The youth's comments also reveal a deeper element that is often absent in traditional classrooms—the ancestral spirit. According to Rodriguez (2005), administrators and politicians have put pressure on teachers to produce in a way that limits their creativity, eliminating the spiritual and human elements in the classroom. He uses the Nahuatl term *Nemachtilli*, which translates to *the spirit of learning*, along with its counterpart *the spirit of teaching*. According to Nemachtilli, teachers can recognize and bring out children's innate gifts, talents, and callings in order to inspire a love of lifelong learning and feelings of sacredness. To Rodriguez (2005), the human and spiritual element of the classroom is about having natural, connected, vibrant, and imaginatively connected teachers supporting their students in being creative and curious, challenging, countering, and wanting to learn more (Rodriguez, 2005).

This is not the reality of today. Many youth are excited and relieved when school is over or dread going to class and are struggling with school truancy. This is especially true for Colorado as the state is witnessing record-high levels of absenteeism, where nearly one in three students is chronically absent (Patterson, 2024). Learning has taken up a new meaning that does not reflect our everyday lived experiences, and it is slowly catching up to us and manifesting itself as a medical condition(s):

> I'm convinced these issues [ADD and Alzheimer's Disease] are not just chemical imbalances and genetic propensities (other than the fact that we now have several generations suffering through these maladies). These are the results of life imbalances; the slow erosion of the mind, heart, and spirit; the push to maximize profits, gain power, waste the earth, with little thought for what we leave behind. (Rodriguez, 2005, p. 45)

With this in mind, I believe teachings from ethnic studies can play an important role in balancing and healing life's imbalances, by creating spaces and places within academia to embrace Nemachtilli. To be in a Nemachtilli state is to seek and live-out our sacred purpose. Ethnic studies did that for me; it created a space where I could heal and taught me to embrace the spirit of learning and teaching.

Ethnic Studies Holds Us Together

Ethnic studies explores how systems of domination function in the everyday lives of people of color, as well as how we can cultivate new possibilities for social change when we stand up to challenge normalized oppression. In a research context, Fong (2008) identifies four founding concepts that distinguish ethnic studies research from traditional discipline. First is the importance of incorporating the community into the research process in order to see both facets (the researcher and community members) as working hand in hand in addressing community concerns. Second, ethnic studies provides an interpretive and protective agenda for those who are being studied (their social and ethical treatment) and what the end-product of the research produced (ensuring it serves the community). Third, it is important to question objectivity and neutrality by paying attention to *what* questions are being asked, *who* is asking the questions and *how* the questions are being asked in the research. Lastly, with a focus on social change, ethnic studies seeks to "document injustice and survival, promote cultural tenacity and vibrancy, highlight unequal power relationships, influence policy, and work to provide a more accurate picture of the United States past and present" (p. 4). These concepts emphasize how ethnic studies is and always will be for the community. As for the future of ethnic studies, Dominguez et al. (2023) state:

> The future of ethnic studies will be attuned to hope; to the relational, the spiritual, and proleptic possibilities. The future of ethnic studies will invite youth and families to be co-creators of knowledge, teachers to facilitate empowerment and healing, and scholarship to speak with humility and solidarity. The future of ethnic studies is now; etched in the prefigurative world-building and liberatory love that guides the varied, contextual, and creative projects it engenders. (p. 4)

The hope shared in this testimony is lived through the Girasol program, a space of healing for the youth, facilitators and communities they represent. As a researcher and community member, I sought out *feminista* ethnic studies pedagogies (Pláticas, Bodymindspirit, Conocimiento) as a means to situate the specific epistemological perspectives that the program embraces to facilitate spaces of healing embodying what I am referring to as the Girasol Epistemology (Anzaldúa, 1999, 2015; Delgado-Bernal et al., 2023; Fierros & Delgado-Bernal, 2016; Lara, 2002: Rodriguez, 2005).

Pláticas* and the *Path to Conocimiento

In "Vamos A Platicar: The contours of Pláticas as Chicana/Latina Feminist Methodology," Fierros and Delgado-Bernal (2016) distinguish pláticas as a methodology and provide researchers with its five principles to follow. First, the research must draw upon Chicana/Latina feminist theory. In my research, I draw upon Critical race theory, Critical Indigenous theory and Chicana feminist thought to create and conceptualize a research study that draws attention to the ways systems of oppression impact youth and how we can facilitate spaces of healing. Second, "a plática methodology has a relational principle that honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge" (p. 111). In Girasol, the facilitator(s) and youth meaning-make the healing process together, which is based on our own knowledges and experiences. Third, the lived experiences of the contributors are drawn in as part of the research inquiry, not only as a means of data collection, but to influence the very foundation of the research. In Girasol, we welcome all facets of the youth into the group to take part in the healing process. We do not ask youth to separate their identities to "fit in"; we ask them to come as they are and be open to having a fluid discussion about who we are and how we can heal. Their contributions are the foundation of the program.

Fourth, a plática methodology provides a potential healing space. In Girasol, youth identified that this particular space allowed them to *desahogarse*, to "unburden" themselves. This co-created safe space gave us the opportunity to think, theorize and act through how we move past our pain and traumas and move forward in a good way. Lastly, the fifth element is the importance of trust through reciprocity, vulnerability and researcher reflexivity. As Girasol facilitators, our vulnerability and ability to share our own stories is vital in leading by example and building *confianza* (trust). This is the only way the Girasol program can succeed. As facilitators, we must be reflexive in the ways we move in the Girasol space. As a researcher, I knew I would have to take on additional preparations and responsibilities in order to be *presente* in my bodymindspirit so I could be ready when youth shared their life with me and the group (Lara, 2002).

My research and facilitating Girasol were in some ways answering my *scholarly prayer*, and they became a way to combine the parts of myself that academia worked so hard to separate (Lara, 2002). I used my bodymindspirit knowledge to build a bridge between academia and the community I come from by working together with community practitioners to co-create a healing space for our youth, especially for our system-impacted youth. The Girasol program led some youth to embrace their bodies, forgiveness, and spiritual activism:

> One youth shared:
> "Just in general the ways of healing and the hurt I feel out of nowhere and where the emotions and feeling are bottled up in my body it [Girasol] helps me understand myself and people around me more."
>
> Another youth shared:
> "Yes it's [Girasol] has made me rethink other people's actions"
>
> And another youth shared:
> "I like the person I have started to become, and I don't want that to change."

As a result of the program, I created the Girasol Epistemology to capture how the teachings can enact consciousness raising and what this means at the grassroot level. I wanted to expand the path to conocimiento beyond theoretical paradigms to incorporate what this means in our

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everyday lives (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018). The Girasol Epistemology can become a framework for other youth programs that are facilitating and creating healing spaces. The following are examples for three stages of the path of conocimiento, along with corresponding questions:

Figure 7.3. The Girasol Epistemology

The Stage	Questions	Examples
El Arrebato: "A rupture, the shattering of subjectivities and experiences" (Anzaldúa, 2002)	- What do youth identify as their rupture(s)? -How can these ruptures lead us to further harm or enable us to enact healing? - Traumatic events in life that youth share out loud or that they journal	- Participants in the past have experienced abortions, family deportations, expulsions or suspensions from school, a traumatic experience, a family loss, a break-up that they shared was a "low point" in their life.

The Stage	Questions	Examples
Nepantla: The clashing of the new and the old– a liminal space– a borderland waiting to be embraced. (Anzaldúa, 2002)	- What contradictions might have arisen once they began Girasol programming, that is, once they began to receive the teachings, how did this enact new ways of thinking or being? -How have the teachings impacted them, or how have they embraced the in-between zones? - This can happen throughout the program, after each session check in and see where youth are at in their *bodymindspirit*.	- One of the participants in the program shared that because of probation she can't smoke anymore since she does not want to get "caught up" with her probation officer, but the path she has been walking has been centered around smoking. She had to navigate this *in-between* space, that is, this limbo state of whether or not to smoke or not to smoke. The teachings of the Girasol taught her that she needs to be honorable and follow through with her promises. In being in this state I asked what tensions did this bring for her and how can this potentially lead to walking a new path?

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The Stage	Questions	Examples
Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: In this stage, it is time to bring the pieces back together and begin to feel hope. Your soul begins to return to its body. (Anzaldúa, 2002).	- How are the participants using the teachings of the program to put themselves back together, to heal the wounds (their Arrebato(s)? - We can see this through the art pieces in the program, see what they create and how it connects back to their Arrebato(s) -We can also see this through what they share and how they come to understand their situation through a different perspective.	- Participants have shared that they used some of the teachings in dire times. For example, during one of the sessions we create medicine bags and one of the participants mentioned that she took her medicine bag to school and felt good knowing it was in her backpack. She shared she felt that the medicine bag was protecting her through her hard times. -Another participant saw forgiveness differently and framed it as a way for her to move on and begin to heal, it was not necessarily for the other person.

Conclusion

> "I feel like I was able to improve every aspect of my life with Girasol. Academics, my social life, my emotions, my physical and mental health." -Youth Participant (at the end of the program)

More than half of Girasol's participants (54 percent) know someone close to them or are personally involved in the criminal legal system. Research shows that culturally and gender-responsive programming can support youth who have been exposed to system-generated, interpersonal, and intergenerational trauma to embrace transformational healing and raise participants' critical consciousness (Desai, 2019; Haskie-Mendoza et al., 2021). I sought to understand how Girasol could inspire youth to feel sacred and how this, in turn, could help system-impacted youth access transformative healing. After witnessing many youth complete the program, and co-facilitating the program myself, I can confirm that its teachings have the power to guide youth to embrace their sacredness and for some youth to enact spiritual activism (Anzaldúa, 2002).

As a researcher, I adopted feminista ethnic studies pedagogies (through pláticas, bodymindspirit, and the path of conocimiento) to best capture the unique experiences youth undergo in the program. I created the Girasol Epistemology as a means to capture the transformation youth can undergo in Girasol, in hopes that other youth programs utilize or think through how their youth journey through the different stages of consciousness. The Girasol Epistemology is a framework that extends the path to conocimiento beyond theoretical paradigms to capture the praxis experienced by the femme-identified youth who are exposed to the gendered, cultural, and

Indigenous-based teachings of the program (Anzaldúa, 2002; Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018). I conclude with a youth's statement about their experience with Girasol:

> I think after Girasol it was really brought to my attention how important it is to "water yourself" and take care of yourself every day and every week. It's also taught me the importance of connection and being vulnerable. I was really able to be vulnerable in this program. I felt comfortable sharing a lot of shit that's happened, and I know it's okay and other girls won't judge because I know if I share my truths, some other girls can relate in silence, it'll help them not feel so alone. Lastly, I think Girasol has really taught me to "take up space" because I think it's really discouraged amongst young women. Girasol has taught me to use my voice.

This kind of testimony serves as a reminder that this program has made not only a difference in her life, but in the life of many femme-identified youth who experienced the Girasol program.

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