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Author

Coráñez Bolton, Sony

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How to Tame a Wild Eardrum: On the Mad/Deaf Aesthetics of Latinx and Asian American Linguistic Identity

SONY CORÁÑEZ BOLTON
Amherst College

Decades ago, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa famously linked ethnic identity to linguistic identity to articulate an alternative space not beholden to the homogenizing effects of the Mexican and US nation states. She detailed the harrowing ways her speech—an “impure” Spanish or imperfect English—was maligned in her educational experiences as a child and college student. She suggested that she and others like her, the speakers of Chicano Spanish and its regional varieties, were “deslenguadas” and that they spoke “un español deficiente.”¹ Her writing famously used “deficiency” as an aesthetic strategy that inspired hybrid life writing across political, social, and linguistic domains to foreground “Spanglish” as its own kind of literary and artistic convention for borderlands subjects. In this essay, I seek to push this idea of deficiency further to consider the linguistic politics of disability as it pertains to the shared domains of mad/Deaf aesthetics. As the reader will see, the intersection of Deaf linguistic identity and madness with racial identities marked by the itinerancy of migration produces different angles of approach to the idea of a “deslenguada” identity.

Undone is a television series that first aired in 2019 and was created and written by Raphael Bob-Waksburg and Kate Purdy.² Directed by Dutch director Hisko Hulsing, the show artfully explores the “elastic nature of reality” through the perspective of its Mexican American Deaf and schizophrenic protagonist, Alma Winograd-Díaz, portrayed by Peruvian Canadian actress Rosa Salazar. Alma navigates a surreal transition from deaf to hearing while also experiencing the onset of symptoms consistent with schizophrenia. The show’s cinematography uses rotoscoping, an animation technique

in which live action footage is traced over frame by frame with artistic, lively, animation art, to produce and capture the polychromatic sensation of madness (as experienced by the character of Alma rather than as a generalization of schizophrenia) and the imaginative worlds which the mad protagonist passes through. As I will explore, schizophrenia as an aestheticized narrative technique structurally embeds encounters between racialized subjects whose experiences of being “deslenguada” or the object of “linguistic terrorism,” in Anzaldúa’s words, would normally not be explored in other forms of “sane” media. That is, Mad deafness becomes a threshold subjectivity in which political intimacies between Asian American and Latina/o experiences with linguistic normalization in the United States can be explored. And from this exploration, we can ideate possibilities that reject or greatly interrogate the substrata upon which such norms are articulated.

Undone’s plot centers around Alma investigating the events surrounding the death of her father, Jacob Winograd, when she was a child while also coming to understand the nature of her father’s neuroscientific research on schizophrenia. The show establishes Alma’s experience of her deafness and neurodivergence as bound up with an exploration of her racial mestiza identity. Moreover, the nonlinear and disjointed ways that she explores this identity expand the limited geographies through which Mexican migrant identity is typically understood. I argue that this opens comparative pathways that connect Latinx and Asian American migrant subjectivities across language, space, and time, demonstrating that disability enhances a comparative ethnic studies analysis materializing through what we could call a mad migrant imaginary.³ I take up Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s tremendous concept, placing it in explicit conversation with disability politics. However, these migrant identities and imaginaries intersect within the colonial space of the US-Mexico borderlands, displacing Indigenous peoples and thus conjoining migration with settler colonial processes.

While this essay is methodologically and primarily one of cultural analysis, because of the ways that biomedical and neuroscientific knowledge are treated in *Undone* it is relevant to gain at least a cursory understanding of the environmental and psychological risk factors that contribute to the diagnosis of schizophrenia. However, it is important to note that this is a medicalized and scientific understanding of this condition and thus represents only one framework to understand it. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* defines schizophrenia as existing on a spectrum of intensity and variety of psychotic disorders, all of which involve some combination of “delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking (speech), grossly disorganized or abnormal motor behavior (including catatonia), and negative symptoms.”⁴ In “Psychodynamic Psychiatry in Clinical Practice,” Dr. Glen O. Gabbard observes that schizophrenia was psychoanalytically described as a problem with *cathexis*;⁵ Sigmund Freud defined cathexis as the mental process by which subjects invested psychic or libidinal energy in objects—an investment that modern theorists would likely describe as attachment. When we form attachments to objects or people we invest psychic energy in them, fueling and cultivating that connection. It should be

noted that there are gender-based biases in this Freudian theory which almost wholly blamed the etiology of the condition on poor care from “schizophrenogenic mothers,” describing the most severe cases as withdrawing so deeply within the self to the point of delusion, thus crafting a highly individuated reality thoroughly detached from a shared reality with the rest of the world.⁶

Clinical and diagnostic discourses have understood the psychopathology of schizophrenia partially as an issue of *cathexis*, which describes the process by which we invest energy into objects or people. Schizophrenia in a Freudian model has been described as *decathexis*, or the withdrawal from social reality outside of the self and reinvestment into one’s own ego to the point of delusion.⁷ I revisit these clinical discourses from a cultural studies perspective. What I want to bring to these conversations is an understanding of the ways that the idea of *decathexis* amplifies the conversation from “proper and improper psychic object choice” to the narrative explication of racial immigrant identity as it enfolds through the prism of mental disability. Withdrawing into the self to the point of “delusion” is a process explored in *Undone* in ways that innovatively binds migrant subjectivity to others, i.e., telling the manifold stories and journeys of migration rather than relying on ethnically siloed representations. That is, rather than *decathexis* being a withdrawal into the self that is then lost to reality, it is presented as an opening up of migrant subjectivity intending the self toward the other. Instead of the propriety of object attachment, we see a *cathexis* that re-signifies the boundaries of migrant subjectivity in a multiperspectival orientation in relation to both South Asian and Mexican American migrant realities that don’t typically overlap. The show beautifully threads the parallel assimilatory realities of both Latinx and Asian American identities. The comparative move in the show transpires through the ways that disability identity navigates the politics of accents and colonial subjectification. This intersectionality comes through as a quality of storytelling. The narrative structure utilizing schizophrenia as an alternative storytelling technique that plays with time, linearity, and embraces unreason as a solid basis for the examination of reality, facilitates a connection between two migrant stories from vastly different geographies that connect in a moment of linguistic intimacy. Disability becomes the scaffold underwriting transnational multiracial affinities through language.

I disidentify with the epistemological shuffle of im/proper object choice and *cathexis* in psychiatric understandings of schizophrenia, in order to argue that it is impossible to understand an economy of disability and its managements disarticulated from the intersecting landscapes of race, immigration, and assimilation. *Undone* provides us a cultural archive in which we can ask and answer related questions about this interplay of factors arriving at what many scholars like Jina B. Kim, Sami Schalk, Eunjung Kim, and others have variously advanced as a “crip-of-color critique,” a “feminist of color disability studies,” or “postcolonial disability studies,” essentially articulating a racial analysis of disability that attends to the effects of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and transnational differences in the experience of impairment.⁸

Something somewhat contrary to the settler history of psychiatry emerges in *Undone*.⁹ Similarly evocative of the ways that settler society and the confinement of the “mad” intertwine, we are led to believe that Alma, who shares the symptomology of someone with schizophrenia, is actually coming into her own Indigenous shamanic powers. In this way, western science and the empirical substantiation of her mental capacities as extraordinary (rather than invariably debilitating) do work to indigenize Alma. That is, Indigenous subjects emerge at various moments of the story who provide the “empirical” evidence of the *true* nature of schizophrenia. It is established that Alma’s *mestizaje* as a Mexican American woman places her in an Indigenous genealogy of shamanic forbearers establishing it as almost a birthright. Such seemingly Indigenous ties in her “mestiza consciousness” are consistently established in her various interactions with Indigenous peoples in the southwestern United States.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the specious assumption of a mutually shared Indigenous spiritual worldview between Mexican Americans and Indigenous peoples as is foregrounded in the show requires intentional unpacking. In the section that follows I explore the experience of racialized deafness before elaborating a transnational vista of comparative racial analysis intertwining Latinx and Asian American migrant subjectivities. Both these analyses are attentive to the intersecting racialized politics of linguistic self-determination, accents, and psychonormalization.

Mad Deaf

The adult Alma that we first meet in the show possesses the ability to speak a seemingly unobstructed oral English that you might expect from the “normal” speech of the hearing. We noticeably observe that Alma is able to hear because of the use of a surgically installed cochlear implant, which we later learn in the show was acquired at the insistence of her mother, Camila Díaz. A conventional reading attending to the differential and asymmetrical effects of “audism,” or a form of ableism in which hearing people and culture are prioritized, would suggest that Camila is in the wrong for insisting that her daughter Alma conform to normality for her able-bodied comfort.¹¹ Literature in Deaf¹² studies and politics affirms that since there exists a robust system of American Sign Language that it is not advisable to surgically alter a deaf child’s body and instead they should learn to communicate in sign.¹³ Deafness in this perspective is benign and a valid human physical difference. Moreover, “correcting” it is an affront to Deaf culture. Parents should follow suit by accommodating their child’s difference rather than insisting upon conformity with able-bodied hearing culture, so the arguments go. We learn that Camila, however, wanted to be able to communicate with her daughter vocally and to make it easier for her to assimilate into American culture as the child of an immigrant. Is Camila prioritizing the needs, ease, and experiences of hearing people over those of her daughter who could explore her identity as a Deaf person in the Deaf community?

As a child enrolled in a Deaf school, Alma has found community and friendship. On her mother's recommendation, she is pulled out of the school and forced to say goodbye to her deaf friends. The scene of her departure from the school is quite moving and one gets the impression that Alma's mother, in her eagerness for her daughter to begin her "normal" life with her, neither sees the friendships that Alma has made with other deaf children to be worthy of cultivation nor that they would have even enriched her life in any meaningful way. Instead, they are perhaps representative of the difference that Alma must overcome and leave behind in order to assimilate into American culture as an effective citizen. These deaf characters never again appear in the show, which centers around hearing people frankly sidestepping the agency of the Deaf. It would have been innovative to hold hearing and Deaf identities more in relation to each other, particularly through the presence of consistent signing alongside oral speech. Instead, Alma is normalized and the show's linguistic landscape is largely governed by oral English. The racial dynamics between Spanish and English in the Southwest and the Winograd-Díaz family complicate this critical reading, however. We should not assume that Alma's characterization here is an uncomplicated ableist narrative transformation from deaf to hearing, from sick to well. It is not only oral English and ASL that influence the disability context of *Undone* but also the presence of Spanish.

In a particularly evocative moment, Jacob suggests that Camila learn ASL in order to adapt to her daughter's difference rather than enforce normalization through medical intervention. Camila retorts, "Why don't you learn Spanish?" This highlights that the logics of normalization and rehabilitation are not linear and are, instead, embedded in a complicated political ecology that asks that we consider the relationship of multiple languages, assimilation, citizenship, migration, and colonial history. It may also present a suggestive critique of the whiteness of Deaf culture which might not consider the additional negotiations Deaf people of color must undertake in balancing an ethnic heritage and their cultural attachments to deafness which may very well demand that they reject such a heritage if it means conforming to hearing culture. For a heritage speaker of Spanish who is deaf there may be many linguistic parallels that this intersectional identity can pinpoint between Spanish and ASL that might go unacknowledged otherwise. Certain aspects of a critique of audism may persist with regard to Alma's normalization, but one may ask the reasonable question of why *per se* should maintenance of ASL take precedence over Spanish?

While certain features of the critique of ableism and audism in Alma's assimilation into able-bodied society are compelling and should not be dismissed out of hand, it is important to point out that an insistence on prioritizing Deaf culture at the political expense of hearing *tout court* would fundamentally inhibit Alma's access to Spanish, clearly an important marker of linguistic identity and connection with Camila and their Mexican heritage. This is frankly not unlike English-only mandates in schools or workplaces directed at Spanish speakers. While the desire to affirm Deaf culture and identity in the United States vis-à-vis the dominant political language of English would

prompt a disidentification with the uncritical demands for conformity with the needs and comfort of hearing individuals, these demarcated lines of power are not as clear in ASL's relation to Spanish. For many intents and purposes, Deaf culture revolves around the maintenance and flourishing of ASL, which might ironically come at the expense of the linguistic and racial diversity of Deaf people of color. We may not want to measure the gains and preservation of a robust Deaf culture by unintentionally colluding with the draconian, culturally anti-Mexican metrics of an immigrant-free American society that ignores its colonial history of land theft from Mexico. In this sense, the history of Mexico-US relations ought to be a part of Deaf history.

Rather than Deaf identity functioning simply as a disability identity (which many Deaf individuals would find extremely problematic), the centrality of ASL renders Deaf politics much more like those of an ethno-linguistic minority. This is a crucial and often overlooked point with regards to Deaf identity which would call into question the lumping together of Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals into a monolithic disabled community. Deaf histories and studies are sometimes better understood not as "disability" histories but rather as the histories of a linguistic and cultural minority. Though language sovereignty and maintenance implicate similar notions of accessibility to public life that shape the experience of many minority languages, it would be problematic to assume that the linguistic politics of a full-fledged language like ASL with its own grammar, syntax, and sociolinguistic cultural dynamics would be reducible to the albeit complicated array of psychophysical variations associated with disability communities. In this sense, there is a lot more in common between ASL and Spanish in terms of the ways that access and citizenship adjoin ethnolinguistic minoritization. Adhering to a strict hearing-deaf binary would not be able to capture these symmetries between sign language and orally spoken minority languages. Within the US context, particularly around the border, precisely how much hearing privilege does Spanish have in relation to English? That is, in a context in which the speaking of Spanish can be a political liability for many, how much unfettered access to the claims of "normate" citizenship critiqued by disability advocates does it truly possess and garner?¹⁴ And in the maintenance and proliferation of Deaf culture to include someone like Alma, would it be too much to ask that she give up Spanish and this important cultural connection with her mother?

I would suggest that a systematic critique of hearing privilege in culture must consider various aspects of racial difference and respect for the ethno-linguistic identities of other racial minorities in any critical account of ableism. That is to say, that in a political environment like the United States in which English is the prestige language, Spanish has a subordinate position that presents certain obstacles that mirror those of ASL speakers' navigation of hearing society. While the relationship of Spanish to English is not reducible or equivalent to disability, there are certainly a series of disabling effects with regards to consistent access to education, services, citizenship, and other privileges. And while it is certainly the case that hearing culture is prioritized in *Undone* with the consistent presence of signing phased out narratively, Spanish is essentially

completely absent. Beyond a few stray words, Alma does not produce consistent meaning in Spanish like she does indeed do in ASL. In this sense (while narrow, it is significant), Spanish may have a subordinate position to ASL, thus speaking directly to the marginalized position of Camila (Alma's mother) in the entire linguistic arrangement of the Winograd-Díazes and the US-side of the borderlands generally. This places her insistence on Alma becoming hearing—so she can learn Spanish and assimilate into US culture in ways that she is prohibited from doing completely as a Mexican immigrant—in a much more holistic context that better elaborates her subjectivity as not completely capitulating to audist privilege.

In the next section I seek to further complicate the reading I present above by foregrounding the ways that a mad migrant cultural imaginary demonstrates how disability analysis profoundly enriches comparative race critique. *Undone* aids us in articulating lines of transnational affinity between Asian Americans and Latinx Americans with a particular regard for South Asian and Mexican American connection across geography, difference, and language.

Crippling Accents Across Geography: Asian American and Latinx Migrant Imaginaries

Undone provides a rich portrayal of immigration and assimilation and their intersection with disability. A remarkably important character in this regard is Alma's boyfriend, Sam, portrayed by South Asian American actor Siddharth Dhananjay. Sam, for his part, aids in Alma's investigation post-accident around the circumstances of her father's death and the contents of his controversial research program. Sam importantly bears witness to much of Alma's special abilities to intuit personal details about the lives of others that she shouldn't otherwise know. Much of the show is somewhat ambivalent about the veracity of Alma's preternatural perception abilities (are they "real" or a product of her psychosis?), but moments with Sam seem to lend credence to them. These abilities and temporal jumps into the past shed light on Sam's migrant subjectivity in a truly moving and beautiful portrait of Asian American and Latinx affinities.

We discover that Sam is a 1.5 generation immigrant and that he and his family are from Sri Lanka. We make this discovery through the unexpected source of Alma's schizophrenia. During one of her hallucinatory episodes in which she is seemingly traveling through time and space, she encounters a childhood version of Sam in his past before he arrived to the United States. He is playing with two of his friends and they all are speaking in South Asian accented English with some Tamil interspersed. Not realizing her presence, Alma witnesses the scene perplexed, perhaps noting how different this Sam is from the one that we have come to know. The present-day Sam speaks in an "accentless" (or should we say an Americanized accented) English—a "normal" prestige variety that you might find spoken in California, the Midwest, or parts of the Northeast. Sam's mother arrives, instructing him to say goodbye to his friends as they will be moving to the US. His friends are surprised as Sam did not share

any details of his departure, likely not wanting to come to terms with leaving. In a symmetrical scene to Alma leaving her deaf school, Sam painfully says goodbye to his childhood friends, thus leaving his home and everything he once knew. This symmetry between Sam with his accented English and Alma with her deafness draws a powerful connection between disability, migration, and language that is, from my vantage, exceptionally unique in cultural production.

Alma jumps forward in time to Sam as a new immigrant in elementary school. Two boys bully Sam mercilessly for his heavy accent. In a deeply profound and moving scene for its implications, Alma again jumps through time and encounters childhood Sam in his bedroom listening to playback of American-accented English. Crestfallen, he trains his mouth and tongue to mimic the sounds painstakingly and in a repetitious manner. We are treated to the profound lessons that many accented immigrant children learn while having to make the traumatic choice to eclipse differences that are viewed by US American society as deficiencies. While not as extreme as cochlear surgery to enhance hearing, Sam's use of recording technology and playback to modify the ways that his body naturally works in order to produce sounds that are unfamiliar to him is rather notable.

To use the oft-quoted phrase: he “tamed” his “wild tongue,” and this taming is mediated by and through a form of technological intervention.¹⁵ Alma realizes that Sam went through a similar process of linguistic assimilation into English. Although Sam already spoke English, it was the rehabilitation of his accent that marked his normalization, and it was his accent per se that marked his deficiency. Despite much of the sub-continent of Asia experiencing the centuries-long rule of British imperialism and the fact that it is one of the largest Anglophone populations in the world, US racialized animus against immigrants compounds harm in this instance by obfuscating this colonial history and the valid variety of English that emerges from it. Why should English be seen as the property of the inheritors of one British colony in North America over the descendants of another British colony in South Asia? An English that *is* Sam's by right as the descendent of the colonial violence that Anglophonized his nation is disarticulated and dispossessed from him. There are a number of things to remark upon here that challenge a hearing/Deaf and disability/able-bodied binary in making sense of migration, race, and linguistic colonialism. In short, this encounter across the geographies of accent manifests through a shared vulnerability produced through the racialized optics of who is deemed a proper, healthy Anglophone citizen-subject. Moreover, in this transnational encounter across accent, language, and experience, it is Alma's acquired ability to hear that allows us to take stock of the global effects of disablement, which unexpectedly connects the British colonial experience of Sri Lanka with the US colonial experience of the Mexican American borderlands through the prism of normative English and deviations from it.

The study of South Asian history, migration, and subjectivity has been a vital field of inquiry in understanding United States immigration history. While Asian American scholarship on the “coolie” global labor market in the nineteenth century

can often be synonymous with a history of the Chinese migrant diaspora, South Asian labor was also a constitutive part of this market that eventually shifted the racial maps of the Americas. There has also been recent work commenting on the intersecting subject positions of Latinx and South Asian Americans in the realm of sexuality and performance cultures. Kareem Khubchandani has argued that middle to upper class South Asian migrants to the United States often navigate their way through multinational racial capitalism through accented performance that actually accentuates their difference from white heteronormativity rather than inclusion into it.¹⁶ Oftentimes this has caused, as Khubchandani observes ethnographically, misrecognition and identity slippage between South Asian and Latinx subjects. He accounts for this using José Esteban Muñoz's notions of brown affect, feeling, and politics.¹⁷ I, like Khubchandani, am very interested in these slippages, interconnections, and unexpected affinities where "Brown" maps onto "Brown" in a multiracial American imaginary. This is not only an affective relation in the contemporary moment but also Mexican American and South Asian American intersections have deep-seated articulations connecting the migration histories from Mexico and South Asia to the United States. For instance, historian of race and sexuality Nayan Shah has demonstrated that migrants from India who would often intermarry with Mexican American women would both be marked as the "same race" by county clerks issuing marriage licenses and therefore these Indian-Mexican unions were not in violation of anti-miscegenation laws of the early twentieth century. Under US structures South Asians and Mexicans were legally considered, at least in the context of heterosexual marriage, not racially distinct.¹⁸ It is therefore intriguing that in contemporary culture like that of *Undone* we see cultural resonances of these historical affinities or, in juridical spheres, legal racial sameness.

I suggest that what Alma and Sam's encounter communicates to us is that colonialism transpires across a racialized sensorium articulating a kind of transnational "stranger intimacy," to use Shah's formulation, that challenges the balkanized tendencies that can structure engagements with immigration history. Moreover, it is Alma's subjectivity as a disabled woman of color that ensures a resistance to "alienation" and articulates a "desire for visceral solidarity."¹⁹ Had Alma not acquired the ability to hear, however, she would not have been able to understand Sam's struggles as she would not have been able to hear the different accents and the ways in which these shape different Englishes. Beyond reading about them, she would not have been able to sonically experience a very important transnational connection across the different accented geographies that compose US migration and assimilation. Neither could we comprehend the ways that colonial histories from other contact zones are exacerbated within what would initially be surmised as narrowly domestic matters of Americanization. In this instance, her ability to hear actually *enhances* her disability identity and *specifically* the affinities through which her Deafness can articulate across racial and linguistic difference. Indeed, the oral English from which Deaf culture and ASL might disidentify is not monolithic and has complex colonial legacies that subtend

it. Moreover, her ability to distinguish vocal accent and thus to empathize with Sam's emotional labor in mimetically adjusting his mouth and tongue actually allows her to place her Deaf identity (as she underwent similar processes of normalization into English) within a larger context that includes the realities of Asian American migration, exclusion, and assimilation. In this sense, the accented bridge connecting Sam and Alma's migrant subjectivities is facilitated by her ability to hear, while her ability to empathize with an equivalent experience of linguistic normalization is fundamentally rooted in her experience as a disabled woman of color.²⁰ Even as a hearing person and all the privileges that are afforded within a society that prioritizes and structures itself around this ability, someone like Alma still bears the disenfranchisements and disablements that constitute racialized experience.

In a powerful way that productively draws upon the cognitive transience of migration and schizophrenia, the encounter between Sam and Alma mirrors what Shah describes as "the paradox of stranger intimacy ... [which] offers a way of conceptualizing everyday encounters that can either invest in sustaining hierarchy or produce egalitarian social and political arenas, ethics, and associations."²¹ My point here is that the linguistic and migrant affinities that are movingly shared between Asian American and Latinx cultures to which Alma bears witness through one of her schizophrenic episodes would not have been able to materialize in the same ways without hearing. And yet an appreciation for the ways South Asian American and Mexican American identities intersect here would have been impoverished without Alma's experience as a Deaf person. Or rather, without an experience of *acquiring* hearing and the subsequent acquisition of oral language as it would be experienced as an immigrant woman of color with a disability, a vital cross-racial imaginary bridging colonialisms, language, and geography would not be able to emerge. So, it is not hearing *per se* that facilitates this appreciation of accents that I want to pinpoint. Instead, it is the experience of hearing through the lens of disablement and its management that inaugurates an encounter making meaning of the colonial politics of accent and linguistic normalization.

My intention is certainly *not* to place hearing ability over Deaf culture but to show the creative and important ways that Deaf and hearing cultures can meaningfully connect across difference and linguistic colonial frames of reference. This dialectical interplay between deafness and hearing fundamentally reorients our appreciation of the affects and connectivity between these seemingly very different migrant subjects represented by Alma and Sam. This is not to underplay the real divisions and oppressive dynamics that exist between hearing and Deaf experience. Nevertheless, the nuances of this *multiracial* encounter would not be captured and would otherwise be invisible in my view. However, the assumptions upon which the narrative disturbances to normative time and geography rest are on the figure of a schizophrenic deaf woman of color who is configured as a "supercrip" with preternatural abilities to time travel. These supercrip abilities similarly rest upon, recenter, and leave unquestioned the logics of *mestizaje* that can dip into settler colonial territory. Moreover, this supercrip

status into which Alma is positioned relies on a configuration of Indigenous identity and spirituality as magical plot devices. The “magical Indian” articulates the mestiza supercrip as capacitated settler citizen.

The Supercrip Mestiza: Mestizaje and Indigenous Temporality

In disability studies, the supercrip has been defined as a problematic trope in disability inspiration narratives—sometimes called “inspiration porn.” Likely deriving from the popular comic book hero Superman, the supercrip describes an individual who, despite their physical or mental deficiencies, is able to perform supernatural feats that even able-bodied people would find difficult. However, oftentimes people with disabilities are praised for simply performing everyday life activities, thus “reflecting low expectations about what a person with a disability can do.”²² Such excessive praise can be awkward as “[m]any individuals view their impairment as part of their identity and not something to overcome or defeat.”²³ While certain individual stories about surmounting the odds can on their own be inspiring, these stories understood within a context of ableism are problematic for a few reasons. First, they reduce the experience of disability to one of personal overcoming rather than telling the story of necessary structural changes that need to be achieved such that all people can thrive irrespective of bodily difference and capacity. Second, in these individual inspiration narratives, there is the logical implication that the “problem” of disability is one of willpower, grit, and determination and that the individual person is responsible for their own problems. If X disabled person can win a gold medal, then certainly other disabled people have no real cause for complaint. This accentuates the myth of liberal individualism foundational to the ideology of the citizen; the citizen is or should be radically self-sufficient and contribute mutual advantage to all. Ethnic studies scholars like Lisa Lowe, Grace Hong, and Mae Ngai demonstrate the logical fallacies of this kind of thinking as the US citizen’s abstract freedom and independence often rely on the material capacities of the alien non-citizen’s invisible labor power.²⁴ A third issue is that these narratives can tend to present disabled people as cultural or even supernatural oddities, distancing us from examining real-world conditions in favor of extravagant stories of fantastical people removed from our everyday lives. In reality, disabled people are all around us. They are family members, friends, or colleagues whose needs and material conditions for full-fledged participation and flourishing in society often go ignored. The popularity of the supercrip trope implies we’d rather consume fantastical, one-in-a-million kinds of cases rather than think about disabled people as a real community with particular needs.

These kinds of stories can play into racial fantasies, as we can see in *Undone*. Alma is a supercrip because she possesses supernatural abilities of perception and even time travel due to her schizophrenia. This trope not only rehashes some of the problems I elaborate above, but also problematically intersects with settler colonial discourses where the inspirational discourse mitigates the realities of disability

through a “magical” or spectacular mode that appropriates Indigenous beliefs as the raw material for narrative fantasy. In this case the “supercrip mestiza,” as I’ll name this archetype, relies on a “magical Indian” presence, which problematically plays on both Spanish and US settler colonial ideologies. This transpires through the confirmation of Alma’s powers by authenticating her heritage through an Indigenous interlocutor. Playing on the eugenic logics of mestizaje, this magical Indian essence is projected as being a part of Alma—her unquestioned, untroubled, and unproblematic inheritance. While many mestizas could certainly draw genealogical and even genetic connections to Indigenous patrimony, existing within the political field of Indianness as it has been constructed through settler regimes of dispossession, land expropriation, and delimited national sovereignty is quite different from being a Mexican American ethnic minority. As Josefina Saldaña-Portillo has argued, this Anzaldúan variety of mestiza consciousness treats indigeneity as a pastiche grab bag of Indianness to be conveniently fastened to one’s subjecthood without orienting oneself intentionally to contemporary issues of Indigenous elimination whose realities do not exist as abstract identity markers for Indigenous peoples like they do for the diffuse theoretically sophisticated mestiza able to shuttle between worlds.²⁵ Part of this is complicated and aggravated by mestizaje.

Mestizaje is a racial logic at play in many Latin American countries, including Mexico, that historically suggested that the national racial body would incorporate Indigenous people correcting their deficiencies by blending them with European blood. The mestizo was born and was seen as the “cosmic race”—a new kind of human person that eugenically left behind the negative traits of indigeneity while accentuating their positive attributes—a kind of human engineering only possible through racial mixture. Whereas places like Mexico predicated nation building and “better breeding” on the ostensible incorporation of Indians, the United States was much more known for segregationist policies that separated out people of color and discouraged miscegenation in order to preserve white purity.²⁶ Both kinds of racial states construct the Indian and the Indigenous as communities that are relegated to a past to be supplanted by incorporation and/or genocide. Mexican ethnologist José Vasconcelos in *La raza cósmica* heralded the mestizo as the utopian future of humanity, positioning the Indian as an antiquated past to be transcended through selective reproduction.²⁷ In this sense the mestizo is modern and avant-garde, while the Indian is barbaric, primitive, and savage. In the United States, the Indian is seen as a figure that is relegated to the colonial past and thus it is imagined that there are currently no Indigenous peoples in the contemporary moment. They do not “live on” as incorporated into the national body like in Mexico. However, tokenistic aspects of Indigenous culture are preserved in white American fantasy in the form of Indian sports iconography; the names of places and states; the US western; or militaristic nominal appropriations like the “Tomahawk” missile. So, either the Indian is preserved through a mixed-race body—i.e., the mestiza—or culturally preserved in tokenistic ways that enhance white dominance rather than pose questions about rightful land

ownership. In either instance, contemporary Indigenous people are disappeared and replaced as part of what scholars like J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, engaging with Patrick Wolfe, call the “structure” rather than the singular “event” of settler colonialism.²⁸ The future of the nation is mortgaged on the Indian being calcified in a past temporality denied coequality with the present.

Mestizaje functions alongside disability by drawing on these settler temporalities in Alma’s navigation of her cognitive difference. As I mentioned in the introductory section, Alma’s father worked as a neuroscientist researching the ways that schizophrenia was not a mental malady but was rather a supernatural power that allows those who experience it to perceive time differently. When Jacob returns to Alma as a vision or a ghost, he attempts to explain to his daughter that she has special abilities that indeed allow her to speak to him in the first place though he has passed. US-Mexico racial relations and the structure of settler colonialism inform and shape the father’s empirical efforts to diversify his understanding of schizophrenia. In montages of Jacob’s research, the show establishes that he uses Indigenous research subjects who undergo brain scans which he then compares to patients experiencing schizophrenia. It is revealed that Jacob dedicated his research program to studying the brain patterns of many Indigenous spiritual leaders who are understood in their respective cultural contexts as a kind of shaman or faith-healer who through a special sight are able to detect aspects of reality that are not readily captured by western empiricism. Surprisingly enough, though narratively expected, the “shamanic” brain pattern is virtually identical to a brain readout that would be consistent with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. The show postulates Indigenous cultures as celebratory of such individuals as healers and sages while western cultures medicate, marginalize, and institutionalize.²⁹ Alma is at the intersection of these competing realities of Western empiricism and Indigenous spirituality, allowing us to attribute to her a “mestiza consciousness” that must navigate the contradictory signs of the borderlands—a subject position first popularized by Gloria Anzaldúa.³⁰

Although it is possible to infer an affirmative reading of the ways that Indigenous knowledge can update Western biomedical science’s understanding of mental disabilities, it is also reasonable to question whether or not *Undone* succumbs to tokenization of Indigenous peoples, who are a “magical” plot device diversifying Western understandings of disability while neglecting Indigenous people themselves. Disability historian and Deaf studies scholar Susan Burch has demonstrated the ways that settler colonialism and institutionalization have a deeply entwined history in the biopolitical management of the marginalized. Drawing on the work of Jessica Cowing and her framework of “settler ableism,” Burch argues

Beliefs in superiority and practices of domination—inherent aspects of settler colonialism—regularly invoke ableist logics. Through the lenses of normality, fitness, and competency,

settlers have judged Indigenous people and nations. Historically, settlers have interpreted Native people's unwillingness or inability to conform to colonial ideals, such as individuality, heterosexuality, and materialism, as indications of inherent deficiencies or defects.³¹

That is, oftentimes psychiatric institutionalization of Indigenous people actively promoted and exacerbated settler colonialism and the assertion of settler power over Indigenous life and minds. Alongside historians like Burch, disability studies scholars such as Geoffrey Reaume, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, Anna Mollow, and Therí Alyce Pickens theorizing in the realm of cognitive disability have come to understand Western psychiatric categories as fabrications reflecting colonial or chauvinistic cultural values that are historically rooted in racism and are not transcendent normative ideals of the way a mind ought to be.³² Moreover, Western biomedical science would often diagnose symptoms and disabilities of Indigenous peoples that were likely the *result of colonialism* and Indigenous dispossession.³³ These often included symptoms of malaise, depression, hysteria, or substance abuse in the form of alcoholism.

Rather than focus on these historical realities, the use of Indigenous people to center the experiences of a mestiza woman to substantiate her as a “magical” character endowed with “powers” rather than shine a light on the deep-seated traumas that psychonormalization has had on the Indigenous psyche could be seen as opportunistic and politically lacking. This critique materializes as even more convincing when we consider the ways that Jacob's research often used native people as “props,” giving evidentiary support for his cutting-edge and progressive views on mental disability. The Indigenous people that appear in the show appear without much nuance, depth, and lack specificity. When they do appear, they are more so extensions of Alma's mestiza consciousness.

The connection is further substantiated later in Alma's life when she interacts with an Indigenous dancer who is performing a dance she calls “La Antigua” at an event in a hotel conference room. “La Antigua” is a dance that is meant to call upon the ancestors. Alma watches the performance depicted as an ancient dance, the sight of which is hazy with incense or smoke from the burning of copal, which is a resin from a tree of the same name Indigenous to Oaxaca, Mexico. Copal is often burned for ceremonial purposes. Alma enters a fugue state, suggesting that it rekindled something essential and primal deep within her. After the performance, one of the dancers is having a cigarette break outside, and Alma joins her. They converse about what the performance stirred in Alma, and the dancer asks: “And you're mestiza, right?” To which Alma replies that she is Mexican on her mother's side. The dancer rejoins, “[t]hen it's in your blood.” Here it can be inferred critically that a magical Indian appears before Alma to confirm her indigeneity. I suggest that the Indian is pushed into the past while the mestiza heralds a crisp future in which she complexly weaves

the different aspects of her identity together in ways that aren't equally ascribed to Indigenous peoples.

More in the vein of Native studies and Indigenous theory, Juliana Hu Pegues's formulation of "space-time colonialism" brilliantly weaves together the fields of Indigenous studies and Asian American studies in ways that are helpful for the cross-racial, -temporal, and -linguist affinities in *Undone*.³⁴ Indigenous studies has critiqued the ways that "settler time" has positioned Indigenous peoples outside of time either eliminated in the past or as nonmodern subjects in the present. Meanwhile Asian American studies has been more concerned, according to Hu Pegues, with the *spatial* (rather than specifically temporal) dynamics of racial capitalism and the ways that these have prompted mass migration, labor exploitation, and community formation in the United States. Hu Pegues encourages both fields to come together to think both time and space relationally, thereby linking "the forever foreign and the never modern."³⁵ Where I think Hu Pegues's analysis helps us in thinking about the multiple borderlands of US territory and colonized spaces is anchoring our understanding of settler colonialism vis-à-vis the production of the alien non-citizen in the form of either the racialized laborer, the assimilated/Americanized racial migrant, and even the temporally anachronistic Indian. Concurrent with work by Lyko Day, Jodi Byrd, and Lowe, Hu Pegues demonstrates the ways that the racialized migrant is instrumentalized as a tool of racial capital which helps to change space in order to facilitate its acquisition as white settler territory.³⁶ In doing so, it implants a temporal colonial logic that positions Indigenous people outside of the time of the state—relegated to the past, destroyed, or inauthentically modern and therefore unable to possess or steward land.

Conclusion

In this article I attempted to hone in on several interconnected issues in *Undone* to demonstrate the ways in which the show productively and innovatively threads together issues of disability and deafness; racial and immigrant identity; and cross-racial solidarity amongst Asian American and Latinx American subjects through the politics of language. This latter point is particularly important in that I suggest that a disability lens leads to and fundamentally enriches a comparative racial analysis, in this case bridging Native, Asian American, and Latinx studies. I contend that disability is fundamental for a comparative ethnic studies approach attentive to the formation of migrant subjectivities articulated in a relational web of racial-colonial histories. Similarly, how can disability studies better attend to the colonial frames of citizenship and settler colonialism in its vision for a more equitable society? These share particular, grounded material realities that prompt migrations with varied historical ontologies to settler colonies like the United States. At the same time, however, the relational experience of incapacitation, disablement, and debility forges vital connections that are not always reducible to specific historical contexts. Disability is one of the mechanisms through which racial subjects are deemed not worthy citizens, while

being a robust, fully-fledged citizen typically indicates a propertied relation to ability. The racialized ability of the citizen is often subsidized by the exploited capacities of the noncitizen alien. Rather than race and disability comprising separate political issues, it becomes evident the historical and linguistic registers through which capacity and identity intersect.

Notes

- ¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 38.
- ² Hisko Hulsing, dir., *Undone*, TV animation series, Season 1 (Amazon Prime Original, 2019), <https://www.amazon.com/Undone-Season-1/dp/B0875GVR67>. The content of this article will focus only on the first season given the complexity of its themes and richness of the narrative.
- ³ Alicia R. Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York University Press, 2008).
- ⁴ *Diagnostics and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 87.
- ⁵ Glen O. Gabbard, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry in Clinical Practice*, 2nd ed. (American Psychiatric Press, 1994), 173–74.
- ⁶ Gabbard, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, 173–74.
- ⁷ Gabbard, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, 174.
- ⁸ This field is becoming more and more expansive. See Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Duke University Press, 2017); Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim, “Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality,” in *Cambridge Companion to Disability and Literature*, ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 123–38; and Sami Schalk and Jina B. Kim, “Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies,” *SIGNS* 46, no. 1 (2020): 31–55, <https://doi.org/10.1086/709213>.
- ⁹ Susan Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and Beyond Institutions* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
- ¹⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*.
- ¹¹ Susan Burch and Alison Kafer, *Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Gallaudet University Press, 2010).

- ¹² Many Deaf individuals would opt for “Deaf” with a capital “D” which is meant to highlight ties to the ethno-linguistic identity of Deaf culture. It is helpful to think of this like a national demonym, e.g. “Japanese,” “Estonian,” “Deaf.” This distinguishes Deaf culture and language from the pathologized medical condition of “deaf” originating from the chauvinism of hearing culture. In this article I will opt to use “Deaf” when referring to this community but will maintain the use of “deaf” when referring to the physical difference of being hard-of-hearing. By the same token, this article uses “Mad” when referring to the neurodivergent communities that inhabit and challenge normative renditions of cognition and sanity; Mad thus serves more as a political designation rather than solely a psychological condition. The lowercase “mad” refers to cognitive variation that might meet more biomedical designations of insanity or neurodivergence rather than a politicized social identity.
- ¹³ Karen Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- ¹⁴ “Normate” is a term that specifically refers to able-bodied normativity. It was coined by Rosemary Garland-Thomson. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*.
- ¹⁶ Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (Triangulations, University of Michigan Press, 2020).
- ¹⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, Tavia Amolo Ochieng’ Nyongó, and Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson *The Sense of Brown* (Perverse Modernities, Duke University Press, 2020).
- ¹⁸ Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (American Crossroads: 31, University of California Press, 2011).
- ¹⁹ Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 55.
- ²⁰ Schalk and Kim, “Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies.”
- ²¹ Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 273.
- ²² Jeffrey J. Martin, “Supercrip Identity,” in *Handbook of Disability Sport and Exercise Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2017),
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190638054.003.0015>

- ²³ Martin, “Supercrip Identity.”
- ²⁴ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996); Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America, Princeton University Press, 2004).
- ²⁵ María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Latin America Otherwise, Duke University Press, 2003), 286.
- ²⁶ Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (American Crossroads 17, University of California Press, 2016).
- ²⁷ José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica: Misión de La Raza Iberoamericana, Argentina y Brasil* (Colección Austral, 802, Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1948).
- ²⁸ Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014); J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “‘A Structure, Not an Event’: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Lateral*, 5, no. 1 (2016): 7 PDF pages, <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>
- ²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Pantheon Books, 1965).
- ³⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.
- ³¹ Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and Beyond Institutions*, 10.
- ³² Geoffrey Reaume, “From the Perspectives of Mad People,” in *The Routledge History of Madness and Mental Health*, ed. Greg Eghigian, 277–96 (Routledge Histories, Routledge, 2017); La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Black Outdoors, Duke University Press, 2021); Anna Mollow, “‘When Black Women Start Going on Prozac’: Race, Gender, and Mental Illness in Meri Nana-Ama Danquah’s *Willow Weep for Me*,” *MELUS* 3, no. 67 (2006): 67–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/31.3.67>; Therí A. Pickens, *Black Madness : : Mad Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2019).
- ³³ Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and Beyond Institutions*.
- ³⁴ Juliana Hu Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska’s Indigenous and Asian Entanglements* (Critical Indigeneities, The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
- ³⁵ Hu Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism*, 13.

- ³⁶ See Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016); Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (First Peoples: New Directions Indigenous, University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015).

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