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DEAFNESS, CATHOLICISM, AND COLONIALISM IN MEXICO

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Publication Date

2024-07-24

DEAFNESS, CATHOLICISM, AND COLONIALISM IN MEXICO

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A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

November 10, 2023

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT

Disabilities affect the lives of people worldwide in the present and in the past. Hearing impairment is one rather common disability, yet it is largely misunderstood and stigmatized. In Mexico, hearing-impaired persons are still denied many rights able-bodied people possess. Contemporary views of deafness in Mexico have tended to emphasize the biomedical model, which recognizes deafness as an impairment and something that requires fixing. To this end, oralism, hearing aids, and cochlear implants are standard. Framed within disability studies, this research project is an effort to understand and challenge this ableist perspective that persists in Mexico today through an interdisciplinary study of Deaf Mexican history. One of the main goals for this paper is to demonstrate that ableism and the biomedical model of disability derive from a long history of Western, Christian thought which was imported to Mexico by the Spanish starting in the early 16th century during colonization. In the pages ahead, this paper explores influences of Catholicism and Spanish colonial structures in perpetuating ableism and the biomedical model of disability through close analysis of historical theological commentary and Indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican interpretations of deafness and disability.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research project would not have been possible without the incredible support and encouragement I received in both my personal life and from my academic advisors. I am very grateful to my faculty mentor Dr. Jennifer Scheper Hughes for always pushing me to dig deeper and having faith in my abilities as a budding historian. The University Honors Program also deserves recognition for their continual commitment to support and facilitate undergraduate research. Without the Honors Program and its resources, this project would not exist. Lastly, I am eternally thankful to my parents who largely inspired this project. Living as Deaf people in a world geared toward the hearing is not an easy task. I am constantly inspired by their strength and resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Disability studies is an emerging academic discipline that has produced much important knowledge over the past fifty years. However, there is still so much more to be done. While not always visible, disabilities exist in every part of the world, affecting the lives of millions of people. Disability studies seeks to analyze the meanings, consequences, and lived realities of disability to increase visibility and awareness. Much of the work already done has challenged existing perceptions and legislation concerning disability, which has gone to great lengths to improve the lived experiences of people contending with disabilities. This positive impact disability studies can have on people today highlights the importance of continued academic attention. This paper looks to contribute to the growing interdisciplinary discourse of disability in history and in religious studies with a specific focus on deafness.

Hearing impairment is one rather common disability, yet it is largely misunderstood and stigmatized. In many countries worldwide, including Mexico, hearing-impaired persons are still denied many rights able-bodied persons possess, such as obtaining a driver's license. I take a particular interest in studying Deaf history since both of my parents are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and I identify as a CODA, a child of Deaf adults. Growing up, I was exposed to American Deaf culture and I have witnessed my parents struggle daily to access a world meant for the hearing. Through my own life experiences as a hearing person with a foot in the Deaf world, deafness as a disability and Deaf culture in America are very familiar and known to me. This research project began when I started to question what the Deaf experience was like in other countries. I was particularly interested in deafness in Mexico because I have grown up in Southern California, just hours away from the Mexican border. I wondered, despite the proximity, if Deaf experiences in Mexico differed from Deaf experiences in the United States and, if so, how? My

expectation was that the experiences would differ, but that much would still be held in common due to the similar barriers Deaf people face.

The scope of this paper is shaped by my own curiosities and explores themes, ideas, and events that influenced my understanding of Mexican Deaf history. As the title of the paper “Deafness, Catholicism, and Colonialism in Mexico” indicates, I am interested in understanding how the Catholic religion and its institutions, as well as Spanish colonial structures, affected Deaf Indigenous Mexican lives. I also investigate the legacy of Spanish imperialism and thought on contemporary Deaf Mexicans, and how this may be connected to current legislation that denies deaf people the same access as hearing people. As I dug more into the sources, I realized how complex and understudied this history is. The Deaf experience in Mexico has not received sufficient scholarly attention prior to the founding of the Escuela Nacional para los Sordomudos (National School for the Deaf-Mutes) in 1869. Deafness in the early colonial period is essentially untouched. This is likely due to a lack of archival work surrounding deafness and disability. The depth of this research has certainly been limited by the lack of sources. Hopefully more attention is paid to these topics in the future as this work can potentially have positive impacts on Deaf people living in Mexico today.

For centuries, Deaf identity and meaning has been renegotiated and rethought. Contemporary views of deafness have tended to emphasize the biomedical model, which recognizes deafness as an impairment and something needing to be fixed. Oralism, hearing aids, and cochlear implants are standard. The biomedical, ableist approach we see today largely derives from a long history of Western thought. Throughout this paper, I investigate how deaf ableism has manifested in Mexico through its experience as a Spanish colony and interactions with Roman Catholicism.

THE METHOD

With this framework in mind, I dove into the sources eager to build my knowledge. My first task was to identify keywords that would aid in my search of both primary and secondary sources. When searching Spanish sources for relevant content, I looked for words such as “sordo” (deaf), “mudo” (mute), “sordomudo” (deaf-mute), “oír” (to hear), and “oreja” (ear). I assume that many of these keywords might appear obvious with the exception of “mudo” (mute) and “sordomudo” (deaf-mute). The inclusion of these words are a result of a tendency to perceive hearing-impaired persons as mutes because they usually do not acquire spoken language naturally. Thus, muteness is often connected with deafness and could signal discussions of hearing loss in the sources. This strategy of keywords allowed me to select sources that specifically mentioned deafness in either Spain or Mexico.

Since I also looked at larger themes of how disability was perceived in Catholic theologies and Spanish colonial structures, I searched for additional sources that were not connected specifically to deafness. The difficulty of investigating disability history, however, is the changeability of terminology. Our modern concept of “disability” did not exist a few centuries ago. Yet, there have always been people living with impairments. Dr. Mary Dunn identifies that there were many ways to refer to impairments in the past such as infirmity, affliction, monstrosity, and deformity.¹ While outdated terms, these words and others indicate the historical presence of those with impairments. In this paper, I will follow Dr. Mary Dunn by often referring to those we would consider having impairments or disabilities as those with “embodied difference” in an effort to be more inclusive.²

¹ Mary Dunn, *Where Paralytics Walk and the Blind See: Stories of Sickness and Disability at the Juncture of Worlds*, 1st ed., (United States: Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 5.

² In her book *Where Paralytics Walk and the Blind See: Stories of Sickness and Disability at the Juncture of Worlds*, Dr. Mary Dunn prefers the phrase “embodied difference” to challenge semantic boundaries and capture various experiences with differences.

VILLAGE OF CHÍCAN: INDIGENOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF DEAFNESS

During my search for Indigenous perspectives on deafness, I was quickly directed to the Yucatec Maya village of Chícan. This traditional village located southeast of Mérida has an unusually high occurrence of deafness in the population. In most parts of the world, deafness occurs in about 1 in 1,000 people whereas in Chícan the rate is approximately 30 in 1,000.³ Upon further research, I learned that every resident of the village, hearing and deaf alike, uses sign language. Rather than using LSM (Lengua de Señas Mexicana), the official sign language of Mexico, the residents use LSMY (Lengua de Señas Maya Yucateca), an Indigenous signed language.⁴ Chícan piqued my interest for its intersection between local Indigenous populations and the Mexican nation. Chícan presented itself as an ideal starting point to frame my research.

There have been a few significant research investigations done by other researchers who have also taken an interest in Chícan for its continued use of Indigenous sign language and its dynamic between hearing and deaf villagers. Dr. Robert E. Johnson, Chair of the Department of Linguistics and Interpreting at Gallaudet University, proposes a compelling argument based on his observations of the deaf in Chícan and in industrial societies like urban Mexico and the United States. Johnson argues that since Chícan identity lies first with the family and the village, “. . . deafness itself does not appear to have coalesced a strong ethnic group within the society of the village not to have become politicized in the form of solidarity.”⁵ This argument is intriguing to me because it is the beginning of an answer to a question that I held prior to conducting this research. I had wondered if hearing-impaired persons are more readily accepted in smaller, rural

³ J. Paige MacDougall, “Deafness and Sign Language in a Yucatec Maya Community: Emergent Ethnographic Practice,” *Annals of Anthropological Practice* 39, no. 2 (2015), p. 151.

⁴ Chícan is not the only Latin American community using Indigenous signed languages. Erich Fox Tree has identified a Mesoamerican sign language he calls “Meemul Tziji” that is widely used in Mayan communities in Guatemala.

⁵ Robert E. Johnson, “Sign Language, Culture & Community in a Traditional Yucatec Maya Village,” *Sign Language Studies*, no. 73 (1991), p. 469-470.

societies where the community relies on each other for survival. My own experience living in an industrial, capitalist nation and witnessing people with disabilities such as my parents face discrimination has shown me that urban societies might not be as accepting of those with differences.

Like Dr. Robert E. Johnson, sociocultural anthropologist Dr. J. Paige MacDougall observed a non-discriminatory attitude towards the deaf residents of Chícan while carrying out her doctoral field research there from 2007 to 2009. During this period, MacDougall observed that the majority spoken language was Yucatec Mayan, but all 612 members of the community also signed LSMY (Lengua de Señas Maya Yucateca).⁶ Out of the 612 villagers, 18 were considered deaf. This is a surprising instance where the language of the minority group is used by the entire community. In a society where identity and belonging is defined by relationships to family and the community as a whole, the community of Chícan promotes equal access to social participation. As one community leader explained, “. . . everyone uses sign language because deaf individuals operate in the community in the same way as hearing people.”⁷ As MacDougall and Johnson observed, Chícan residents do not perceive hearing loss negatively.

Unfortunately, the majority of people worldwide do not share the same perspective on hearing impairment. Hearing loss is widely understood as the lack of something, as something needing to be remedied. While conducting her field research in Chícan, Dr. J. Paige MacDougall encountered several individuals and groups who visited the community attempting to “fix” the deaf problem. MacDougall documents groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and the non-profit Mexican Association for Persons with Auditory Disability who tried to introduce LSM (Lengua de Señas Mexicana) to the deaf Chícan residents.⁸ LSM, the official sign language of Mexico,

⁶ MacDougall, p. 151.

⁷ MacDougall, p. 152.

⁸ MacDougall, p. 159.

was presented as the superior sign language and thus undermined the Chícan usage of Indigenous LSMY. Also, in 2007, the Mexican government provided hearing aids to all deaf Chícan residents but did not provide instructions on how to use them.⁹ While these people were motivated by good intentions, their help may have been counterproductive and even harmful. By asking deaf Chícan residents to conform to the national Deaf Mexican identity, the Indigenous Deaf identity is disregarded and considered inferior. Interestingly, MacDougall likens this process to European colonialists imposing their foreign ways onto Indigenous peoples.¹⁰

The importance of the village of Chícan is that it offers an alternative, Indigenous, non-ableist perspective of deafness that demonstrates the success and benefits of the social model of disability. The social model is one that practices accomodation and seeks to change society, not the disabled, so that those with disabilities can participate. In Chícan, for instance, every resident can communicate using sign language regardless if they are hearing or deaf. On the other hand, the biomedical model advocates for assimilation of the differently abled into societies structured around “normal” bodies. Concerning deafness, the biomedical model promotes oralism, hearing aids, and cochlear implants so that Deaf people can interact with hearing people. By providing hearing aids without proper instruction to deaf residents of Chícan, the Mexican government emphasizes the biomedical model over the social model of disability. Thus, national perspectives of deafness are in conflict with local, Indigenous perspectives. In trying to understand why ableism and the biomedical model of disability is so pervasive in Western and Western-influenced nations today, I turned to the historical commentary on deafness and disability. Much of this commentary was found in Christian theological contexts, which I investigate in the next section.

⁹ MacDougall, p. 161.

¹⁰ MacDougall, p. 159.

EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT ON DEAFNESS AND DISABILITY

Before modern science explained the causes of hearing loss, deafness was understood through religion and philosophy. The religion I am most concerned with for the purposes of this paper is Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism, as this was the predominant religion introduced by Spanish colonizers to Latin America. There is a surprising amount of Christian theological commentary on congenital disability,¹¹ and deafness especially. It was thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo and Saint Thomas Aquinas whose powerful ideas influenced Western discussions of embodied difference for centuries.

Saint Augustine of Hippo is perhaps the most pervasive theological commentator on deafness and disability. This 4th century Christian theologian and philosopher theorized that the presence of congenital disabilities such as blindness and deafness were the result of original sin passed down by the parents.¹² Saint Augustine, like many others, considered deafness a form of punishment for sinful human nature. These thinkers considered deafness a negative occurrence and that God would not allow such a trait in His creations unless He was punishing them for something. These ideas were supported by Biblical evidence, such as Exodus 4:11. In this excerpt, “The Lord said to [Moses]. ‘Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?’”¹³ Also noteworthy are instances of the deaf being “healed” in the Bible. In Mark 7, Jesus encounters a deaf and mute man in Decapolis. Jesus heals this man so that he can hear and talk. Is it not significant that it is the son of God who restores hearing to the deaf? The existence of people

¹¹ Congenital disability refers to structural or functional anomalies that are present at birth.

¹² Jenni Kuuliala and Reima Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages,” In *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, 1st ed., (Milton: Routledge, 2020), p. 181.

¹³ Exodus 4:11

with congenital disabilities was evidence for people like Saint Augustine that humans were sinful creatures and only divine intervention could cure them.

Interestingly, Saint Augustine also argued that the ability to hear is a prerequisite for religious understanding and salvation.¹⁴ It is unclear whether he meant that faith comes from the literal hearing of the word of God, or if he simply conflated hearing with understanding. Since at least Aristotle's time, there was a preconception that to be deaf is to be dumb. Most people are born hearing so the conventional method of learning is through hearing spoken language. Spoken language is usually not naturally acquired by hearing-impaired persons so different forms of learning and communication are required. This is why signed languages are common in Deaf communities. However, because deaf persons do not acquire language and understanding with the same ease hearing people do, many consider deaf people dumb even when there is no cognitive impairment. The phrase "deaf and dumb" is still tossed around even today. Either way, through the pervasiveness of this thinking, deaf persons were considered inferior to hearing people in their understanding of Christian faith, and were essentially doomed to damnation. Many deaf people were likely denied access to religion as a result of this conviction and because of communication obstacles between the hearing and the deaf.

However, there were a series of Christian theologians and philosophers in medieval Europe who did think about congenital disability (which includes deafness) beyond explanations of sin. The most notable of these were Albert the Great and his pupil Saint Thomas Aquinas. Albert the Great, a German bishop, philosopher, and scientist, took a methodological approach to congenital disability that was influenced by Aristotle's natural philosophy. (It is important to note that although Aristotle predates Christianity, his ideas and the philosophical tradition inspired by him continued to influence intellectuals for centuries after.) Like Aristotle, Albert

¹⁴ Kuuliala and Välimäki, p. 181.

the Great believed that congenital disabilities were due to variations in the biological process.¹⁵ For the most part, Saint Thomas Aquinas agreed with his teacher that there were natural causes for embodied differences. However, Aquinas, more than Albert the Great, also believed there may be some connection between sin and the congenital disabilities he (and many others) called monstrosities (*monstra*).¹⁶ While Albert the Great and Saint Thomas Aquinas thought about disability beyond sin, their ideas of biological variations are still ableist. For something to be considered a “variation,” there first has to be a concept of what is normal or standard. For these thinkers, able-bodied people are considered nature’s normal, and even its goal. Thus, disability was defined in contrast to able-bodiedness and, to an extent, was considered to be nature’s failure to achieve normativity.

For contemporary readers with the benefit of hindsight and a modern understanding of disability, the historical theological commentary on embodied difference is riddled with harmful, ableist language. Yet, these thinkers and their ideas still pervade Western academia today. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas college in New York is named for the medieval philosopher and theologian in recognition of his brilliant mind and influential ideas. While Saint Thomas Aquinas and others were indeed gifted intellectuals and in many ways contributed positively, it is still important to recognize that many of their ideas are flawed and constrained by the times in which they lived. Whether thinking about disability through the lens of religion or biology, these medieval intellectuals promoted perspectives that in no small part contributed to the legacy of ableism in Western societies. In the next section, I investigate how this legacy manifested in the

¹⁵ Gloria Frost, “Medieval Aristotelians on Congenital Disabilities and Their Early Modern Critics,” In *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, 1st ed., (Milton: Routledge, 2020), p. 64.

¹⁶ Scott M. Williams, “Introduction,” In *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, 1st ed., (Milton: Routledge, 2020), p. 8.

“New World” through European colonization and Catholic missionary practice, bringing our discussion closer to contemporary Mexico.

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF EMBODIED DIFFERENCE IN NEW WORLD MISSIONARY PRACTICE

In “New World” missionary encounters, the experiences of able-bodied people are often emphasized over experiences of people with embodied differences. Herein lies one of the main difficulties in studying disability history. Those who live with embodied differences often do not get to tell their own stories. This denial of historical agency makes it near impossible for a disability historian to study the lived experiences of embodied difference. So, instead of theorizing what the lived realities were for the differently abled in places like colonial Mexico, it is much more productive to critically examine what disability meant to those who could write about it, such as the missionaries.

For many Christians, including missionaries who traveled to the “New World,” the presence of disabilities signified a divine demonstration, and so the differently abled were viewed as “fulfilling an extrinsically ordained divine purpose.”¹⁷ Dr. Mary Dunn, a professor of theological studies at Saint Louis University who takes a special interest in early modern Catholic Canada under French rule, argues that, for the Jesuits of New France, sickness and disability were made meaningful and acted as the “handmaids of mission.”¹⁸ Taking care of the sick and disabled Indigenous allowed the Jesuits to gain converts, practice acts of charity, and cultivate their Christian virtue.¹⁹ Sick and disabled people were perceived as opportunities for missionaries to gain spiritual capital. While this perspective on disability is arguably better than

¹⁷ Frost, p. 53.

¹⁸ Dunn, p. 30.

¹⁹ Dunn, p. 46.

others because it includes genuine care for those with embodied differences, it is still problematic and ableist. Those who are sick or disabled are set apart from the rest of the population because their difference is recognized and emphasized. This perspective also denies the sick and disabled historical agency as they are relegated to the care of others. In “New World,” encounters with sickness and disability, the historical narrative largely focuses on the missionary figure rather than on the lived experiences of those with embodied differences.

Some parallels between Dunn’s research in colonial French Canada can be seen in Latin America under Spanish colonial rule. Like the Jesuits of New France, the Spanish missionaries were also very preoccupied with Indigenous bodies and souls. While sources detailing Spanish missionary interactions specifically with disability are limited, much can still be learned about embodied difference through sources connected to sickness and epidemics, of which there are plenty. For the Spanish Catholic missionaries, the conservation of Indigenous lives was at the forefront of their evangelizing mission. This idea of *conservación de Indios*²⁰ was widespread throughout colonial Mexico in particular. There are many accounts of Spanish missionaries who were genuinely concerned with saving Indigenous bodies and souls and even experienced distress at perceived failures to do so. After the devastation of the *cocoliztli* epidemic in 1581, for example, Bishop Medina Rincón wrote the Spanish king asking to be absolved of his duties as bishop in Mexico.²¹ The extreme nature of this request illustrates Medina’s anguish over failures to save Indigenous lives and bodies through medicine and physical care. Many of Medina’s contemporaries felt the same. Like in French Canada, tending to the physical needs of the *Indios* allowed Spanish missionaries to cultivate Christian virtues and a sense of “spiritual

²⁰ In Spanish sources, Indigenous Americans are often referred to as *Indios*.

²¹ Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021), p. 61.

and social jurisdiction over Indigenous bodies and lives.”²² Failure to save Indigenous bodies deeply impacted and discouraged many Spanish missionaries.

As indicated previously, the major drawback to researching disability (deafness in particular) in colonial Mexico is the lack of accessible historical sources that reference it, again highlighting the need for further research and archival work of this period. To circumvent the absence of sources but still touch on issues relevant to this paper, I have looked to Dr. Mary Dunn’s groundbreaking research on embodied difference in colonial French Canada for reference. While comparative analysis comes with caveats, the similarities between colonial Canada and colonial Mexico are striking. Both territories were colonized by Western Catholic European powers and run mostly by missionaries of Catholic religious orders who migrated to the “New World.” Dunn’s claim that sickness and disability were “handmaids of mission” in French Canada may be more relevant to colonial Mexico than we currently recognize. Again, more research is needed on this topic.

JUAN PABLO BONET AND DEAF EDUCATION IN THE 17TH CENTURY

While missionaries were contending with sickness and disability in the “New World,” intellectuals were grappling with it back in Europe. Spain in particular saw a surge in interest in deafness and deaf education during the 16th and 17th centuries. In the mid-1500s, the success of Benedictine monk Pedro Ponce de León in teaching his deaf pupil Don Francisco who was born “dumb by nature” to speak “by the ingenuity of man”²³ spread through intellectual and religious circles.²⁴ Teaching the deaf how to speak had previously been thought to be an impossible feat.

²² Hughes, p. 57.

²³ Again, the able-bodied person is emphasized over the differently-abled person. The “genius” of Ponce de León is given more attention than the accomplishment of Don Francisco learning spoken language.

²⁴ A. Farrar, “Historical Introduction,” in *Simplification of the Letters of the Alphabet and Method of Teaching Deaf-Mutes to Speak*. By Juan Pablo Bonet, (1890): p. 24.

Ponce de Leon's unprecedented success motivated other Spaniards like himself to research and implement methods to teach speech to deaf individuals. One of these individuals was Juan Pablo Bonet, who is considered a pioneer of deaf education. His 1620 treatise *Reducción de las letras y arte para enseñar a hablar a los mudos*²⁵ included a manual alphabet²⁶ that could be used to communicate with the deaf through signs. This is perhaps the first documented manual alphabet for the purpose of deaf education. In this work dedicated to the Spanish king Philip III, Bonet identified himself as "Confidential Servant of His Majesty, Attendant on the Person of the Captain-General of Artillery of Spain, and Secretary to the Constable of Castile."²⁷ To this resume we can also add Spanish priest. Juan Pablo Bonet was an interesting, well-educated, and well-traveled individual. As a Spanish Catholic priest concentrating on deafness during the 17th century when Spanish colonial presence in Mexico was still strong and education was still mostly accessed in religious settings, the ideas presented in Bonet's book are hugely relevant to the themes explored in this paper.

The bulk of Bonet's treatise reads like an instruction manual. The first part is mostly concerned with individual letter breakdown in which Bonet describes in depth the sound, tongue placement, and breath technique required for correct pronunciation. Bonet includes recommendations for instructors, such as using a leather tongue model that can be used to demonstrate the correct position without having to invasively manipulate the deaf-mute's tongue. (In the original Spanish, Bonet referred to the deaf as "mudos," or mutes. In the 1890 English translation of Bonet's treatise that I used alongside the 1620 original, Hugh Neville Dixon translates "mudos" as "deaf-mutes." For sake of clarity, I have opted to use "deaf-mutes" here.)

²⁵ Translation: "Simplification of the Letters of the Alphabet and Method of Teaching Deaf-Mutes to Speak"

²⁶ It is not believed that Bonet created this manual alphabet. He was probably just the first to publish it for widespread use. This indicates sign language was being used in Spain to some extent at this time, another potential area of continued research.

²⁷ Title page of the 1890 translated version by Hugh Neville Dixon.

Bonet also emphasized that for deaf-mutes to master speech and language, constant practice and correction by hearing people was necessary. An additional recommendation was that in homes where there is a deaf-mute, all those who can read should be familiar with the manual alphabet in order to converse with the deaf-mute.²⁸ This refreshing sense of accommodation appears to place the successful learning of the deaf person as the main concern. Consistency and accuracy were key to the success of Bonet's method of teaching the deaf to speak.

Beyond getting the deaf to speak, Juan Pablo Bonet was also concerned with genuine understanding and intelligible communication. Bonet's treatise contains several sections dedicated to methods of teaching the deaf proper grammar and structure of the Spanish language. In one section, Bonet emphasizes the importance of correctly teaching abstract nouns so that the deaf can fully understand matters such as religion. For the deaf to truly know God and His teachings, "así es necesario que se ponga en esto el mayor cuyadado de esta enseñanza."²⁹ For Bonet, the deaf were not dumb. He recognized their capacity to learn. In certain sections of his book, Bonet even lauds the abilities of deaf-mutes, especially that of attention to detail and lip-reading abilities.³⁰

In the prologue to *Reducción de las letras y arte para enseñar a hablar a los mudos*, Juan Pablo Bonet expresses his hope that his method of teaching the deaf will be of use to many others, including foreigners since deafness and muteness is present everywhere.³¹ Bonet's treatise was indeed used in Western deaf education models beyond the Spanish mainland, which

²⁸ Bonet, Juan Pablo, Hugh Neville Dixon, and Abraham Farrar. *Simplification of the Letters of the Alphabet and Method of Teaching Deaf-Mutes to Speak*, (1890): p. 154.

²⁹ Translation by Hugh Neville Dixon: "it is therefore necessary to take the utmost pains with this part of [the deaf-mute's] education."

³⁰ Bonet, Juan Pablo, Hugh Neville Dixon, and Abraham Farrar. *Simplification of the Letters of the Alphabet and Method of Teaching Deaf-Mutes to Speak*, (1890): p. 201.

³¹ In the original Spanish this reads "pues es el daño común a todos," which roughly translates to "since [deafness/muteness] is the hurt or harm common to all." Interestingly, in the 1890 English translation done by Hugh Neville Dixon, this part was translated as deafness being the evil common to all.

is why many consider him a pioneer of deaf education today. However, like other intellectuals we have discussed throughout the course of this paper, Bonet's ideas require a critical examination. While much praise should be awarded to Juan Pablo Bonet for recognizing the abilities of deaf people and making great strides in promoting deaf education, many of his ideas still exhibit ableist themes and promote the biomedical model of disability. For instance, the second half of Bonet's treatise is dedicated entirely to how to teach deaf-mutes how to speak, which is known as oralism. Oralism is aimed at getting deaf people to communicate with hearing people through spoken language, which inherently prefers spoken language over signed languages. Oralism is overwhelmingly dominant in Western deaf education today. Many Deaf people, including my parents, attend speech therapy sessions in their youth. Speech therapy is often extremely frustrating and can be traumatic. Oralism is evidence of a prevailing biomedical model of disability since it seeks to assimilate Deaf people into a majority hearing society. This conflicts with the situation in the Mexican village of Chícan mentioned at the beginning of this paper. There, Deaf individuals are incorporated into the community and the hearing residents accommodate them through widespread use of sign language. While groundbreaking in ways, Juan Pablo Bonet's treatise reflects ableist rhetoric still present in Western deaf education. With this historical context in place, I now turn in earnest to Deaf experiences in contemporary Mexico.

CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN DEAF EXPERIENCES

Much of the research done on deafness in Mexico rarely predates the founding of the *Escuela Nacional para Sordomudos* (National School for Deaf-Mutes, or ENS) in Mexico City in 1869, again emphasizing the need for more work with earlier sources. ENS is important not

just because it was the first school for the Deaf in Mexico, but also because it was established by Mexican President Benito Juárez. Juárez is a widely admired Mexican national hero known for being the first native Mesoamerican to rise to the presidency and for his program of reforms. He is especially loved by Deaf Mexicans because of the special interest he took in ensuring their education.³²

While ENS was an important early institution of deaf education, it has since closed and other deaf education programs offered are severely lacking. Claire L. Ramsey, a professor of Education at UC San Diego, is one of the foremost researchers of deafness and deaf education in Mexico. Ramsey focuses on contemporary Mexico and her work highlights many of the inequalities and injustices Deaf Mexicans face today. Her book *The People Who Spell: The Last Students from the Mexican National School for the Deaf* offers an incredible look at lived experiences of *Sordos Mexicanos* today, many of whom attended ENS before it closed down in 1972. Many of these “ENS signers” remember the school fondly as it being the first place they were exposed to LSM (Mexican Sign Language) and for providing them with an opportunity at education.³³ Yet, since the school’s closure, not much has been done to improve deaf education in Mexico.³⁴ Deaf education in Mexico has remained rather stagnant. As a result, many have looked to America for better models. Interestingly, many Deaf Mexicans admire American Deaf culture and its opportunities for Deaf people especially in terms of advanced education (i.e. Gallaudet University). Many Deaf Mexicans or families with young hearing-impaired children often opt to immigrate to the United States to take advantage of American deaf education, which is perceived as superior and more developed. While not perfect, the United States does have

³² Claire L. Ramsey, *The People Who Spell: The Last Students from the Mexican National School for the Deaf*, (Gallaudet University Press, 2011), p. 55.

³³ Ramsey, p. 9.

³⁴ I would like to state here that I do recognize that public education in Mexico is generally underdeveloped when compared to countries like the United States. It is not just hearing-impaired Mexicans who do not have easy access to public education. Yet, the point still stands.

more resources available for deaf education. The struggle for hearing-impaired Mexicans to access education is one of the main issues faced in contemporary Mexico.

Another identifying feature of contemporary deafness in Mexico that may indicate intersections with the Western biomedical model is that of miracle cures. In a book chapter called “*Niños Milagrizados: Language Attitudes, Deaf Education, and Miracle Cures in Mexico*,” Claire L. Ramsey and José Antonio Noriega identify three miracle cures for deafness in the Tijuana/San Diego region. These cures are known as the key, the swallow, and the parakeet and are usually sought after by parents of deaf children. The key cure involves a priest inserting a key into a deaf child’s mouth and twisting it to “unlock” the child’s voice.³⁵ The swallow and parakeet cures are similar to each other in that they both involve a bird sacrifice so that the bird’s song (voice) could be transferred to the deaf child.³⁶ These miracle cures are ableist in the sense that they promote oralism and the importance of spoken language. These cures can even be seen as perpetuating the biomedical model of disability since they attempt to restore the deaf child to society. And, since one of the miracle cures (the key) requires the presence of a priest, these ableist perspectives are once again tied to Christianity which was introduced to Mexico through colonial structures.

The contemporary experiences of deafness in urban Mexico differ greatly from the Deaf Indigenous experience of Chícan examined at the very beginning of this paper. Deaf education aimed and miracle cures aimed at oralism in urban Mexico have no place in rural, Indigenous Chícan where deaf residents are incorporated and accepted entirely into society. While the urban Mexico that promotes a national Deaf Mexican identity aligns more closely with the biomedical

³⁵ Claire Ramsey and José Antonio Noriega, “*Niños Milagrizados: Language Attitudes, Deaf Education, and Miracle Cures in Mexico*,” in *Bilingualism & Identity in Deaf Communities*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2000), p. 130.

³⁶ Ramsey and Noriega, p. 132-133.

model of disability, rural, Indigenous Mexico practices accommodation with the social model and preserves Indigenous Deaf identity.

CONCLUSIONS

In Mexico today, Deaf people are not allowed to obtain a driver's license nor are they able to buy a home without the assistance of a hearing person.³⁷ This legal discrimination against hearing-impaired people is evidence of prevailing ableism in Mexico. And, as we have examined in depth throughout this paper, this is largely due to a long, complicated history of interaction with imported Western, Christian thought. The ideas presented in this paper are intended to introduce a Mexican Deaf history that extends back to the colonial period. However, this research is in no way complete and I invite other disability historians to delve deeper into the themes and ideas discussed here.

³⁷ Anthony Depalma, "In Mexico, Deaf Find the Future Lies North," *The New York Times*, July 26, 1997.

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