

H 31 Pre-Doctoral Research Grant Summary  
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**“Nurses, Indigenous Authorities, and Rural Health in Oaxaca, Mexico, 1935-1970”**

In the late 1950s, Mexican officials recruited Indigenous women to complete twelve weeks of nursing training in effort to modernize rural health across the nation. Indigenous nurses could speak Spanish and Indigenous languages, mobilize local social networks, and enter spaces typically segregated by gender. Federal officials identified those skills as crucial for expanding its development projects in the late 1950s and 1960s. Grounded in the ethnically diverse and overwhelmingly Indigenous state of Oaxaca, my research examines how Indigenous nurses worked within and outside the roles that the state intended for them as they facilitated the expansion of rural health, a principal demand that drove the Mexican Revolution only decades earlier.

My dissertation examines the impact of nursing work on Mixtec, Mazatec, and Zapotec Indigenous communities in post-revolutionary Mexico. I trace a shift in nurses’ expected roles from enforcers and interpreters of health and sanitation measures in the 1940s to promoters of development in the 1960s. Visiting nurses struggled to adapt to highly localized norms of communication and behavior across rural Mixtec and Zapotec communities in the 1940s. They encouraged Indigenous municipal authorities to support rural health initiatives with communal labor and, in doing so, they contradicted federal officials’ desire to abolish communal labor structures entirely. In the second half of my dissertation, I argue that Mixtec and Mazatec nurses rejected, engaged with, and selectively implemented the development initiatives they were expected to promote. In my final chapter, I utilize Mixtec language sources to show that state-sponsored health education relied on imperfect and incomplete translations of Indigenous healing knowledge and notions of health and disease.

With the support of an H-31 Grant, I consulted the papers of Lini M. de Vries in the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University in December 2021. Lini de Vries was a Dutch public health nurse who expanded health education in rural Oaxaca during the 1950s. This collection houses her personal correspondence, professional reports, notes, photographs, and draft writings. For my project, it proved most useful for the photographs, curricular materials, public health reports, and professional correspondence from de Vries’ work as a nursing instructor at the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO) and public health nurse with the Comisión del Papaloapan (Papaloapan Commission). I am still analyzing these materials, but they have been helpful for writing the fifth chapter of my dissertation on translation and health education.

I have used de Vries’ notes and reports to analyze the content covered when she taught nursing students, rural teachers, and empiric nurses and midwives, or those who learned through experience and practice. These programmatic materials offer insight into the education and training that Indigenous nurses received during the 1960s, which is missing from university, municipal, and state archives in Oaxaca. At the university, most of de Vries’ students came from Indigenous communities in the Sierra Norte, and with the Papaloapan Commission, she taught public health to teachers, empiric nurses, and midwives in Mixe, Mazatec, Zapotec, and Mixtec (Indigenous) communities. In contrast to scholarship that over-emphasizes conflict among Indigenous healers and university-trained doctors, these materials confirm that empiric nurses and midwives learned from and collaborated with doctors and public health nurses like de Vries

as they traveled across rural Oaxaca. A close examination of de Vries' work unveils broader processes linked health education and its impact on community-state relations. I appreciate the AAHN's support of my dissertation research, especially following the pandemic closure of archives in Mexico. With this grant, I was able to finish my dissertation research and will writing in time for graduation in May 2023.