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## Emilia Pérez and the colonisation of culture

*The French musical film “Emilia Pérez” has garnered international acclaim but sparked outrage in Mexico due to its stereotypical and insensitive portrayal of the country and its people. Kevin Zapata Celestino calls out the film’s Eurocentric perspective, which fails to understand the country’s reality and trivialises an utterly sensitive topic, such as violence, for Mexican people. He argues that the controversy around the movie highlights the ongoing problem of colonial narratives in the media, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and deepening cultural divides between the Global North and South.*

The french musical movie “Emilia Pérez” by director Jacques Audiard made history at the Golden Globes and broke a record for the **most Oscar nominations** by a foreign-language movie. At the same time, it caused outrage among many Mexicans. How can a film that received overwhelming international recognition cause so much rage in a country to the point that people have organized to sabotage its screenings?

Supporters of Emilia Pérez argue that the backlash stems from systemic transphobia in Mexican society, as the movie’s plot revolves around a transgender gangster escaping from the mob. Certainly, systemic hate against trans and queer individuals is a tragic reality in Mexico. However, I would argue that the heart of the matter is not transphobia, but the film’s poor depiction of Mexican culture, abuzz with stereotypes and offensive representations.

### An unfair portrayal of the South

This is not the first time Mexico has been portrayed in such a way. The **“Mexican filter”** is a well-documented phenomenon widely used in American films and television series to present Mexico and other Global South contexts in a biased manner—arid, hostile, and underdeveloped (as seen, for example, in the TV series “Breaking Bad”). While such representations are problematic in themselves, what has struck a particularly sensitive nerve in Mexican society with “Emilia Pérez” is

how it trivialises violence from organised crime. The film – arguably unintentionally – mocks the crisis of enforced disappearances of people (**more than 80,000**) who have fallen victim to criminal organisations and the so-called “war on drugs” that started in 2006. Victims are depicted as mere ornaments in the film, devoid of empathy for the harsh reality endured by thousands of Mexicans.

Additionally, the film’s lack of Mexican representation (featuring only one Mexican actor in the main cast) and its poor research about the country have resulted in bizarre dialogues and scenes that supposedly depict Mexican folklore but instead feel like a parody – at some point of the movie, it is suggested that Mexicans smell like spicy food, mezcal and guacamole. While the film may have artistic merit, at its core, it is filtered through a Eurocentric lens. It is a movie about Mexico, filmed outside Mexico and without Mexicans. Unsurprisingly, audiences have severely condemned the film as insensitive and even racist.

What Emilia Pérez (and, frankly, much of the film industry) thus reveals is the deep embeddedness of colonisation in cultural narratives. According to anthropologists **Patrícia Ferraz and Livio Sansone**, Western storytelling is strongly linked to colonality, resulting in societies in the Global South being continuously depicted as inferior to their Northern counterparts.

Moreover, the film’s underlying premise that a violent person magically transforms into a good and pure-hearted individual simply by transitioning into a trans woman has raised many eyebrows. This reductionist narrative simplifies gender identity into a moral dichotomy, ignoring the complexities of both human nature and trans experiences. Not only does this infantilise trans individuals, but it also reinforces misleading myths about gender that ultimately hurt the LGBTQ+ community. **Queer literature**, in this regard, points out how the hegemonic way of thinking prompts a binary discourse on gender identity development that erodes the complex reality many queer and trans individuals endure.

While art should serve as a space for critical discussion and help foster an empathetic understanding of different cultures, Emilia Pérez, unfortunately, does the exact opposite. By exploiting common stereotypes and clichés around Mexico, it reinforces the legacy of the colonial mindset. This misrepresentation of Global South societies reinforces social stigmas and disparities, creating barriers for people in these contexts to reclaim their own narratives. At worst, it creates a sense of antipathy that prevents mutual respect as it happened with Mexican’s “retaliation” with the production of “**Johanne Sacreblu**” – a low-budget social media clip that went viral in all of Latin America which is explicitly offensive against French people.

### **What can we learn?**

The case of Emilia Pérez is a good opportunity to critically reflect on colonality and decoloniality. As suggested by renowned scholar **Aníbal Quijano**, decoloniality serves not only to expose how colonial arrangements can persist even past colonial times but also as an emancipatory project for the recognition of alternative existences. Thus, it is essential to challenge the enduring presence of

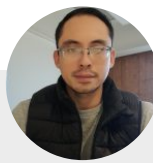
Eurocentrism and hegemonic discourses in art and culture. As long as the film industry and hegemonic media in the Global North persist in portraying entire societies and groups of the Global South in such an outrageous way. Certainly, resistance, distrust and antipathy will continue dividing both.

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*The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Featured image credit: Emilia Pérez red carpet premiere at Cannes 2024. Via [Wikicommons](#). This file is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported](#) license.

### About the author



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Kevin Zapata Celestino has a PhD in Social Policy from the University of Edinburgh and is currently an LSE Fellow at the Department of Social Policy. Kevin's work focuses on international social and public policy, with a focus on Mexico and Latin America.

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