

# Universal white male perspective is destructive, says Mexican Tzotzil filmmaker

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A still from Mamá by Xun Sero. Image supplied

A man has made a documentary about his relationship with his mother. We were at a media conference when he first told me about it. He said his documentary was a way to start conversations about the silenced issue of violence within families and homes and the struggles women face when raising children on their own.

But, Xun Sero is a Tzotzil person from Mexico's southern Chiapas state, and he knows that when many people watch the documentary they will make it about violence within Tzotzil communities, rather than allowing it to speak to broader social issues.

Mamá premiered in Mexico last week, and at the Canadian Hot Docs festival last month. It shows Sero and his aunties talking to his mother about how she had to run away from home as a child to avoid being married off, and about how his biological, but not-present father raped her.

"Discourse about universality has always come from white men. They are ones who have the universal passport so they can call themselves citizens of the world," he tells me in an interview. This passport, he explains, gives them easier access to the arts world. But what "makes them think they know all the different cultures?" he asks.

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From the novels and art we learn about in school, through to movies and documentaries, only white men have permission to talk about universal themes. Sero argues that they believe that everything belongs to them, that they "know everything", while original peoples apparently are limited to talking about their own identities.

"There are people who have so much power that they think they have the right to talk for everyone, to impose a single idea of universality on everyone," Sero says.

## The damage of universality

Angela Davis, speaking to a gathering of Ferguson protesters in 2015, made a similar argument. "Any critical engagement with racism requires us to understand the tyranny of the universal. For most of our history the very category 'human' has not embraced Black people and people of colour. Its abstractness has been coloured white and gendered male," she [said](#).

Ideologies of objectivity, universality, balance and neutrality go beyond the arts to the news, sports, work, education, museums, and most of our lives. Ultimately, they are a defensive code inscribed by the gate keepers of power in order to maintain their unfair *status quo*. Anything that comes from the perspective of an oppressed group is dismissed as "political" or "niche" or "unobjective".

And of course, filmmakers, writers, artists, and musicians who are sidelined into non-universal categories, into our class, race, gender, disability, and sexual identities, are paid much less. We are meant to be grateful for having made it vaguely close to readers and viewers, because most of our community members will not.

In the US in 2020, [74.6%](#) of movie directors were white, and the figure has hovered at the 80–90% mark over the past decade. In 2017, in the US, of the hundreds of feature films that made at least US\$250,000, 12% of directors were women, and 10% were Black or people of colour. Here in Mexico, despite white people making up just 5% of the population, [98%](#) of the main actors on television are white.

Sero described the creation of arts categories as being like a big cake. Those with power "decide the flavour of the cake, the size that goes to each person. And later they say to us, 'You can join in and we'll give you a piece of cake.' But they don't ask us if we want cake or what flavour we prefer. Instead, they say, 'This is my cake and I'll give you a little bit'".

Categories, Sero stressed, should be created by the people who make them up. But instead, they are created in the same way public policy is, from the top down, he argued.

"It's like, they recognise what art is, but then they say, 'Over there is Indigenous art'. Basically, looking down on it. So sometimes I do prefer to be called a filmmaker, rather than an Indigenous filmmaker. Because, then I am on the same level as everyone else," he said, adding, "But if you really have to label what I am, do it based on my culture. My culture is Tzotzil, and I am a descendant of the Mayans. Those are my roots. It's important to state that and to challenge this idea that the Mayans have disappeared and only exist in museums."

Similarly in literature, there is a women's literature category, but there is no man's category. When women like myself write fiction, we often feature women as some of the main characters, and that is enough to meet the criteria of women's fiction.

Men, however, often write books with no women bar the trophy female model that the violent and racist hero man wins after defeating all evil (see James Bond for what I mean). So, men's literature does exist, as do men's documentaries, imperialist films, US-centric films and books, and upper-class content and more.

But these categories of the privileged pass as universal. Perhaps it's time to start calling them out.

The art theory I was taught at school, for example, was actually just white-European and men's art, with a bit of Georgia O'Keeffe for "diversity".



Xun Sero filming at a march. Photo: Tamara Pearson

## Stereotypes about Mexicans

Films with decent levels of funding that have been made about Mexico, tend to feature drug smuggling and violence. In Mexican television, such criminals are often romanticised, as is domestic violence in Mexican telenovels. But there's a reason for that.

Money, resources, and time are necessary to produce full-length films. There is a commercial risk in producing content that won't gain traction. So while some people in Mexico do dare to make different kinds of films, "People tend to copy, or well, they use the word 'adapt' ... films that do sell well, and that usually means Hollywood," Sero says.

"I don't want to make films about drug smuggling, films where there isn't any hope," he adds. "I am more interested in topics where the people are resisting, including resisting the drug smugglers, or mining companies."

But also, "The drug smuggler is always brown, or the murderer or hired killer is brown and that creates a stereotype about what Mexico is."

Sero also addressed the "Indigenous" label, arguing that for him, it has been associated with racism, discrimination, and fear. "Fear that if you are in some place ... and something is lost, you will be blamed for it. The first reaction people have is to blame the Indigenous person. So sorry, but for me, 'Indigenous' doesn't mean native to a place. In my experience, it means robber, killer, wretched person, ungrateful, idiot ... that's what it means."

At the same time, there is a lot of inequality within Mexico. Sero described a filmmaking world where those with formal training feel and act superior to those without, and where there is a lot of competition and "putting on an appearance". That is something that is easier for people with economic or social privileges to do.

In southern Mexico, "we are 10 or 15 years behind in technology, and that stops people giving workshops or training in such regions."

US-based filmmaker, Michael Premo [noted](#): "Very often in the documentary space, I'm the only person of colour ... If you don't come into this world with a certain amount of social capital it can be very hard to access the gates of power."

When asked what a better filmmaking world would be like, Sero says he'd like documentaries to be as valued as books are, to be seen as serious sources of information.

"My goal with my documentaries is to transform [society] ... not just to ensure more visibility [of oppressed groups]," he says.

[See the trailer, with subtitles in English [here](#). Tamara Pearson is a journalist in Puebla, Mexico, and author of [The Butterfly Prison](#). Her writings can be found at her [blog](#). Twitter: @pajaritaroja.]

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