

Canadian filmmaker Michelle Latimer targeted over alleged lack of Indigenous credentials

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A controversy that has developed in recent weeks surrounding Canadian actor and director Michelle Latimer exposes the destructive, pernicious logic of identity and racial politics.

Having achieved notable success for her work in film and television, much of which has centred on Indigenous issues, Latimer has been turned into a virtual pariah over questions about her ethnic background detailed in a CBC article published in December.

The suffering and oppression of Indigenous peoples are being leveraged here by a minority within that population to assert the exclusive right to artistic and cultural expressions about that reality so as to secure the accompanying resources and professional opportunities.

The ongoing controversy arose out of a months-long investigation by the CBC into Latimer's lineage resulting in an incendiary December 17 article by reporters Ka'nhehsí:io Deer and Jorge Barrera ("Award-winning filmmaker Michelle Latimer's Indigenous identity under scrutiny").

Following the publication of what were described as inconclusive findings, Latimer replied in an email, "I sincerely apologize for naming the community of Kitigan Zibi [a First Nations reserve 180 miles northwest of Montreal] publicly before I had done all of the necessary work to understand the [family] connection."

Latimer thereupon resigned as director and showrunner (leading producer) of the popular CBC television series *Trickster*, a coming-of-age supernatural thriller drama, "in the hopes," she said, "that the show would continue."

Latimer's action came two days after producers Danis Goulet, who is Indigenous, and Tony Elliott, stepped down. Goulet explained, "I feel a responsibility to uphold the values that I am dedicated to," while Elliott asserted on Twitter that as "a settler, it's not my place to comment on concerns raised by the Indigenous film and television community." The fallout continued last week with the announcement that the second season of *Trickster*, already in production, had been cancelled altogether.

As noted, the headline of the December CBC report struck a deceptively innocuous tone, suggesting that Latimer's identity was merely "facing scrutiny after she claimed to be of 'Algonquin, Métis [a person of mixed Indigenous and Euro-American ancestry] and French heritage, from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg (Maniwaki), Que.'" in a 2014 National Film Board news release.

In fact, the lengthy piece made clear the matter had been the subject of an extensive investigation encompassing historical data, census records, genealogical reports and numerous interviews with native

elders, artists and authorities.

The insistence flowing from such a campaign that only those who can prove their "blood" ancestry should be allowed to speak on or promote a given culture must be challenged and opposed as reactionary at its root.

Many of the current attacks have a clearly selfish and self-serving element. They come in a number of instances from those who argue that opportunities and space that should be accorded to them on the basis of their ethnicity are being "appropriated" by interlopers such as Latimer.

Among other punishments, the actor-director has been forced to return a number of awards and funding, including \$1,000 in cash and \$40,000 in production services from the prestigious DOC Institute.

Latimer rose to prominence for her role in the television series *Paradise Falls* nearly 20 years ago and subsequently transitioned from acting to work behind the camera. Until her fall from grace, Latimer had been widely recognized for her work around injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples, including murdered and missing Indigenous women. In 2017, she directed the documentary series *Rise* that dealt with Indigenous resistance across North America against mining companies and other oppressive institutions.

To oppose exclusion, or a quota system, based on race is not to deny the distinct culture of any oppressed minority, or its right to demand the redress of injustice. However, the campaign against Latimer raises important questions of artistic freedom in a society of blended and overlapping cultures that includes artists, young people and workers whose experiences and backgrounds span a spectrum, but who are defined more importantly by social class than by race or nationality.

It appears likely that Latimer's claims regarding her ancestry were made in good faith and to the best of her knowledge. As she explained in emailed responses to the CBC, her claim rested on the "oral history" of her maternal grandfather.

According to an expert in such matters consulted by the CBC, Kim TallBear, professor of Native studies at the University of Alberta, Indigenous identity claims based on a vague ancestral link and confusion over race and Indigenous identity are very common in Canada and the US. "I don't think they [the claimants] are wilfully lying. They don't understand what they don't know."

The investigation into Latimer's ancestry appears to have intensified following the premiere of her innovative and award-winning documentary film *Inconvenient Indian* at the Toronto International Film Festival in September of last year, where it won both the People's Choice Documentary Award and the Amplify

Voices Award for best Canadian feature film. The response has been swift and harsh.

The film was withdrawn from the 2021 Sundance Film Festival where it was set to have its international premiere and was pulled from distribution by the National Film Board of Canada, while Latimer's Indigenous identity is being investigated.

Inconvenient Indian is based on Thomas King's 2012 "narrative" history, which he subtitled "A Curious Account of Native People in North America." The author, featured as a narrator in the film, has remained silent throughout the controversy, although he once quipped. "I claim to be a male, but in fact only one of my parents was male."

Disturbing, though hardly surprising in the current climate, the piling on has occurred without restraint or much opposition. A noted Elder from the community of Kitigan Zibi, Claudette Comma, for example, denounced Latimer: "It's an insult and it's an exploitation and an appropriation of our culture, identity, community." Filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril claimed, "She's thrown years of work and beautiful, thoughtful craft down the tubes because she didn't have the nerve to be honest about her heritage." Author, actor and former colleague of Latimer's, Gitz Derange, commented that "We want to see ourselves succeed. When this happens it robs us of that. They just take our stories and they've always done that."

Indigenous playwright Drew Hayden Taylor argued that Latimer has appropriated funding that was specifically allotted to the development of Indigenous talent and enterprise. As Taylor writes, "In the big musical-chairs game of funding, there are precious few chairs available already." Jesse Wente, an Anishinaabe writer, broadcaster, producer and an erstwhile supporter of Latimer, indicated he had previously asked her "to do the work necessary with her family and her community to seek the truth."

Eden Robinson, the author of the trilogy of novels on which the *Trickster* series is based, has been among Latimer's harshest critics. After the CBC article appeared, Robinson wrote on Facebook that she was "so embarrassed" and "felt like such a dupe."

All of this ignores and obscures Michelle Latimer's actual contributions and achievements. As commentator Garry Lamourie noted regarding *Trickster*, "There were no quality issues about how Latimer directed, co-wrote or co-produced the program, no issues about her level of ability in portraying indigenous themes and apparently no question that Latimer was so good in this job that she seems to have been irreplaceable."

This sort of career and character assassination over racial credentials has disgraceful precedents such as the shunning of noted Canadian author Joseph Boyden. In 2016, Boyden ran afoul of Indigenous writers, activists and politicians who raised similar objections over his heritage and condemned him for accepting prizes, speaking fees and "taking up space" meant for others. As a result and despite his important role in exposing widespread government abuse against Indigenous peoples, Boyden has been forced to spend much of his time defending himself against what amounts to ongoing discrimination.

The public shaming of Michelle Latimer takes place within a definite ideological atmosphere fostered by the Canadian ruling elite. A preoccupation with racial and gender identity has been central in the Trudeau government's efforts to divert public attention from social polarization, the danger of war and the devastating pandemic, while portraying itself as a progressive alternative to its rivals.

The CBC in particular has provided a "left" cover for this effort with its Indigenous content and programming. Defending the

cancellation of *Trickster*, CBC officials issued a statement boasting they currently had eight projects on Indigenous stories in development. This even as the Trudeau government that funds it remains locked in protracted legal battles against Indigenous peoples over land claims and compensation for historic crimes.

Trudeau was elected on a promise to implement all of the 94 "calls to action" from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, released in December 2015, on the reactionary residential school system, aimed at "civilizing" Indigenous children, but its actions reveal a cynical hypocrisy. The Trudeau government like its predecessors continues to fight reconciliation in the courts—to the tune of \$347 million since 2015.

At the same time, the media circus around Latimer serves to divert attention from the disastrous and disproportionate impact of the global pandemic on Indigenous communities, with coronavirus case numbers recorded at more than 40 percent above the national average.

The spread of this disease compounds the already dire situation for many living on reserves who have limited access to health care, housing or social services or even potable water. First Nations overdose deaths nearly doubled in British Columbia in 2020 and while Indigenous people represent roughly 5 percent of the population, they accounted for 16 percent of opioid deaths nationally last year, reversing a trend downward prior to the pandemic. Indigenous peoples make up more than 30 percent of those in Canada's federal prisons, which are especially prone to the spread of infection. Indigenous women make up 44 percent of the female prison population, with rates in some provincial jails as high as 80 percent. Among First Nations people aged 10 to 44, suicide remains the number one cause of death, responsible for almost 40 percent of mortalities.

In the face of these catastrophic numbers, what possible purpose is served by the scapegoating of Latimer?

At the end of January, Latimer launched a libel lawsuit against the CBC arguing on Twitter, "They reported inaccurately about my ancestry and created a false narrative about my character and my lineage... The CBC was aware of the questions and concerns I raised about the integrity of the research they used to inform their reporting, as well as the manner in which they approached the story."

This and similar issues have seen First Nation filmmakers and producers pushing for legislation in Canada to penalize those who pretend to be Indigenous in order to access grants, awards and jobs intended for Indigenous people. Haida Nation filmmaker Tamara Bell has in fact proposed the Indigenous Identity Act for just such a purpose. "I would like to see Michelle Latimer to take responsibility for her positions, and I would like her to take responsibility for what she has done to our community."

The suggestion that Latimer is guilty of some immense crime is reactionary nonsense. Canadian capitalism is entirely and criminally responsible for the deplorable conditions of the Indigenous people. The critical question is unifying every section of the working class against the profit system and its consequences.



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