

Case Study

Chapter 8

Leroy Fox is a Canadian filmmaker who has received critical acclaim for his work. His films focus on Indigenous topics, issues and characters. He has received funding as an Indigenous artist. During an interview, Fox is unable to authenticate his Indigenous ancestry or answer questions about the culture and history of the people related to the identity he's claimed.

Elders within the community criticize Fox for his lack of knowledge and accuse him of misrepresentation and cultural appropriation of Indigenous work. They do not criticize his films since they portray Indigenous issues and characters with sensitivity and respect.

- 1. Should Leroy Fox need to prove his cultural identity? Why or why not?**
- 2. Why do sociologists consider race to be problematic?**
- 3. Why are Elders concerned about Leroy Fox as an artist?**
- 4. Why is cultural appropriation a concern?**
- 5. How should Leroy Fox handle these criticisms?**

Sample Answers:

1. Answers will vary, so this will be a good debate topic to discuss as a class. Some might state that Fox should not need to prove his identity because this is problematic and could resemble colonial efforts to identify “other” races based on appearance and/or genetics. There is a troubled history of these efforts i.e. Eugenics, the loss of status of Indigenous people (in particular Indigenous women) in Canada as a result of ‘gatekeeping’ by the federal government on Indigeneity, etc. Others might suggest that Fox does need to prove his cultural identity in order to claim membership to a particular culture, and in order to qualify for funding that is designated for people within this cultural group. Both perspectives are valid. If Fox is claiming membership of a particular nation, it would be up to that First Nation to validate his membership.
2. Sociologists consider race to be a social category with no basis in science. In fact, there are few genetic differences between the “races.” The history of race construction is problematic because it originated in the eighteenth century when European colonial powers were trying to assert their superiority over other groups of people and justify exploitation and oppression of these people through human rights violations and atrocities such as slavery and genocide.
3. The Elders are concerned that he is identifying as a member of a particular community, without being in relationship with that community. This may result in Fox mischaracterizing the community or taking opportunities that might otherwise have gone to community members.
4. Artists from marginalized cultures are often underrepresented in media. It is important that they have equal opportunities in terms of funding, publicity, and recognition. Their artwork can and should represent their cultures. Those from other cultures wouldn’t necessarily understand these cultures and should therefore not appropriate their art

style or subjects. This is why cultural appropriation is a concern in a society that focuses on white privilege, as discussed in the text.

5. Leroy Fox could ignore these criticisms, or he could meet with the elders to address their concerns, or he could give another interview in which he discusses the issue and why he was not able to answer some of the questions and why he will, or will not, provide more details about his cultural background. If Leroy Fox has been falsely claiming membership of a First Nation or Indigenous community, he may need to undergo a process of reconciliation with that community or nation and listen to what the members think would be appropriate.