

How a Single Anonymous Twitter Account Caused an 'Indigenized' Canadian University to Unravel

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In a recently published *Quillette* article, Political Science professor Frances Widdowson described the difficulties that Canadian university administrators face when they seek to “Indigenize” their schools. Everyone in academia seems to agree that Indigenization is an urgent task, but the particulars are typically ill-defined.

As Widdowson reports in a newly published book, these efforts at Indigenization (sometimes referred to as “decolonization”) comprise a combination of symbolic gestures, ramped-up affirmative-action programs, mandatory anti-racism courses, and demands that Indigenous folklore be accorded epistemological stature on par with science. At Concordia University in Montreal, for instance, a dozen researchers are collaborating on a project called “Decolonizing Light,” whose aim is to “investigate the reproduction of colonialism in and through physics and higher physics education.” Our scientific understanding of light as constituting electromagnetic radiation perceptible to the human eye, these scholars explain, is the historical product of “a white male dominated field [i.e. physics] disconnected from social life and geopolitical history. [Its] narrative both constitutes and reproduces inequality.”



Widdowson (who isn’t Indigenous) has been criticized for casting doubt on the value of Indigenization. Yet her new book, which she intended as a catalyst for debate about a subject that many scholars are afraid to critique, also contains several essays that support Indigenization initiatives. Moreover, Widdowson’s target has never been Indigenous people or scholarship *per se*. Since gaining widespread notice in 2008, Widdowson’s critiques have been directed at what she originally called “the Aboriginal industry”—the white lawyers, consultants, academics, activists, and politicians who profit as go-betweens and “allies” in the service of Indigenous groups, with varying degrees of sincerity.

In *Indigenizing the University*, Widdowson describes several unsettling public spectacles at her own campus, in which administrators showcased Indigenous consciousness-raising sessions about supposedly sentient rocks and shape-shifting animals. It is

unlikely that this material will help Indigenous students gain career-track jobs in growth fields such as engineering or health care. The main beneficiaries are more likely to be privileged administrators who burnish their bona fides by filling alumni magazines and email blasts with Indigenous photo-ops.

But those PR dividends come at a cost: Insofar as Indigenization now signifies a system process of compulsory ideological programming among academics, it has led to dissonance in the way universities define themselves. Traditionally, scholars have been free to defy their own administrations in all sorts of ways—from their opposition to campus military recruiters during the Vietnam era, to divestment campaigns targeting oil in the 1990s, to the lengthy anti-racism strikes at Haverford College and Bryn Mawr in late 2020 (during which many teachers filled “teach-in” seminars with fiery denunciations of their own deans). But when it comes to Indigenization, Canadian universities have made it clear that there are to be no conscientious objectors. The result is that, as the following case study shows, even tiny, symbolic acts of ideological resistance can spark wholesale institutional dysfunction.

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Amos Key, Jr.

In 2018, Brock University approved an Institutional Strategic Plan whose listed “key priorities” included “reconciliation” with Indigenous peoples, and “decolonization” of the institution. Following a lengthy search process, the St. Catharines, Ontario school selected its inaugural hire for the newly created post of Vice-Provost, Indigenous Engagement: Amos Key, a highly accomplished teacher, linguist, and cultural preservationist who advocated passionately for members of nearby Indigenous communities. Unfortunately, for reasons no one at Brock will explain to the public, Key lasted only a year in the job. (In response to my questions, the school’s communications manager would say only that Key “let us know he was leaving Brock University, and we wished him well.” Key didn’t respond to an emailed invitation for comment.)

His replacement, announced with considerable fanfare, was the much younger Robyn Bourgeois, a Women's and Gender Studies professor from Canada's west coast who has Cree ancestry but describes herself as mixed race. She self-identifies as an academic "badass," and describes her specialty as "Indigenous Feminisms." Bourgeois's 2014 PhD thesis celebrated Indigenous "Warrior Women," while critiquing Indigenous women whose political strategies "replicate dominant discourses and strategies and [thereby] secur[e] the colonial Canadian state's authority."

Indeed, she and her predecessor are very much a study in contrasts, and so serve to show how reductionist that single label, "Indigenous," can be. While Key is an old-school educator whose experience is rooted in the culture of nearby First Nations communities, and who has spent much of his career doing the quiet work of preserving endangered Indigenous languages through the creation of dictionaries and digital archives, Bourgeois communicates fluently in the sweeping idioms of woke academic anti-racism (which, somewhat ironically, remain completely incomprehensible to the grass-roots Indigenous communities that are ultimately supposed to benefit from educational reform).

Compared to other Canadian schools, Brock was late to the game when it came to Indigenousization. It's a middle-tier university with about 20,000 students, only about two percent of whom are Indigenous. In 2020, the school attracted criticism from progressives when it was revealed that one of its chemistry professors, Tomáš Hudlický, had written an article critical of efforts to diversify science—which was then matched by criticism from conservatives when Brock officials eagerly joined in Hudlický's public shaming. With her self-described rocker attitude, tattoos, and *Huffington Post* bylines, Bourgeois was seen as someone who could help improve the school's brand in a hurry. The university's official publications began regularly documenting her activism, while Brock's provost publicly praised Bourgeois as "inspirational."

In a 2020 article, published in a Brock-funded outlet around the time Key abruptly left, Bourgeois made the provocative argument that the April 18-19, 2020 mass murders committed by Gabriel Wortman in Enfield, Nova Scotia exemplified what she called "male terrorism," "hegemonic masculinity," "white masculinity," and "patriarchal domination." The controversial article was promoted by Brock's official social-media channels and widely circulated. A few months later, after she'd officially started her job as vice-provost, Brock University's magazine featured her again, this time showcasing her claim that "gender-based violence" is "a deadly pandemic akin to COVID-19." It was plain that Brock considered her a rising star.

Earlier in this essay, I noted the dissonance that otherwise free-thinking Canadian scholars are facing now that they've been conscripted into what is effectively a political project aimed at enhancing the status of a specific Canadian ethnic category. But as Bourgeois's case shows, the same political forces can subject Indigenous scholars to another kind of intellectual dissonance.

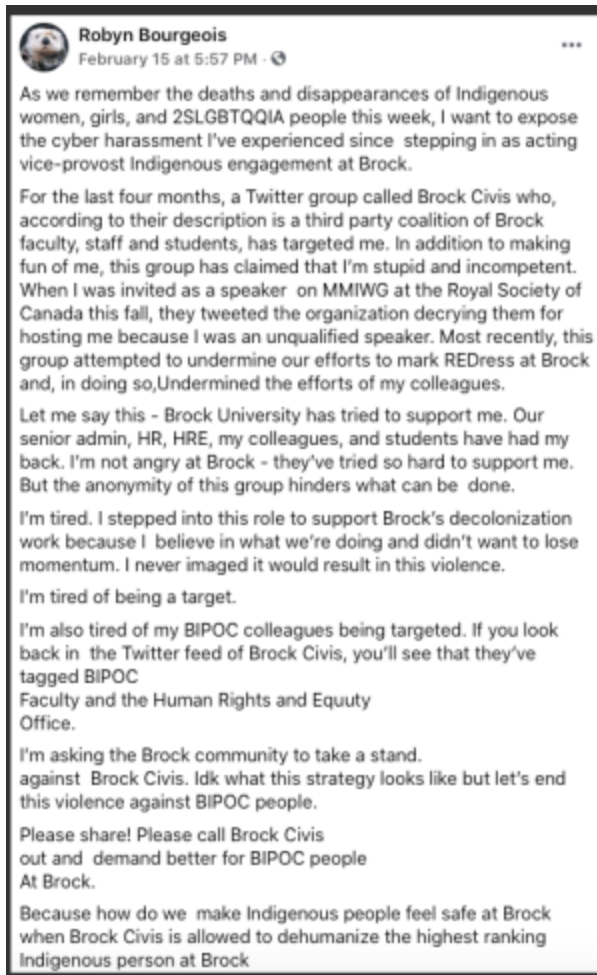
On one hand, academics such as Bourgeois now tend to receive extra support and praise from their non-Indigenous colleagues, all of whom are vested in the success of Indigenousization policies. But outside that controlled professional bubble, these

Indigenous scholars may hear a more mixed message. This was certainly true of Bourgeois after she'd made her dubious argument that Wortman's unhinged April 2020 rampage was a symptom of white supremacy. As it turned out, Wortman was an unfathomable sociopath who'd long been obsessed with police and COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Bourgeois's claim that this evil specimen was some kind of moral stand-in for ordinary white men everywhere received the kind of reaction you'd expect: Her email account was deluged with criticism, some of it quite vicious, and she eventually gave up her Twitter account.

At around the same time, Bourgeois was among a number of Brock officials who were targeted by an anonymous Twitter account called @BrockCivis, which presented itself as being operated by members of the university community who were concerned about allegedly unethical behaviour. But relatively little attention was paid to the account until February 7, 2021, when @BrockCivis scathingly quote-tweeted the official university announcement of a forthcoming event to "remember the loss of thousands of Indigenous women...to colonial violence." While the tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) is well-known among Canadians, having been the subject of a recent national inquiry, @BrockCivis expressed outrage that the official Brock University Twitter account was using MMIWG "to score ideological points" in a "stupid way." The criticism was presumably related to the fact that about two-thirds of female Indigenous murder victims are killed by other Indigenous people, and not by "colonial violence" (a fact that is considered impolite to point out in Canadian media), though it is impossible to know with certainty exactly what @BrockCivis was getting at.



When the school's Sexual Violence Prevention Committee subsequently issued a statement accusing @BrockCivis of promoting "racism," and denouncing "ongoing settler-colonial violence," @BrockCivis replied with a quote from historian Gerda Lerner to the effect that sexual violence against women has existed in all societies known to recorded history, and then added that university groups should stop exploiting "human tragedy." A day later, @BrockCivis explained that it does "fully support" the activists memorializing MMIWG, but not the university's "co-opting [of] the movement." Shortly thereafter, the @BrockCivis account went dormant, allowing everyone to move on.



Except that Bourgeois couldn't move on, having apparently come to believe that @BrockCivis's ability to criticize her with impunity represented an existential threat to the Brock community, and to her professional role as its protector more particularly. In a public Facebook post, she asked: "How do we make Indigenous people feel safe at Brock when @BrockCivis is allowed to dehumanize the highest-ranking Indigenous person at Brock?" She also urged the Brock community to "take a stand" against this anonymous (and by now apparently defunct) account. Having already described Bourgeois as "inspirational," university officials would find it hard to say no.

On February 22, Bourgeois launched the official component of her campaign against @BrockCivis at a regularly scheduled meeting of Brock's Two Row Council, a body that the school's senate had created "to inform, guide and advance its efforts towards Indigenousization, reconciliation and decolonization." Along with Bourgeois, Council members include Indigenous Elders, a set number of Indigenous faculty members, staff, and students, representatives from the wider Indigenous community, as well as other senior school administrators, and three rank-and-file non-Indigenous faculty members. In theory, the Two Row motif signals "respect, and friendship...between autonomous beings"—such as Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics. In practice, however, it

appears to be a forum for Indigenous grievances to be aired and for white attendees to express support and agreement.

At the February 22 Two Row Council meeting, a recording of which was made available to me, attendees were presented with the above-described @BrockCivis tweets, and Bourgeois led off the discussion with a five-minute denunciation of the person (or people) behind the Twitter account, whom she described as racist, sexist, colonial bullies who were engaging in a campaign of “criminal” harassment.

“The worst part is the absolute cowardice,” she said, “because they hide behind anonymity so they can spout their racist, sexist, vitriol. And [we’ve had] enough. Enough! This hurt the community...This hurt people, Indigenous peoples in our community. And how are we supposed to make Indigenous peoples feel safe here when this is the kind of treatment that the highest-ranking Indigenous person in the building is receiving on a regular basis?”

The discussion that followed consisted in large part of white attendees indicating how horrified they’d been when they learned of @BrockCivis. One male academic, Health Sciences professor Jens Coorsen, is heard to repeatedly offer somewhat theatrical declarations such as, “I’m shocked,” “I don’t need to be this pissed off on a Monday morning,” “I’m really pissed!,” and “It’s time this moves forward to the police.”

As the meeting progressed, participants started bidding up their allyship rhetoric. Some suggested that university officials ask Twitter to permanently ban the account (which, it turns out, a school official had already tried to do—unsuccessfully). Another suggested that the police could help them track down the phone that @BrockCivis used to tweet its criticisms. Another proposed the “Ontario human rights” route. Another vaguely suggested that a “forensic IT person” could help crack the case. Several attendees—including Bourgeois herself—casually described @BrockCivis as engaging in criminal “hate speech,” despite the fact that nothing @BrockCivis is known to have tweeted comes anywhere close to the extremely strict definition of hate speech contained in Section 319 of the Criminal Code. (Remember that @BrockCivis hadn’t come out against the commemoration of MMIWG, let alone tweeted anything racist about Indigenous people *per se*, but had simply alleged that Brock’s administration was appropriating the MMIWG cause for ideological purposes.) As I listened to this discussion involving about a dozen active participants, most of them veteran academics, I was surprised to observe that none of them (with one exception, noted below) betrayed any real understanding of how social media works, or to what extent its use is subject to legal constraints.

One of the most unsettling aspects was the discussion about how the participants could frame @BrockCivis’s ideological crimes once the account holder(s) were outed. Aboriginal Student Services Director Sandra Wong, then serving as the Council’s rotating chair, mused that they might leverage the language contained in Brock’s Indigenousization declarations so as to cast @BrockCivis as “resisting decolonization—because they *want* a very colonized institution.” Another attendee suggested that the

tweets, if made by a professor, would violate provincial ethical standards, and represent a “toxic” presence on the campus. He then went on to demand that Brock’s Faculty Association conduct an internal investigation to root out anyone who’d abetted @BrockCivis, arguing that doing otherwise would betray the school’s student body. “It really comes down to the students,” he said with a Helen Lovejoy-esque flourish. “I always make sure the students come first.”



Lynn Wells

To be fair, there were also a few notes of caution thrown up. At various points, Brock’s Provost, Lynn Wells, tried to (sensibly) suggest that they instead focus on the positive work that Brock is doing on the Indigenous file, rather than getting hung up on a single anonymous account. She added that “we have to acknowledge that we live in a world where people use social media in all sorts of ways... that we may find hurtful.”

Also sounding a note of caution was Brock’s Director of Human Rights and Equity, Leela MadhavaRau, who (accurately) warned that the same people who might be inclined to support @BrockCivis would also be likely to excoriate the university—and her in particular—for spending a lot of money on the investigation of just a single Twitter account. And so she suggested that the best way to approach the university’s president on the issue would be to broaden the project by wrapping @BrockCivis into a larger play for “holistic change” (which, I’m guessing, would entail a “holistic” expansion of her own office’s staff, budget, and oversight powers).

But all of these caveats were quickly swept aside by Bourgeois’s vocal supporters on Council. By the tail end of the conversation, in fact, this was no longer just a debate about a single Twitter account and a single academic at a single university. Refuting the provost’s suggestion that they emphasize what they were “building” at Brock, an Indigenous academic declared that building *anything* would be impossible until @BrockCivis was brought to account. Indeed, the racial peace of the entire country was at stake, he suggested: @BrockCivis “not only affects Brock university. This affects the larger indigenous community across Canada. It’s targeting [all] Indigenous women.”

The same speaker also told a story about how he'd been approached on campus in 2019 by a white academic, who told him that he would have difficulty making a persuasive case for Indigenization at Brock. Ten minutes later, this anecdote was seized on by another meeting attendee as an example of "heinous" colonial "violence." She also described it as the type of "escalating" behaviour that eventually could lead to the Canadian equivalent of the storming of the US Capitol by right-wing protestors.

In other words, the very future of the country's political system might be at stake. All of this was precipitated, I had to remind myself, by @BrockCivis tweets that, according to the circulated screenshots, had amassed a grand total of zero retweets and one like.

To emphasize the high moral stakes at play, Wong then offered a warning to white naysayers on the Council who might "stall" efforts to investigate @BrockCivis—lest they themselves come under suspicion of harboring @BrockCivis-ian sympathies:

"I feel that many of these people... on this committee are very threatened by the thought of brilliant people such as Robyn... and all these Indigenous people that are standing up. And they're not going to be taken down by all these efforts of oppressing them. We're going to move forward with our vision, and nobody's going to stop us. [The white people are] just going to eventually have to take a back seat to that."

Ultimately, the Council decided to compose a letter summarizing the case against @BrockCivis that would be circulated to every corner of the university community—including the Board of Trustees, the school Senate, the undergraduate and graduate student societies, the President's Advisory Committee on Human Rights, Equity, and Decolonization (PACHRED), the Aboriginal Education Council, and the Faculty Union—seeking to enlist them all in the campaign against @BrockCivis.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of school officials will now be tasked with responding to this academic bill of attainder in the weeks to come. And while no one at Brock would show me a copy of the letter (or even tell me whether it's been drafted yet), I do know that an investigation has been commenced: Bourgeois herself announced as much on her Facebook page on February 26th. She also asked for incriminating information about @BrockCivis—a Twitter account that, if I had to guess, was probably run by a single disgruntled student or ex-staffer. To the extent this whistleblower (or troll, depending on your perspective) wanted to embarrass Brock University's administration, he or she has succeeded mightily (though perhaps not in the way he or she intended).

Bourgeois didn't respond to the list of questions I sent her on March 3rd, which included an open-ended request for comment. Nor did MadhavaRau, which is a shame because her experience with this kind of controversy goes all the way back to the early 1990s, when she was the first Race Relations Officer appointed at the University of Western Ontario. Based on her personal experiences at that school, she knows better than

most how these grievances can go sideways for the people pushing them—but also how they can be exploited in a “holistic” way by those who know how to work a crisis.

Aside from the provost, MadhavaRau seemed to be the only one in the meeting who recognized that the whole saga largely came down to a branding issue for the university, because of the appearance of the word “Brock” in the name of the Twitter account.

“I don’t want my identity attached to the... behavior that’s coming out of these people,” she said. “How are we ever going to get [new] faculty in here at Brock? If the word is out that they’re being targeted, viciously targeted, how are we going to get them here, never mind retain the staff and faculty that we [already] have.”

In this vein, she echoed the university’s communications manager, whose email response to my questions top-lined the (completely obvious) fact that “although the [@BrockCivis] account was using the word Brock in its name, it was in no way associated with the University’s official social media.” As I’ve noted in similar stories about woke race meltdowns at [Smith College](#), [Haverford College](#), [Mount Allison University](#), and [the University of British Columbia](#), there is now an extremely blurry line between social justice as a principled ideological movement among academics, and social justice as a corporate branding strategy among academic administrators.

Interestingly, this is a phenomenon that Bourgeois herself has pointed out in her own academic writings. After being trolled online last year (and getting death threats, I should add), she wrote up her experience in a 12-page [article](#) for *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice*. Bourgeois described her tormentors as an army of “angry white men” who “hunted me down like the mass murderers I had written about.” Fortunately, her Brock colleagues were “entirely supportive,” and “a large contingent of my colleagues signed a letter of support.”

Elsewhere in the *Atlantis* article, Bourgeois complained that her submissions to journals are subject to an editing style that “privileges Western, white, colonial academic approach to knowledge production.” And she dismisses freedom of speech as a concept exploited by the “global elite” to sustain their “dominant interlocking social systems of oppression.” But I’d urge readers to persevere through all this numbing wokeness because, eventually, we get to a genuinely interesting passage in which Bourgeois describes her realization that, for all the victim status she’s accorded as an Indigenous person, she’s actually got her employer over a barrel—a rare example of someone in this academic subculture saying the quiet part out loud:

“Brock’s strategic commitment to decolonization has created a sort of reverence around Indigeneity that offers me privileges and protections as an Indigenous scholar. All of the Indigenous-centered initiatives I’ve put forward have been well-supported, both in terms of funding and widespread institutional support. At the same time, as the only tenured female First Nations professor at Brock University, my departure could undermine the university’s stated commitment to decolonization. Thus, the university’s efforts to make me feel supported and safe can reduce this risk. Again, I want to believe

that my colleagues acted as genuine allies and accomplices, but we cannot ignore the ways in which power and privilege may have influenced their supportive response.”

I’ve focused on Bourgeois as the protagonist of Brock’s meltdown over @BrockCivis because the university itself promoted her as the public face of its Indigenization efforts, and because she’s been the one proactively pushing everyone to regard this obscure social-media account as an existential threat to the school. But I’m certainly not trying to portray her as any kind of villain figure. In fact, upon reading her essay in *Atlantis*, and considering the academic trajectory that’s brought her to this point, I started to feel a great deal of sympathy for her.

Like many similarly situated scholars in Canadian academia, Bourgeois has been consistently encouraged to internalize her status as a perpetual victim of “male terrorism,” “hegemonic masculinity,” “white masculinity,” and “patriarchal domination”—despite the fact that Canada is, by global standards at least, an unusually safe, tolerant, and egalitarian country. For the academics who inhabit this world of overheated identity-based propaganda, it really does make sense to imagine that the presence of a single off-message Twitter account makes a campus “unsafe.”

In the Indigenization era, moreover, there are concrete incentives for asserting this kind of hypersensitivity. Every time Bourgeois has expounded on a new kind of threat facing women and visible minorities, Brock’s official magazine has done another splashy profile of her work. Under this kind of system, what incentive is there for her to stop discovering new kinds of racism?

And even in those moments when Bourgeois isn’t consumed by ideologically inflected fear, she writes in *Atlantis*, she finds herself consumed by *guilt*, ruminating over the fact that she is “white-passing and therefore benefit from white privilege.” Nor can Bourgeois even enjoy her professional success without doubting whether what she’s achieved is really just the tacit *quid pro quo* that non-Indigenous university leaders pay to colleagues such as Bourgeois in return for their Indigenous benedictions.

On the surface, Bourgeois is one of the unalloyed success stories of Indigenization. But her reaction to @BrockCivis suggests that the story is more complicated than that. And it helps show us one of the real reasons why Indigenization advocates are so quick to bristle at any suggestion that their work does more harm than good: The most painful thing you can say to someone is often the thing they already know.

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