CULTURAL SAFETY AND INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

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A PROMISING COURSE OF ACTION FOR THE ENTIRE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY*

Education has gotten us into this mess, and education will get us out
Hon. Justice Murray Sinclair, TRC Commissioner

From the outset of colonialization, the institutionalized education of Aboriginal peoples has been a tool of forced religious conversion, Francization, assimilation, and acculturation, part of larger sociocultural power struggles that served political and economic goals. It is impossible to overestimate the intergenerational impacts of assimilative violence on Indigenous peoples that was brought to bear through the educational and Residential School systems. During the aforementioned campaigns (espoused and orchestrated by the Canadian government of the era), more than 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to institutions which were culturally, psychologically, and often physically abusive, whose aim was to facilitate the sedentarization of then nomadic peoples. Sedentarization was viewed as a means to access and exploit the forestry resources of First Peoples' land. Considering that in Quebec this period ranged from roughly 1931 to 1978 (TCR, 2015) and reached it peak during the period 1950-1960, it is understandable that intergenerational stigma from this attempted ethnocide still reverberates today in as familial, communal, cultural and educational fallout.

In recent years, there has been an increase in studies seeking to document the experiences, challenges, and needs specific to Indigenous students within Quebec's educational establishments (Rodon, 2007; Loiselle, 2010; Joncas, 2013; Dufour, 2015a; Gauthier, 2015; Lefèvre-Radelli and Jérôme, 2017). While each Indigenous Nation, community, family, and individual possesses their own experiences, certain challenges shared by a significant portion of First Peoples have been identified (see: Table 1). During my own research, I learned that the "fear of failure" is among the most considerable obstacles for many Indigenous students (Dufour, 2015a). This lack of confidence is the result of complex and multifaceted issues that are historically and intrinsically rooted in the very nature of educational institutions themselves. Indigenous cultural safety is thus presented as a promising avenue for Indigenous student success, as well as broader higher education community.

But what does *cultural safety* (or *cultural security*) mean, and how can it be integrated and implemented in higher education writ large? This article is largely based on research conducted for my Master's dissertation and is informed by information garnered by over one-hundred Indigenous students and professionals (Dufour, 2015a). It seeks to demystify the concept of cultural safety/security as it exists today, being a frequently employed tool in the field of Indigenous education. While this article is by no means an exhaustive work, it will present a portrait of the needs and challenges shared by many Indigenous students, in addition to providing a brief introduction to select core services adopted by some of Quebec's post-secondary establishments. This article will also offer avenues of reflection which will enable those within higher education institutions to adjust and adapt their discourse, practice, and communication.

This article also seeks to illustrate that globally, reflecting upon cultural safety measures represents a unique opportunity to question our own pedagogical approaches, frameworks, and concepts, in order to better respond to humanist, civil, and cultural goals that are inherent to higher education itself.

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS SPECIFIC TO INDIGENOUS POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

Table 1 presents a summary that explains and contextualizes the gap between post-secondary graduation rates for Indigenous students (specifically those arriving directly from their home communities), and their non-Native counterparts. Note: Indigenous students are not a homogenous group; each individual has unique familial and communal lives and histories. Therefore, this analysis cannot be generalized and applied wholesale to the ensemble of the Indigenous student population.

* Within this text, the terms Indigenous, and First Peoples are used interchangeably to designate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, although it is acknowledged that each of these groups have distinct languages, cultures, and histories. Within the territory of Quebec, there exist 11 Indigenous Nations, comprising 10 First Nations (each with their own distinct languages, cultures, and histories), and Inuit. The term non-Native refers to non-Indigenous populations within the territory.

TABLE 1	FACTORS WHICH MAY INFLUENCE INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND PERSERVERENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (WHEN ARRIVING DIRECTLY FROM HOME COMMUNITIES)*
AVAILABILITY OF POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS	A majority of Indigenous communities are geographically distant from post-secondary institutions. In order to attend these institutions, Indigenous students must leave their home communities and move to urban centres. This move brings with it numerous potential challenges: distance between self, family, and community, loss of familiarity and routine, culture shock, erosion of social and community networks, discrimination and racism, isolation, lack of support, financial difficulties, etc.
EDUCATIONAL PROFILES	Many students return to education after a prolonged absence, or via adult education streams (secondary schooling that occurs over an extended period). Educational preparation is frequently lacking, due to insufficient funding of schools that serve the Indigenous community, and in terms of the individual education of students within their communities, as compared to students residing outside of the community. Some students must also attempt to balance the role of student with that of being a parent.
INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION	The integration of Indigenous students into higher education institutions often seems shallow, marked by their infrequent use of support services, shared spaces, and extracurricular activities made available to the generalized student body. Many Indigenous students are hesitant to request help or access support services that have not been adapted to their specific cultural realities (wariness due to previous experiences of discrimination, lack of trust, etc.).
LANGUAGES OF INSTRUCTION	French and English are second - in some cases, third - languages for some students. As a result, reading, writing, abstraction, and conceptualization difficulties arise. Further, within the present educational system, it is impossible for students to be assessed in their Indigenous languages (for example, there are no existing uniform language tests).
STUDENT LIFE EXPECTATIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL STYLES	Some Indigenous students have difficulties related to student life expectations: time management, note taking, online institutional portals, computer-based tools, teamwork, planning, etc. This is in addition to lacking general knowledge of the post-secondary system as a whole, its rules and its requirements. Pedagogical approaches and mindsets, assessment methods, as well as the overall mission of higher education institutions are often very different from those employed in Indigenous communities.
OVERALL PERCEPTION OF "SCHOOL"	Education provided outside of the community is still considered by many to be a means of assimilation (the result of intergenerational trauma from the Residential School system). Thus, educational success stories are often rare, and post-secondary studies are sometimes considered to be of little valuable.
SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS	The presence of multiple social problems in certain communities are often associated with assimilative violence is often associated with assimilative violence (forced sedentarization, the Reserve system, Residential Schools, sled dog massacres, etc.), and brings with them various problems: cultural and identity uprooting, loss of familiarity and routine, unemployment, poverty, inadequate sanitation services, addiction issues, depression, conjugal and familial violence, suicides, overcrowded housing, health problems, malnutrition, etc.

* Adapted from the 2014 Diagram by Bordage and Dufour (from: Dufour, 2015a).

Indigenous academic perseverance should not be viewed as a deficiency within First Peoples students themselves, but rather be viewed as inadequacies of the system, which result from discontinuity phenomena and cultural conflict (Gauthier, 2005; Dufour, 2015a). As an institutional entity, schools are based on a Western European cultural model, which has been imposed and implanted into the heart of colonized territory, to act in service to the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic integration of populations. In light of this fact, and even to this day, conformity to the educational system's expected (imposed) acculturation processes weigh upon Indigenous students' adaptability. Indigenous students are compelled to integrate "foreign" values, languages, perspectives, and concepts that are tainted by a relationship with institutional power. The vast majority of pre-university level Indigenous students who participated in my research nevertheless hoped to succeed in an educational context that acknowledged their specific needs (Dufour, 2015a). They also hoped to experience an education that took more into account the past and present contributions of Indigenous Peoples with which they could identify personally.

Reflecting upon cultural safety measures represents a unique opportunity to question our own pedagogical approaches, frameworks, and concepts.

Scientific literature reveals various factors likely to promote First Peoples' educational perseverance, including academic motivation, familial and communal support, pedagogical support programs, culturally adapted programs, the presence of Indigenous teachers and fellow students, cultural rooting, and finally, financial support (Bourque, 2004; Gauthier, 2005; Loiselle 2010; Joncas, 2013; Dufour, 2015a). As described by Loiselle, the factors promoting success stem directly from the efforts of post-secondary institutions themselves. Among others, these efforts include: on-campus presence of Indigenous students, progressive degree-earning, the creation of programs specifically for Indigenous student cohorts, and access to shared meeting and friendship spaces such as First Nations Houses (Loiselle, 2010).

Openness, cultural sensitivity, and availability of and access to educational personnel are also factors that foster educational perseverance and success (*ibid.*; Dufour, 2015a). Consequently, the issue of cultural safety within the educational system cannot be limited to Indigenous students and communities, but rather requires the involvement of all actors within the field, whether they be public decision–makers, professors, students, and so on.

WHAT DOES CULTURAL SAFETY/SECURITY MEAN?

The concept of cultural safety was developed near the end of the 1980s by Irihapeti Ramsden, a Maori nurse, researcher, and educator from New Zealand, in an effort to counter the discrimination and marginalization experienced by Maori patients within the state health and medical system. The primary goal was to articulate a concept that reflected Indigenous minority needs that could be communicated to nursing staff via training. Since its inception, the concept of cultural safety (or cultural security, a synonym also used by the Canadian Government), has been repurposed and adapted to various other fields across the globe, including usage within the fields of health, Indigenous training and education. In my Master's thesis, I propose that cultural safety as related to Indigenous students can be defined as the potential that results from the development of services that respect and acknowledge the historical, cultural, socioeconomic, political and epistemological determinants of the targeted population (Dufour, 2015a). According to numerous Indigenous organizations, essential aspects of cultural safety measures include the acknowledgment of colonial contexts and related power relations that result from introspection (or self-reflection), as well as the development of communication-based competencies (Baba, 2013). Numerous authors propose four stages of cultural safety development: (1) cultural conscience, (2) cultural awareness, (3) cultural competence (4) cultural safety[1] (*ibid.*; Lévesque, 2017).

Establishing cultural safety within post-secondary institutions requires the creation and application of administrative, organizational, curricular, extra-curricular, material, and pedagogical measures that are culturally sensitive and pertinent in the context of concerted action. Furthermore, these efforts must also reflect students' lived experiences and incorporate these students' responses to such measures so that their effectiveness can be evaluated[2]. These measures may promote the academic perseverance and success of First

1 For more information, please see the CAPRES files, in the Thematic Issues: Étudiants des Premiers Peuples en enseignement supérieur [capres.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Dossier_CAPRES_Notion_Cle.pdf]. (Available in French only)

2 *Ibid.*

Peoples students, as well as increase the in-class participation of young Indigenous students (Colomb, 2012; Dufour, 2015a). Adequate state-sponsored institutional services created as a function of adaptation, reconciliation, and academic improvement needs, which also reflect colonial realities, may indeed foster a more significant degree of "social justice" (Lévesque, 2015) for future generations of First Peoples.

CULTURAL SAFETY MEASURES — FOR WHOM?

All students, regardless of origin, must be free to study in a context that is welcoming and respectful - this is the very concept of cultural safety in education. Yet, this notion exists in a context of domination characterized by unequal power relations between a territory's Indigenous populations and the postcolonial societies with which they are associated. One must not commit the error – too often repeated – of comparing Indigenous students' cultural safety initiatives with services established to foster international student integration. One must remember that First Peoples are not immigrants; this is their home (and historically speaking, has been for a lot longer than) in the same way it is for other Canadian citizens. By virtue of constitutional rights and assorted international commitments signed by the Canadian government[3], First Peoples have the right to receive an education that permits the maintenance of their languages and cultures, all while fostering their individual and collective fulfillment. In fact, many of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC, 2012) 94 Calls to Action referenced improved cultural safety measures for Indigenous students within the post-secondary educational system, for the purposes of academic improvement and reparative justice. The Canadian government adopted these recommendations in 2015.

If the colonial histories of the Quebecois, the First Nations, and Inuit are profoundly different, certain parallels may be drawn that nevertheless foster an understanding of the need for cultural identity-based fulfillment and rooting of founding peoples within the educational system. One needs only consider the academic, sociocultural, and even economic benefits that originated from the creation of a post-secondary educational system adapted to Quebecois culture (via the creation of CEGEPS and Quebec-based universities[4]), in order to see the decisive role that cultural safety has in the educational success of individuals and communities alike. Within the higher educational network, there are only two pedagogical projects which are specifically made "for and by" Indigenous peoples: Kiuna Institution for First Nations peoples[5] and Nunavik Sivunitsavut, for Nunavik's Inuit[6].

These initiatives grew from a desire to reinforce cultural safety in every sense – from course content and teaching staff, to learning assistance and educational approaches. For a multitude of logistical, geographical, academic, and individual reasons, the vast majority of Indigenous students in Quebec are currently enrolled in educational projects within other higher educational establishments. Regardless of this fact, it remains critical that all Indigenous students be able to learn and grow in environments that are culturally safe and secure.

SELECT CORE CULTURAL SAFETY SERVICES

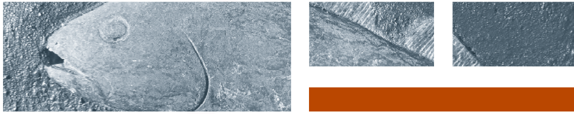
The most common and effective "formula" (and where one finds the majority of culturally adapted measures) of grounding cultural safety services within the higher educational system is the creation of meeting spaces dedicated to Indigenous students. Within such spaces there is generally the presence of a resource person – ideally Indigenous, or someone who demonstrates significant knowledge of and experience with Indigenous cultures. In addition to facilitating the integration of newly-arrived students to the city (finding a place to live, a daycare, jobs, services, etc.), the resource person (whether they be considered liaisons, project mangers, hosts, etc.) should endeavour to demystify institutional culture, the application process, and academic imperatives. This resource person should assist Indigenous students to establish personal landmarks for their post-secondary experience, as well as familiarize students with the organizational structure at play. As such, they act as cultural mediators between Indigenous students and their new environment.

[3] Including *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which, among other things, recognizes the value of Indigenous perspectives and traditional knowledge, all while guaranteeing the right to transmit said knowledge via culturally appropriate educational methods which acknowledge their respective traditions, histories, languages, aspirations (UNO, 2007).

[4] See: *L'apport des cégeps à la société québécoise* by Fortin, Havet and Van Audenrode (2004).

[5] Affiliated with the Cégep de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Dawson College, the Kiuna Institution is an initiative of the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), and its member-communities. Kiuna is located in the Abenaki community of Odank since 2011, and offers various bilingual higher education programs that are cultural adapted to First Nations students, including a First Nations Social Science Degree (Hannis, 2017; Dufour, 2015b) [kiuna-college.com/eng/].

[6] The Nunavik Sivunitsavut program was founded in Montreal in 2015 by Kativik Ilisarniliriniq (formerly known as the Commission scolaire Kativik) and by John Abbott College (with which it is affiliated), in collaboration with Makivik Corporation, the Kativik regional government and the Avataq Cultural Institute. The program includes a platform where students can transition to CEGEP using credited courses that have been culturally adapted to Inuit students from Nunavik [sivunitsavut.ca].



Numerous students are hesitant when it comes to accessing non-Native assistance in the post-secondary context, whether due to shyness or for fear of being negatively judged. This hesitation is often associated with previous discriminative experiences in the non-Native milieu, lived by the students themselves or by a close friend or family member. Therefore, to create pedagogical support that is deemed culturally safe, Indigenous higher educational services should plan various types of skill-building and academic support measures (for example: tutoring, mentorship, language editing services, themed workshops adapted to students' specific needs, etc.). Depending on the measures taken, follow up could be individual or collective, completed by those inside or outside of the system, and include follow up by peers. In the vast majority of cases, measures consist of demystifying the higher educational system's expectations, and providing students with additional tools that promote their academic success. The effectiveness of academic support services is largely contingent on their availability, versatility, and flexibility, as well as their agility in meeting the often-urgent needs of new Indigenous students.

Dedicated physical spaces are something of a remedy for the absence pre-established networks, because they are places to meet fellow students and create new networks within the academic establishment. In other words, these locales are a safe space where students can be themselves without having to bend to the demands of non-Native culture. Such a space may also act as a study spot, a social space, or a meeting place, and can enable the organization of activities specifically intended for Indigenous students on a one-time or regular basis, as organized by the resource person, or by students themselves (ex: traditional activities, retreats, general gatherings, women's circles, family activities, potlucks, talking circles, etc.). Many First Nations graduates also attest to the importance of participating in such extracurricular activities during their academic journey (Dufour, 2015a). They also noted that these activities, coupled with their commitment to their communities, contributed to an emergent awareness of the collective and socio-political issues affecting Indigenous Nations, thereby furthering their desire to become involved, to grow personally, and to take action.

Acknowledgement within post-secondary institutions also corresponds to the need to exit a state of marginalization and anonymity and move into a state of being collectively seen and heard. As a consequence, many culturally adapted establishments or service agencies plan educational and awareness activities intended for their entire population – whether student, professorial, or otherwise. Among these events are Indigenous Weeks, Indigenous conference presentations, themed film screenings or viewings, Pow Wows, makushan, other cultural celebrations, art exhibits, and blanket exercises. These events promote intercultural dialogue and openness that is indispensable to the inception of cultural safety within non-Native majority establishments.

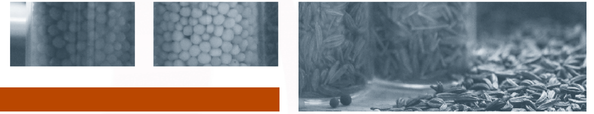
> Cultural safety within the educational system necessarily implies that Indigenous and non-Native communities work together.

While the services listed in this article often constitute core activities adopted by colleges and universities, many other means of support have been created to meet Indigenous students' cultural safety needs. Most notably among these are: resident on-campus Indigenous Elders, adapted psychosocial services, preferential hiring of Indigenous personnel, establishment of Indigenous reference or consulting boards or committees, collaboration with Indigenous organizations, teaching and non-teaching personnel training, scholarship creation, academic inter-level bridging projects (high-school-college or college-university), adapted admission and recruitment policies, Indigenous student residence buildings, adaptation of higher education curricula and programs (ex. Indigenous certificate or culturally adapted or transitional programs), installation and enhancement of Indigenous artwork and design elements, online and off-campus education for Indigenous communities as well as Indigenous cohorts which are designed to meet the precise educational needs of specific communities, and so on.

THE ROLE OF PROFESSORS IN CULTURAL SAFETY MEASURES

Cultural safety processes and initiatives require both individual and collective will, while acting in informed and concerted effort. For many Indigenous authors, including Ramsden (2002), the role of non-Native allies[7] consists of learning a territory's colonial history, and embarking on introspection and reflection about personal thoughts and beliefs. Above and beyond theoretical knowledge, the primary

[7] To learn more about the conception of the role of non-Native allies, please see: *Indigenous Ally Toolkit*, produced by the Montréal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy NETWORK (available in French and English): [reseaumtlnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ally_March.pdf]. Also see: Pulling Together: A Guide for Teachers and Instructors prepared by BCCampus [opentextbc.ca/indigenizationinstructors/chapter/reciprocal-exchanges-as-an-ally-advocate-and-supporter]



role of non-Native professors in terms of cultural safety is in the adoption of an attitude conducive to acknowledgement[8], humility, empathy, and respect. Each Indigenous student is unique, and adopting the above attitudes does not and should not result in any kind of profiling or singling-out of students (this is to be strictly avoided!), but rather requires the fostering of relationships of trust based on authenticity, availability, active listening, and openness. Given that classes are formal, impersonal spaces that do not typically cultivate these types of relationships, some professors have used free-writing techniques (such as journaling) to encourage a meeting of minds, communication, as well as the fostering confidential and safe relationships with their students – regardless of origin. If certain teaching constructs and limitations (number of students, professional overburdening, subject matter) are difficult to adapt to the above-mentioned efforts, other means can be explored in the optic of achieving similar goals and results.

All students should be able to learn and grow in educational spaces which are exempt from discrimination This may seem obvious, yet Indigenous students are frequently the subject of stereotypical and racist comments, as well as other prejudices held by their peers or professors. Given that these incidents are generally the result of a lack of knowledge or poor comprehension of cultural and historical realities, it is highly advisable to commit the time to inform oneself - with a spirit of humility – about the questions and issues that might arise, before they arise in-class. It is also important to remain vigilant to potentially inappropriate comments that other learners might utter, and to intervene unhesitatingly when needed.

The inclusion of concepts and practises initially associated with Indigenous cultural safety represent a multi-sectorial opportunity to enrich pedagogical methods and practices intended for the generalized student body. This could translate to, for instance, the adoption of a model of, or perspective on, success that is shared by many Indigenous cultures, that takes into account the overall development of the individual and their journey. This definition of success more closely resembles the definition of success espoused by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation[9] – instead of a definition of success that is purely meritocratic in nature. Combining these notions of success could represent a positive example of hybridity and transcultural reciprocity. It is also my opinion that the establishment of a culturally informed, aware, and respectful climate (as discussed above) must be implemented and established in all educational spaces, independent of the presence or absence of Indigenous students.

There are resources available for consultation, as well as reference documents and guides which can support professors who seek to better accompany Indigenous students in their academic success[10].The inclusion of additional Indigenous content as well as perspectives, within classrooms and lecture halls may require research; the use of specialized educational resources developed by, or in consultation with Indigenous experts (for example, Indigenous conference speakers[11]), is also a precious and essential pedagogical practice.

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CONCLUSION

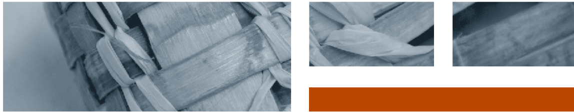
The matter of Indigenous students' cultural safety within Quebec's post-secondary institutions is far from resolved; the province lags behind other Canadian provinces. However, a great deal of progress has been made in recent years. Since the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRC, 2015), one can see that the province's post-secondary institutions seem to be more inclined to develop new services and affect significant changes to their curricula. At the college and university levels, this phenomenon

[8] The concept of "acknowledgement" notably implies acknowledging that we all carry culture within us, and that colonial violence has - and continues to be – visited upon Indigenous people, and is the source of significant sociocultural, economic, and identity-based stigmas, and that there exist even to this day, unequal power relations between Indigenous and non-Native populations, related to access to state resources and services on this territory.

[9] According to the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (CSE, 2002, p. 8), educational success is measured by "qualitative indicators" and related to "the notion of project, self-realization, personal and professional development [...]." (Freely translated)

[10] CARLE, S. "Des ressources pour comprendre, éduquer et sécuriser: Histoire, cultures et réalités autochtones" *Pédagogie collégiale,* vol. 32, n° 3, 2019 [www.aqpc.qc.ca/revue/article/des-ressources-pour-comprendre-eduquer-et-securiser-histoire-cultures-et-realites] (Available in French only)

[11] Various Indigenous organizations may refer Indigenous conference speakers, collaborators or guests as a function of specific needs (subject or theme, Nation, available budget, geographic location, target audience, etc.) [aqpc.qc.ca/revue/article/des-ressources-pour-comprendre-eduquer-et-securiser-histoire-cultures-et-realites] (Available in French only)



is notably facilitated by the "Programme Accueil et intégration des Autochtones," with financial assistance provided by Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES).

To successfully manage cultural safety measures within the educational system, teaching and non-teaching personnel must be attentive to, and work closely with, those who are primarily affected – namely Indigenous students, communities, and various professional and other entities. Clearly, this degree of involvement goes far and beyond institutional walls and requires collaboration. It should not be considered an additional task that further burdens the pedagogical role of higher educational, but rather should be viewed as an opportunity to widen the scope of the often peripheral educational mission of our institutions.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of all those who participated in my research about cultural safety, including all students and personnel at the Kiuna Institution and the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), the Aboriginal Resource Center at John Abbott College, McGill University's First Peoples' House and the Indigenous Student Alliance (ISA), Concordia University's Aboriginal Student Resource Center, and the Centre de développement de la formation et de la main-d'œuvre huron-wendat (CDFM).

I would also like to thank Stanley Vollant, Kakwiranó:ron Cook, Kim Angatookalook, Jimmy Simeon, Jason Annahatak, Anna Mapachee, Diane Labelle, Ann Beer, Léa Lefèvre-Radelli, Marie-Pierre Bousquet, Louise Legault, Fanny Mélodie Bordage, Julie-Anne Bérubé and Jo Anni Joncas, whose feedback and suggestions during both formal and informal discussions indirectly inspired certain components of this article.

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