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The Pedagogy of Graduate Supervision:
Figuring the Relations between Supervisor and Student

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education,
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The supervision of graduate research students is a pedagogy under pressure. Increasingly, in neo-liberal universities, it is subject to regulation and surveillance as well as stringencies of time and intensified expectations. Yet it is an elusive pedagogy, one that has not been much theorised. This is the field that my thesis is situated within. Through a series of small studies, I explore the ‘and’ that relates ‘supervisor and student’ in order to shed some light on the “unstated ethics” (jagodzinski, 2002, p.81) that shape how they act towards each other in supervision’s enclosed space. In the course of my enquiry, I critically engage with several dimensions of supervision: the public discourses that give it intelligibility, the layers of social relations that come into play, the meanings offered by a university’s code of practice, and those made by supervisors and students in an empirical study of several masters-level supervision pairs in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The main methodology used is a form of textual analysis that rests on an understanding of the slipperiness and ambiguity of texts and the inevitable partiality of interpretation. The mode of ‘knowing’ offered here is one of reading and re-reading supervision through a series of figurative rather than literal accounts, none of which is intended to offer the last word on this complex pedagogy. Reckoned together, the interpretations offered here – supervision as a discursive object, as a palimpsest-like field of triangular relations, as a project of governmentality, as a fantasy, as the relation of Master-Slave, and as improvisation – give an overarching sense of supervision as a messy and unpredictable pedagogy in which the academic and the personal come together in an unusual way. The significance of this understanding is that we cannot easily or meaningfully regulate or ‘train’ for supervision. Because of its implication in the production of original, independent academic work and the authorised academic subject, it must be as much a practice of improvisation as it is of regularity.
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References
The advisory process is certainly important to the production of the successful graduate student – but it remains elusive, mysterious, and ambiguous …

(Acker, 2001, p.76)

The process of supervising graduate research students is not only elusive but also contested. In recent years the *Times Higher Education Supplement* has run many pieces on this topic. Two in particular offer strikingly different supervisor accounts of their practice. In the first, a male supervisor outlined 12 “points” for any student wanting supervision from him. Claiming that “the student is not the only one who needs protection”, his tone is blunt and abrasive. Here is a sample:

There is no such thing as an emergency. This is not brain surgery. Contact me by email, by post or through the secretary. You do not need my home telephone or mobile number. If you do find them, I will not reply to any messages you leave. I cannot be contacted at home, in the evenings, at weekends or when I am on vacation. My
spouse/partner does not know of your work and, more importantly, has no interest in it. (Iphofen, *THES*, 09 Nov 2001, p.14)

In the second piece, “scholar and broadcaster Lisa Jardine” is quoted as saying:

I take all my postgraduate students out for lunch and dinner regularly. We gossip as much as we discuss work and conferences and there is not a single one I do not have a personal relationship with. … They come to my house, too, and often if they’re having trouble in their own lives, you have to scoop them up and they even stay over. (Sebba, *THES*, 04 Aug 2003)

Here we find a strong contrast between an emphatic separation of the personal life and supervision, and a relishing of their blending. After many years of working with supervisors and students, I have come to expect such marked differences in point of view about what proper supervision should be like. The single word “supervision” obscures a great and sometimes troublesome diversity in values, beliefs, assumptions and practices. Yet not a lot is known about supervision and so it is often assumed to be straightforward.

Not only is the nature of supervision elusive and contested, but increasingly (and this may well be related) supervision is seen as a problem or risk to be managed by the institution. Supervision is becoming an object of institutional surveillance. For some time now, universities and research funding bodies have attempted to control it via codes of practice and training for new supervisors. Moreover, a hot issue currently is how to evaluate it, that is how to render supervisors more accountable for the effectiveness of their efforts, particularly in the twin terms of the “successful ‘throughput’” (Threadgold, 1995, p.46) of ‘satisfied’ students. In my own university, supervision has the distinction of being the only form of university pedagogy for which we have explicit guidelines, and also the training of inexperienced supervisors is the first (and so far only) mandatory professional development requirement for academics. Until relatively recently, preparation for supervision was largely via the experience of being supervised, an experience that produced a range of effects. Parker Palmer (2001, p.5) describes one kind of outcome:

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1 This contribution earned an equally staunch student riposte published in the *THES* the following week. A sample: “If I am to be your PhD student, please understand the following: … The PhD is mine. It is not yours. While I will certainly value your guidance and feedback on my work, I do not have any intention of following slavishly your interests or referring in my thesis to every single journal article you have ever published.” (Brooks, *THES*, 16 Nov, 2001, p.14). (Note that Brooks was not being supervised by Iphofen.)

2 Some institutions, usually informally, have used an apprenticeship model for ‘training’ new supervisors in which an inexperienced supervisor is paired with an experienced one. However the effectiveness of this mode of professional development is highly variable as Adele Graham (1996) points out in a case study of one institution’s practice.
I did my graduate work at Berkeley. And I had … a friend who felt that his ongoing experience of being a graduate student there was an experience of being brutalized. We talked about it a lot. He needed a lot of hand-holding, a shoulder to cry on, as it were. A lot of befriending and companioning to make it through. And he did indeed, in my observation, have a brutalizing experience. When he left university with his doctoral degree in hand, I felt quite certain that he would go out into the world as a professor who loved and cared for students. But he did not. He became one of the most brutalizing professors I have ever known.

As this testimony suggests, the replication of personal experiences of being supervised, good and bad, is one possibility for how supervision is likely to be conducted, the rationale being that “it worked for me, so it will work for my students”. But, through working with supervisors, I have found the opposite also obtains: the rejection of unsatisfactory personal experience and the desire to do it differently (although having the desire is no guarantee as we shall see).

This troublesome practice, the supervision of graduate research students, is the focus of my thesis. The chapters that follow represent an enquiring, if somewhat restless, engagement with the cultural practice of graduate research supervision as it is occurring at the cusp of the 20th and 21st centuries in Aotearoa New Zealand. As even a cursory reading of the international literature shows, supervision in this place and time is not so dramatically different from supervision in other Western countries, although diverse cultural norms no doubt make their presence felt. For instance, one of my research subjects described finding students less “assertive and demanding” in the local context than those she had encountered in the US and that she had to change her practice to accommodate this (Supervisor 3, initial interview). As well, many of those supervising have themselves been supervised in other places (North America, Australia, the United Kingdom etc) and so the practice of supervision

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3 This is not a history of masters supervision as such, although I want to acknowledge that the practice has deep roots in traditional university practice. John Hockey claims that PhD supervision “is a particular example of a more general pattern of supervision in higher education, namely that of tutorship … [which combines] ‘formal instruction with interpersonal support within a framework that is both demanding and caring … this duality creates a dilemma, as it generates tensions and strains within the tutoring relation’” (Hockey, 1994, p.295, citing Rapoport et al 1989); also, see Gerald Phillips, who claims that supervision is “the last bastion of an ancient style of education” (1979, p.344). Tamar Rapoport and colleagues claim, writing from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (to underscore the internationalism of this practice), that the tutorial “found its way into the contemporary educational system via the medieval English colleges and is especially identified with British Oxbridge Colleges where it developed in the 16th century as a form of intellectual and moral discipline” (p.14). See also The Oxford Tutorial, (Palfreyman, 2001), a contemporary handbook of praise for this form of pedagogy.

4 I have had the pleasure of talking about graduate research student supervision with supervisors in Australia, Sweden, Norway and Canada: many of the issues they face in their practice are similar to those raised by supervisors in Aotearoa New Zealand.

5 She also said that, in the US context, “if you [the student] are not assertive and demanding, there is something wrong with you, you don’t have the fire”.

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has indeed been shaped internationally (which may account in part for some of its variety). In
addition, at this time, universities in these countries share many contextual features that put
pressure on supervision. To name a few: increasing numbers of students, many of whom are
bearing rising costs for higher education coupled with uncertain employment prospects; a
proliferation of ‘joint’ supervisions giving rise to new tensions; intensifying workloads for staff
and pressure to perform well on every front; the withdrawal of public funding from higher
education and the hitching of what remains to various performance measures (timely
completions of graduate research students being one). Supervision may happen in the
relatively private space of a supervisor’s office, but it is also given shape and tempo by systems
and forces beyond individual supervisor and student.

Supervisor and student: so we come to my focus here which is to explore, from a variety of
perspectives, the ‘and’ in supervision. Jan jagodzinski says, “there seems to be … an unstated
ethics that exists in the silent space between teacher and student” (2002, p.81): such an
implicit ethics shapes how the supervisor (as teacher) acts towards her/his student, and how
the student in turn acts towards her/his supervisor. Understanding the ‘and’ as standing in
for that silent space, I ask what does it mean? Who gets to fill the ‘and’ with meaning? Where
do those meanings come from? In making this exploration I will investigate different aspects
of supervision and tender different answers to my questions: I will look at how multiple
discourses give substance to the ‘and’, and how layered social relations fill it with intersecting
and sometimes contradictory meanings. I will also explore what an institution desires the
‘and’ to mean and how different ethical modes play out in some supervision dialogues.

The data I have drawn on across the thesis are a series of texts: texts from the literature, texts
of policy, and texts gathered from interactions with several pairs of supervisors and masters
research students from disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences. The main
reason I chose to work empirically with masters rather than doctoral supervision was
pragmatic: I wanted the supervisions to be completed by the time I wrote the thesis, as
indeed they all now are. However, although my empirical data is from masters supervision,
most of the literature addresses doctoral supervision and often the policy texts address both.
After a long time of working in this area, I remain unconvinced that the pedagogy of masters
supervision is fundamentally and reliably different to that of doctoral students. So many
things mitigate the stereotypic differences: some doctoral students have previously been
supervised, but not all; most doctoral supervisions go on for a lot longer than masters, but
not all; doctoral research may have a greater intensity, but sometimes masters research is like
this too; some masters research projects make substantial original contributions to their
discipline. Because of differences among participants, disciplines, methodologies and projects,
I think the differences among supervisions at any one level, masters or doctoral, are likely to be
just as significant as differences between levels. My hunch is that this goes for the disciplinary
differences too. in a recent paper, Bill Green (2004, p.8) shows how what we might call “a classically ‘scientific’ training” may infuse supervision in other disciplines, especially in traditional social sciences. My exposure over the years to supervision as it is practised in many different departments and faculties underlies this. While I agree that supervisors may get particular benefits from talking about supervision with colleagues in their discipline, or with others who are also supervising doctoral or masters students, I think the issues and complexities raised in this thesis have a general pertinence for discussion and thinking about the supervision of all graduate research students. I am not, though, by any means claiming that my work will offer answers to all the problems that arise there.

Having declared my project, the rest of this chapter will address the following matters: after giving some context for my interest in supervision, I will place myself and my thesis questions in the existing field of literature. This is followed by an account of the methodology used here and a preview of the chapters that make up the rest of the thesis.

**My Interest in Supervision**

In my memory, my interest in graduate research supervision had two ‘inaugural’ moments: the first was my experience of being supervised through my masters research in the early 1990s. My supervisor was someone I had studied graduate courses with and I loved his energy and openness to both class and curriculum. He was someone who inspired me and, under his influence, I struck out and entered new theoretical zones, ones he had little experience of but plenty of enthusiasm for. But, strangely, the supervision did not go well. Somewhere not long into the project, drowning in post-structuralism, I lost my nerve. I was unable to explain this to him. I think in his view I was an able and independent student. As well, his personal life became difficult for a while and I felt reluctant to make any demands on him. As time went by, I felt sorry for him but I also felt angry and isolated, in need of rescue but frozen and passive. Fortunately friends and colleagues came to the rescue and, because of their various services, I made it to the end. But it was touch and go until the day, awash with fear, I handed in a thesis for examination that my supervisor had not seen. Subsequently I pondered the experience, wondering over why it happened and coming to understand that we both contributed to it in different ways. It left me with an intense interest in the dynamics of supervision, in coming to understand more about the relation between supervisor and student that supervision brings into being.

Around the same time, in my role as an academic advisor working mainly with students, I co-facilitated a workshop on supervision for academic staff at the university with my colleague

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6 This work cannot address disciplinary or methodological differences in supervision because of the small number of supervision dyads involved in the research.
and long-time collaborator, Adele Graham. It was our first effort and we were full of ideas but nervous, neither of us having actually supervised graduate students or theses! During a plenary discussion, a senior colleague took issue with our language: “What’s all this about supervision relationships”, he said, “supervision is not a relationship, it’s work.” We were taken aback, then (in private later) quite critical of this cold-blooded, ‘masculinist’ view of supervision. I think now that this blunt charge, along with the stories that students told us of their experiences, awoke a kind of crusading spirit that infused our work over several years with both supervisors and students. But I have since, and particularly through the work of this thesis, come to have a new regard for this ‘impersonal’ view, appreciating the desire to make a distinction between personal and work relationships – even though I will argue here that what makes supervision particularly complex (and potentially difficult as well as pleasurable) in comparison to other forms of university pedagogy such as the lecture or the seminar is that, for both supervisor and student, the academic and the personal come together there in an unusual way.

While working on this thesis I continued to work as an academic advisor in the area of supervision but moved into working full-time with academic staff. I supervised several masters students and had some rocky times (the first one never completed, the second extended and extended). With Adele, I carried out some in-house research projects into supervision for departments and published on the topic (Graham & Grant, 1997; Grant & Graham, 1994, 1999). I was also supervised. What has struck me about these multiple positions with respect to my thesis project is how the experiences (actions, thoughts, feelings) I had in one domain often did not flow into the others. There is something about being in the position of student or supervisor, of researcher or academic advisor, that is irreducibly separate from any of the other positions. For instance, I found I could not easily hold what I learned about supervision through being a supervisor when being a student. In spite of being able to take up the authoritative position of independent researcher or writer or reviewer or teacher or supervisor, I would still sometimes feel gut-deep anxiety as I walked across campus to a meeting with my supervisor, wondering what she would have to say about the latest draft chapter. There is an independent structural reality to the positions of supervisor and student (even though we all occupy these positions differently): different selves come to the fore, different relations obtain, different possibilities for action too. This continues to intrigue me, even throw me off balance from time to time. Thus a fundamental assumption that I make in this work is that supervisor and student co-exist in considerable difference with each other, an assumption shared by Bill Green and Alison Lee:

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[7] The collaboration with Adele included gathering data about supervision from postgraduate students in the Faculties of Engineering, Medicine and Science, as well as the publication of a book of practical advice for supervisors (Graham & Grant, 1997). I have also assisted staff in other Faculties (Education, Business and Economics) in getting feedback about their supervision.
What emerges [from a consideration of supervision] is the ineluctability of difference, and the necessary inequality of powers: power and difference are necessary principles of the pedagogic relation. (1995, p.44)

In the past couple of years of working on this thesis, I have become more uneasy about my work in supervision. I have had a growing sense that I am writing and teaching about it at an historical moment when there are significant changes going on. For one thing, we can understand supervision as being dragged out of the closet at this time, from the sort of anarchy of privacy to the control of a public bureaucratic domain. Various measures conspire to effect this: an emphasis on the standardisation of supervision (via ‘training’, codes of practice and workload norms), on open doors, on record-keeping (even the suggestion that these records be available to others (Morgan & Ryan, 2003)), and on supervisor accountability via student survey. Through my work as an academic advisor, I am one of those implicated in the dragging and I find myself quite unsure if I want to do that. What if such measures promote a kind of mediocrity (as can happen when teaching practices are standardised), or a meanness in practice where the supervisor can tick off their responsibilities and walk away? And then there is my implication in figuring supervision as a ‘relationship’ (in the psychologised sense) through my workshops with staff at a time when, with a massified higher education system, this kind of relationship is increasingly difficult to attain, for supervisors at least. The current climate of accountability that defines the new modern university is not one I particularly like – having seen over the past 20 years how corruptible even the ‘soundest’ processes can be. (For instance, annual performance reviews for academic staff can be meaningless or punitive just as easily as they can be valuable: it depends on how they are enacted, that is on who enacts them, and no policy can protect us from this.) And then there is the persistent question of how effective supervision ‘training’ can be or even should be – a question I don’t have an answer to. So I have some quite deep ambivalences about supervision being turned into a ‘thing’ of accountability and about how my work, theoretical and practical, contributes to that.

At the same time, my work as an academic advisor means that from the start of this project I had an interest in its practical use for inciting transformations in practice – for academic advisors working with staff, for supervisors, for students, for managers.8 Indeed, initially I intended to write a chapter about the implications of this work for practice but, unexpectedly and somewhat strangely, I find myself less committed to any particular view of what those transformations might be. Rather, I find myself drawn to providing some consolation for those who find supervision (doing or being) trying and to offering a little provocation to all who are involved in it. In that spirit, I do hope that this work will speak to supervisors and students who find supervision difficult, that it will shed light on the sources of some of those

8 I have been gratified by feedback from colleagues about the usefulness of the published chapters in this regard.
difficulties so that they are seen in the social and historical context that produces them rather than as necessarily individual failure for which someone must be blamed (and punished – or do I mean ‘held accountable’?) I do also hope that the figurative accounts offered herein give food for thought on how to do supervision differently.

**Supervision as Pedagogy, Both Rational and Desiring**

Supervision has long been an ambiguous activity: in my own institution, masters research supervision usually appears under ‘teaching’ in calculating or reporting workload while doctoral supervision is more likely to figure as ‘research’. An early contribution to the public discussion of supervision, and particularly of supervision as a form of teaching, was Bob Connell’s *How to Supervise a PhD* (1985), where he asserted that research higher degree supervision is “the most advanced level of teaching in our education system [and] certainly one of the most complex and problematic – as shown by the very high drop-out rate of students at this level” (p.38). Connell went on to say that, by thinking of supervision as teaching, we open up consideration of “questions about curriculum, method, teacher/student interaction, and educational environment” (ibid). He also emphasised the range of problems caught within supervision’s ambit: from technicalities of research design to the health and morale of the student. In the 20 years since this article was published, discussion and research into supervision have swelled and the resultant literature features in the chapters to come. For now, in what follows, I want to establish supervision as pedagogy rather than teaching and then briefly preview two strands of thought in this field of enquiry.

Almost ten years ago, in what I think of as a landmark article in the supervision literature, Bill Green and Alison Lee suggested that the available work on supervision was “radically undertheorised” (1995, p.40). Reading this at the beginning of my doctoral research, at a time when I was reading everything on supervision that I could find, it struck a chord. I knew then that I wanted to contribute to the theorisation of supervision. (This is significant because until then I had been more focused on the issue of improving practice.) Little of what I was reading about supervision offered any way of seeing “around the corners of our theories and the stories in which we are entrenched” (Threadgold, cited in Kamler, 1997b, p.385). Yet it seemed to me that just this was needed in order to open up the discussion of supervision beyond the standard, somewhat sterile list of supervisory and student responsibilities.

In the same article, and drawing on David Lusted’s (1986) definition of pedagogy, Green and Lee argued for re-conceiving supervision away from the “comfortable familiarity” (1995, p.40)

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9 I note that the supervision guidelines (the subject of Chapter 4) are not mentioned on the University’s Teaching and Learning website.
of Connell’s “teaching”. In the original, oft-cited article, *Why pedagogy?*, Lusted argues that pedagogy is first and foremost a *process of production and exchange* in which three equally valuable agencies – “the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce” (1986, p.3) – are *bound* in active relations of change, relations which are inevitably unequal power relations:

“How one teaches is therefore of central interest but, through the prism of pedagogy, it becomes inseparable from what is being taught and, crucially, how one learns.” (ibid). Rather than being merely instrumental, teacher-student-knowledge practices and relations are central to pedagogy, as Lusted defines it, because knowledge is *produced* in the process of interaction “between teacher and learner at the moment of classroom engagement” (p.4). This version of pedagogy challenges the commonsense understanding of teaching as transmission, from teacher’s head to learner’s, that appears to underlie much contemporary practice in higher education. Moreover, and somewhat more radically, Lusted argues that thinking of knowledge as the property of the teacher (to be passed over to the learner) “denies an equality in the relations in the moments of interaction and falsely privileges one side of the exchange, and what that side ‘knows’, over the other” (ibid). Lusted puts forward his definition of pedagogy as part of a larger political project, that of attempting to close the gap in status and value between theorists and teachers. His point is that teaching is as much about producing knowledge as is researching, writing, publishing and lecturing.

Figuring pedagogy as knowledge production seems particularly relevant to supervision which, more so than most other modes of university pedagogy, rubs closely against research. But, as well, Lusted’s attention to the active relations between teacher, student and knowledge is suggestive of the dynamics of supervision as a triangular field of action between supervisor, student and thesis. Triangular relations and processes are troublesome though because, “laden with conflict and complexity” (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p.72) arising from shifting pairings and exclusions, they produce unstable plays of identification, emotion and desire (Girard, 1998). Across the chapters that follow, this understanding of pedagogy will keep surfacing and will be connected to the tensions and instabilities of supervision. I turn now to consider the bigger picture of the research literature on supervision, in particular to mark out a bifurcation in the field.

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10 Lusted’s definition has been immensely influential for critical theorists of higher education – it is cited by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992; 1997), Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1991), Patti Lather (1992) and Roger Simon (1992) among others.

11 His analysis echoes Michel Foucault’s discussion of power relations (1986) as always occurring between agents who are capable of acting.
**Fundamentally Rational and Under Control: Supervision as a Transparent Process**

In one strand of the literature, supervision is understood to be a fundamentally rational and transparent practice between intentional, autonomous individuals. Moreover, as a form of ‘teaching’, supervision is seen to be a progressive activity aimed at realising the student’s fullest potential. At graduate level, in particular, the teacher’s goal is for the student to become independent, a goal that may be pursued in either teacher-centred or student-centred ways. In this mode of understanding, however, supervision is not monomorphic. For instance, Sandra Acker and colleagues (1994) argue that there are two main ideal-type models of supervision operating in contemporary practice. One model suggests supervision is largely a domain of technical rationality, the goal being to train the student in the practices of research. Barry O’Rourke’s definition exemplifies this well:

> [Supervision is] an interpersonally focused process within an institutional framework extending over time whereby an academic researcher assumes responsibility for directing an orderly, co-operatively planned and executed series of activities which will nurture: (a) the intellectual expertise of a student with a view to assisting the student to successfully complete a research project and submit a thesis for a higher degree and (b) socialisation to allow that student to make an active contribution to his/her discipline. (O’Rourke, 1997, p.32)

The simplicity and concreteness of this model make it attractive, particularly to university bureaucracies (and their funding bodies) who want predictable outcomes and timely completions. These features, however, lead to overly strong claims for the efficacy of a training model for supervisors and students. Likewise, its advocates overestimate the potential of various tools and strategies to be effective in managing supervision. For instance, Yoni Ryan (1994) suggests supervisor-student contracts and checklists will “eliminate[e] the misunderstandings and failures of performance which seem to dog supervisors and students [so that] we might yet be able to make postgraduate study the ‘adventure of the mind’ ... that we know it can be” (p.162, italics added) and John Hockey (1996a) offers contracts as a “solution to the problems in the supervision of PhDs” (p.359, italics added).

The other ideal-type model suggests supervision is a negotiated process which is less universal, less predictable, more responsive to different students, projects and changes in circumstances than the technical one. This model, which Acker and colleagues argue is more like what

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12 Olga Dysthe (2002), drawing on interviews as Acker al (1994) did, offers a different version of three models for supervision: teaching, partnership and apprenticeship. Yet others offer diverse models under the guise of metaphors – see, for instance, a recent paper by Lee and Green (2004).
happens in practice, is characterised by “uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict” (1994, p.484) as effects of the past experiences of both student and supervisor. These experiences, as well as interactions in the present with each other and with others, mean that the supervision relationship is actively interpreted by both supervisor and student in unpredictable and shifting ways. The success of this model depends upon good communication between supervisor and student which tends to be treated as unproblematic if handled properly. For instance, students are told:

The way to get your supervisor talking about what may be perceived as ‘taboo topics’ is to ask direct, but positively constructed, questions revealing that you are assuming good intentions on their part. ... Such a series of questions should lead naturally into a conversation about the relationship itself. (Phillips & Pugh, 1994, p.104, italics added)

Such views overlook the various problems that attend communication in supervision: the unequal institutional position of supervisor and student, not to mention their different social positioning which produce different expectations and practices around communication. While Phillips and Pugh, among others, admit to the presence of power in supervision (see for instance Johnston, 1995; Leder, 1995; O'Rourke, 1997), their loyalty to the rational ideal means that its effects are glossed over in favour of the probability of rational solutions (happy endings) to supervision difficulties. Good supervision becomes simply a matter of deploying the right kinds of skills and tools, of getting the right balance.

More recently, some writers have begun to consider the effects of social position, or identity, on supervision. Gender, for instance, has been shown to impact on supervision (Conrad, 1994; Conrad & Phillips, 1995; Heinrich, 1991; Leonard, 2001; Moses, 1992), as has ethnicity (Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994; Ballard & Clanchy, 1992). Identity, both supervisor’s and student’s, can be understood simply as a personal attribute affecting an individual’s beliefs and behaviour and not much disturbing our fundamental ‘sameness’. However, because of the ways in which some identities are socially privileged while others are marginalised, identity can also be understood as a political category. From this more socially critical standpoint, identity differences may multiply the institutional differences that already exist between supervisor and student. Inside the intensity of the supervision relationship, (mis)perceptions of difference (or similarity) and relative privilege can be a source of personal confidence, of resentment, of idealisation, of stereotyping, or of dismissiveness. As well, differences in identities may affect how authority is perceived and responded to. They may also shape body language, impact on spoken language, produce conflicting communication patterns (which may have elements of both the former) and beliefs about how differently gendered and aged individuals are to be treated. These differences may profoundly affect the ease of communication or the degree of identification that is possible between student and supervisor. The matters in turn may well
impact on the opportunities for the student to experience recognition or affirmation from their supervisor. It is likely that identity (and thus difference) counts in supervision, but in unpredictable ways.

Some writers within the more ‘rationalist’ strand of thought do point to a darker side of supervision. Phillida Salmon, for instance, tells the following story:

One fine day a student with whom I have worked closely over several years, to our mutual satisfaction, abruptly and unexpectedly casts me into an altogether alien role. I have become for the moment the representative of all that is worst in academia. What I am actually saying seems to count for nothing. I stand, in the student’s eyes, for a particularly narrow, prescriptive, even punitive approach to research. I find this experience quite painful, no matter how often it happens ... (1992, p.118)

The views of supervision described above – while fruitful in many ways – are inadequate to explain or deal with the kind of situation that Salmon describes here, where things seem to go awry. Not uncommonly in supervision, unexpected reactions (thoughts and emotions) surface and complicate the relation for either supervisor or student or both. To address these moments, and the intransigent messiness of supervision generally, I think we need a somewhat different theoretical take.

**Irrational and Intersubjective: Supervision as an Opaque Relationship**

Another, more esoteric strand of thinking within the literature gives a view of supervision as murky and elusive, rather than as transparent and fully explicable: in describing supervision as “elusive, mysterious and ambiguous”, Acker (2001, p.76) points toward this, as do Lee and Green, for whom there is “something that is so difficult, elusive, ambiguous, even ineffable about supervision” (2004, p.4). While some of the ambiguity stems from supervision’s unstable position on the boundaries between teaching and research, some of it comes from its contested discursive framing (as I will show in Chapter 2), and yet further ambiguity arises from its irrational and intersubjective character. In this latter understanding, supervision is seen as a deeply affective relationship where the supervisor’s and student’s desires are implicated in ways that make the relationship potentially complicated and volatile: desires *to* please, to challenge, to do well, to demonstrate independence, to push towards independence, to resist, to be respected by, to be recognised as clever, to be told, to become like, to become authoritative, desires *for* the (powerful or vulnerable) other and *towards* the emergent thesis. These often unconscious, confused and changing desires produce behaviours from both supervisor and student that are not amenable to rational explanation, behaviours that neither might wish to admit to in the public domain.
Several writers have given interesting commentaries underpinned by this view of supervision. Paul Kameen (1995) suggests that where the weight of pedagogical authority and responsibility is radically shifted (as occurs in supervision), the “amount and degree not only of productive contest, but also of conflict” between teacher and student is increased which “escalates the stakes, and the risks, of the exchange taking place” (1995, p.450). Side effects, such as “excitement, irritation, motivation, anger, frustration” (p.451), are variously produced in the individuals concerned. Roger Simon (1995) says of supervision that “the context for learning will be erotic, where education has been historically and institutionally framed to proceed through intimate interaction and structural dependencies” (1995, p.100). In a particularly discerning piece, he offers several ways in which the student might be ‘eroticised’ by the supervisor. For instance, when the supervisor understands their supervision as an act of love or a gift, the purpose of which is to arouse desire in the student, then supervision is fulfilled by the return of love, or acknowledgment of the gift. In this case it is a form of seduction. Or where the supervisor looks to provide themselves with a “love object”, a student who is a reflection of her/him, the supervisor engages in a form of narcissistic desire. Or the supervisor may desire an intellectual partner, one “who is prepared to take me seriously and provide a sense of engagement, one who will construct with me the sensuousness of the ‘academic dance’” (1995, p.97), or a political partner, someone from the same political or cultural community, who shares their commitment and in whose work the supervisor can see a continuation or extension of their own. If those desires are felt but not met, disappointment or even anger towards the student may ensue.

And then he turns to the student’s desires. Simon suggests that because graduate research is often a process of redefining identity, and is characterised by displacement and contradiction, the student’s position may be underpinned by a degree of dependency which is further intensified by the structural dependencies of the supervisor-student relationship. This provides a context for a “highly invested relationship in which a [supervisor’s] speech (what’s said and not said), writing (what’s written and not written), and actions (what’s done and not done) are made to bear considerable intellectual and affective weight” (p.98). The student’s experience of the supervisor’s ‘actions’, and stories told by other students of that supervisor’s actions, produce a series of overdetermined and affect-laden image texts of the supervisor, which eroticise the supervisor as a source of possible pleasure. Simon says: “As a teacher, it is important to acknowledge one’s eroticisation, to realize that one’s actions matter to students. Indeed, to act responsibly in such a situation may be to seek supportively to lessen the degree of cathexis” (p.99). The student might desire the supervisor as the subject who knows (to ‘have’ the thrill of the authoritative supervisor’s attention, praise and recognition, or to bask in their reflected glory), or as a partner who makes her/him (the student) feel

13 Cathexis is a psychoanalytic term for the investment of emotional significance in an activity, object or idea – in this case the supervisor. However, in supervision the student (and supervisor) may also experience cathexis towards the thesis.
intellectually and emotionally at home, or as a pedagogical partner who will teach the student all s/he knows about how s/he learns. Simon, like others, is interested in practices that will de-intensify the supervision relationship; at the same time he is aware that such practices will not, even should not, remove desires from supervision, for those very desires have productive as well as dangerous effects.

In a similar vein, the effects of transference in supervision have been explored (Frow, 1988; Giblett, 1992; Sofoulis, 1997). Transference is the psychoanalytic term for the way in which earlier experiences with key figures in individual's lives get hooked into their current relationships, such that in some sense the other in the relationship replaces some earlier person. In supervision, both student and supervisor make transferences; this is most problematic when the student's feelings and behaviour produced by the transference interfere with their ability to work productively with the supervisor and to continue to make progress with their work, or where the supervisor's transference produces behaviours that are not helpful to, or are even destructive for, the student. Rod Giblett (1992) suggests that transference is likely to be most acute in a supervision relationship which is over-invested with the supervisor's power and authority (and this could be an effect of the supervisor’s demeanour as much as the student’s). Like Simon, he is interested in exploring practices that might disinvest supervision of some of its potency.

Zoë Sofoulis (1997) argues that supervision is an intersubjective space in which, when interacting, student and supervisor try to infer each other’s mental states and intentions. Mutual recognition is the central experience of intersubjective relatedness (and thus misrecognition is one of the dangers). The student looks for recognition from the supervisor as the one supposed to know (the authoritative object of transference), “but also as the ‘one who knows me’ ... who endorses me (recognises and legitimates), who discovers and trains me, who knows my work, who takes it seriously, the one with whom I co-discover and realise my thesis” (1997, p.10, italics as in original text). The space of the supervision process is a “co-created transitional” (ibid) one, in which both student and supervisor taken an active role (although I don’t think she is suggesting they are equal). The challenge, in Sofoulis’ view, is that supervising does not “exclude domains of mastery, expertise, authority, or discipleship, for the supervisor needs to find a balance between mastery and mothering, authority and collaboration, to properly fulfil their role as mentor or guiding expert” (ibid), but that this must be done in a way which fosters the creative expression and transformation of the

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14 I recall a student (who was a member of the MEd supervision group in which I was a supervisor) ringing me upset because his primary supervisor had challenged his project as not being really “about education”. The student was shaken and anxious, not because he believed his supervisor (the student was clear about the point of his project), but because the supervisor’s response to his work indicated to the student that he did not ‘know’ the student. The student asked to meet with me not, it seemed, to be reassured about the worth of his project but because he needed a supervisor to ‘recognise’ him.
subjectivity of the student. She suggests a definition of supervision as “the creation of a space in which two subjectivities/intellects must necessarily interact so that the project of one may be brought to completion” with the goal of assisting the student “to discover one’s ‘own standpoint’, to gain recognition for one’s ‘own work’, and to find ways of expressing it in one’s ‘own voice’” (p.11).\textsuperscript{15} None of these things is reducible to intellectual work alone; all are implicated in how we understand ourselves, our beliefs about our worth as scholars and people, our feelings about ourselves and towards our significant others. As such, they are troubling as well as exciting activities to be involved in, whether as student or supervisor.

The view of supervision as an opaque practice points to the presence of more than just two minds in supervision, to more than the ‘simple’ presence of social difference and its potentially observable consequences. It alerts us to the presence of irrational, difficult-to-detect elements in supervision, elements that include the supervisor’s and the student’s unconscious, their past experiences, their strong desires and feelings. Moreover, it may be that it is because these elements exist in supervision as an intersubjective experience that there is the possibility of both student and supervisor being transformed by it. Here, in this strand of thinking, one which rests on the decentring of the subjects of supervision, I place my work. Through empirical engagement and interpretation, I hope to explore those aspects of supervision that contribute to its messy complexity. Rather than understanding moments of tensions and contradiction as aberrations, I hope to illuminate their creative, if troublesome, implication in ordinary supervision. In such a project I will be arguing for a view of supervision as an unpredictable process that no amount of technique or experience can resolve in advance, a process that always requires thoughtful judgment and risk-taking, perhaps from the supervisor particularly but also from the student.

\textbf{Methodological Matters – or “How I Wish You to Read this Work”}

[T]extual knowledge knows, but what it knows is undecidable – it cannot be settled for once and for all. This is because the process of creating and reading texts, the process of interpretation, is “inaugural, in the primal sense of the word” (Derrida, 1978, p.11). Interpretation starts up the process of meaning-making, but it can never know or control where that process will end up. (Ellsworth, 1997, p.67)

In this thesis, I will attempt to explore the supervision of Humanities and Social Sciences based masters research students in a way that foregrounds uncertainty and complexity rather than truthfulness. To support this goal, I have figured supervision here in multiple ways, ways

\textsuperscript{15} In this characterisation of the goals of postgraduate study (and supervision), Sofoulis sounds just like Salmon (1992) who talks about the importance of developing a personal standpoint and sense of self-as-author: such a contiguity hints as the arbitrariness of the division in the literature that I have tried to set in place here.
that do not fit seamlessly together but work to cast supervision in different lights. This is very much a practice of layered interpretation in which I make no attempt to settle the questions of “what is supervision?” or “how should we do it?”, although I hope that my work speaks to its readers about both of these questions in interesting ways.

In its orientation, this work belongs in a post-humanist tradition of educational theorising that understands pedagogy as ethical work through which our identities as teachers and students are constantly formed and re-formed in a wide field of power relations. These relations, set in place and given meaning by discourses, inhere not only between supervisors and students, but also between them and their departments, disciplines and institutions, and indeed between them and the societies to which they belong. A key theorist for this work is Michel Foucault, whose account of power relations (in particular his essay The Subject and Power, 1986) is compelling for thinking about pedagogy in higher education. I think it is especially useful for assisting us to think about how we willingly comply with pedagogy’s strictures through various techniques of self-discipline. But I have also been bothered by aspects of his thinking (as will become evident in Chapter 5), in particular the loss of attention to hierarchy because of the foregrounding of multiplicity (see also Game, 1991, p.189). Foucault aside, the biggest single consequence of pursuing education research from the “Dark Side of the Postmodern, the Textual” (Green, 2004, p.8) is a commitment to tentativeness and uncertainty, and a recognition that the research project is interminable. (This can cause problems for closure!)

An emphasis on a methodology of uncertainty places my work in the growing field of post-structuralist and post-humanist enquiries into higher education and supervision. This field, sometimes called cultural studies in education, is animated by an engagement with a wide range of social theories so as to think otherwise about the educational puzzles we encounter, to “de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the invention of new forms of experience” (Ball, 1995, p.266). Research done within this paradigm is marked by “the linguistic turn” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p.8), that is by an intense interest in the constitutive role of language and an assumption that meaning is not inherent in any text but rather emerges from relationships between texts. Further, intertextual relationships are dynamic and often contested. The research accounts that emerge are often “linguistically dense, self-reflexive, and speculative” (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p.14) and the difference they seek to make “is necessarily relevant only for particular circumstances” (1992, p.6). As such, the

16 The matter of discourse is taken up in Chapter 2.
methodological mood is one of “disappointment of certainty, clarity, illumination, generality” (Stronach & McClure, 1997, pp.4-5). Like other fields of cultural studies, post-structuralist research in higher education does not have a distinct methodology. Researchers are eclectic, often described as bricoleurs, borrowing practices from other paradigms and repurposing them to serve this distinctive orientation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; McWilliam, 1995b). Methodologies might include critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Kendall & Wickham, 1999), literary textual analysis (Lynn, 1998), ethnography (Britzman, 1995b), rhizomatics (Lather, 2002) or genealogy (Meadmore, Hatcher, & McWilliam, 2000; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Interdisciplinarity is common, prized even (Fairclough, 2001; Green, 2004).

In that vein, two approaches to analysing text inform the readings I offer in the chapters that follow. One is a set of practices from the field of social enquiry known as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2001; Janks, 1997; Kamler, 1997a; Parker, 1992). Distinctively, critical discourse analysis is explicitly concerned with the relationship between language-as-discourse (texts) and discourses as power/knowledge formations: a central assumption is that “texts are instantiations of socially regulated discourses and that the processes of production and reception are socially constrained” (Janks, 1997, p. 329). Thus, those who produce texts are not simply the authors of their meanings for the meanings come from those available ‘to be spoken’ at a particular time and place. Norman Fairclough (1992; 1995) suggests there are three inter-related dimensions of discourse, all of which must be attended to in the analysis: the object of analysis (verbal and/or visual text or language-as-discourse), the human practices through which the object is produced (writing/speaking/designing and reading/listening/viewing), and the socio-historical (situational, institutional, societal) conditions that govern these processes. Critical discourse analysis is marked then by a sort of oscillating focus between the “social structuring of semiotic diversity (orders of discourse) and a focus on the productive semiotic work which goes on in particular texts and interactions” (Fairclough, 2001, p.124). In practice, critical discourse analysis has many different forms – although it has its roots in linguistic analysis, as a methodology it is less obsessed with establishing a rigorous method or correspondence between analytic categories and ‘reality’ (qua speaker/writer’s intentionality) than some other modes of discourse analysis that seem to aspire towards “a certain hardness” (Frow, 1989, p.333). Terry Threadgold says: “depending on the kind of textual work I’m trying to do, critical discourse analysis means slightly different

19 There are many diverse practices described as discourse analysis (see for example Frow, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Powers, 2001), as well as a raft of more carefully defined practices for analysing language, for example conversation analysis (Hutchby & Woottiff, 1998; Kitzinger, 1999; Toolan, 1989), content analysis (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Silverman, 1993) and narrative analysis (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Reissman, 1993). McHoul and Grace (1989) point out that there are two competing traditions in this broad area: the Anglo-American approach which is marked by a desire to find a common core, or scientificty, to the practice, and the continental European approach which shows less interest in unity. The former is characterised by a more intense engagement with empirical linguistics, the latter by an engagement with the big social-historical-political picture.
things to me” (reported in Kamler, 1997a, p.437). She goes on to say, in a bricoleur-ish sort of way, that while once she always would have fore-grounded a detailed linguistic analysis, now depending on her audience she might foreground a narrative analysis instead. In other words she chooses her method according to her purpose. In the analyses that follow, I have tried to work with such an oscillating focus – from considering the discourses available through which to make sense of supervision (the macro), to the institutional mobilisation of powers towards supervision (the meso), to the way in which meanings are enacted and made by individuals participating in supervision (the micro). I have also moved between occasional detailed attention to linguistic forms to consideration of texts as chunks of meaning.

The other approach to texts that has influenced my approach is deconstruction, although I hesitate to say that this work is deconstructive in a thorough-going way, for a couple of reasons. One is because I still wrestle with understanding deconstruction-in-practice and the other is that it sits uneasily with my work as an academic advisor to university staff. Reading Stephen Ball again recently, I found the following, somewhat comforting lines: “theorising that rests upon complexity, doubt and uncertainty … will threaten our certainty and our sense of usefulness” (1995, p.269). I think it would be fair to say that this stance, along with various ‘career’ events, occasionally precipitates something of a crisis of belief in the effectivity of my work. Having said that, the ways in which I understand this work to be deconstructive are as follows.

First, there is an underlying assumption that social texts of any kind (visual, linguistic, musical etc) are always already open to interpretation and that misreading and error are inevitable interpretive by-products. In this view it is impossible to explain definitively or isolate the truth of social texts: every explanation can be supplemented by another, and that one by yet another, and so on (Lynn, 1998). One underlying cause of this undecidability is that language itself is slippery and indeterminate; another is that language is produced and processed by selves who are fragmented and out of control. What I say is not necessarily what I mean to say nor what is heard; what I hear is not necessarily what was said or intended. As well, in all language interactions there are gaps and silences which appear empty of meaning and thus subject to interpretation arising from the interpreter’s stereotypes, presumptions, anxieties, attractions. Consequently, multiple interpreters make multiple, sometimes conflicting, meanings. Moreover, as Barbara Johnson points out in her stunning reading of Melville’s *Billy Budd*,20 these gaps – “the deadly space between” – can produce interpretive actions and thus have the performative power of true acts (1980, p.91). While fictional dramas thrive on these

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20 I am indebted to Alex Calder and Sophie Tomlinson for permission to sit in on their graduate seminar on literary theory in 2001. There I was introduced to Barbara Johnson, among others, and found some inspiration to continue to wrestle with the difficult question of what it means to ‘analyse’ texts in social science.
‘misunderstandings’ and their consequences for action, real life is also filled with them. So too supervisions, as we shall see.

Second, my work is deconstructive in that it seeks “to open up the meaning [of supervision] as a question, as a non-given, as a bafflement” (Johnson cited in Stronach & McClure, 1997, p.5). Although it is the case that this work is marked by a desire for more clarity about supervision, against this I have attempted to open up and proliferate the meanings of supervision rather than to narrow them down to a core truth. I have also resisted an effort to bring the contradictions within supervision that I have surfaced into a tidy reconciliation via any Hegelian synthesis, instead seeking a view which accepts the (difficult) inevitability of uncertainty, complexity and contradictions and the ways in which carefully constructed meanings tend to fall apart.

Third, taking the supervisor/student pair as a binary, and understanding “that any binary is always a triplet, consisting as it does of a first and a second element plus the relation of difference (the slash or ridge) between them” (Hodge & McHoul, 1992, p.205), I have pursued an exploration of the meanings of the slash – what is the relation of difference between supervisor and student or, better, what are the relations of difference between them? In this pursuit I have hoped to breach the fixity of the binary opposition between supervisor and student (including the idea that the supervisor is always ‘on top’, or the idea that the opposition can be simply done away with) and show aspects of indeterminacy that constantly undermine it.

Fourth, I have tried at every step to problematise both my authority as textual commentator and that of the texts themselves. Bob Hodge and Alex McHoul (1992) discern polar trends in textual commentary: one towards mastery (wherein the original text is understood to be a mystery revealed by the commentator’s masterful account) and another towards liberty (wherein the commentator seeks to let the “text speak for itself” (p.192)). Recognising that both trends are problematic, and that the truth of texts remains unavailable, they advocate a practice that seeks to “work along with and through its ‘object texts’ … rather than making those texts over” (p.205, their italics). In their view a self-conscious mode of textual commentary, that problematises itself even as it takes place, is required (although the pitfalls of mastery and liberty will continue to haunt such an approach). In attempting to use such an approach via a series of rewritings of supervision, my intention is to invite further rewritings.

Critical discourse analysis and deconstruction, as approaches to analysing/interpreting texts, have common features. For example, both suggest a careful reading of texts while maintaining a critical distance from them. Both assume texts do “not immediately disclose” (Saïd, 1978, p.675) what they embody, imply or represent and neither is their language
innocent. Instead texts can be read as sites of plays of power “where actual and possible forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested ... [a] place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon, 1987, p.21). Both approaches deny the authority of the text-producer and offer a sense of the text as a ‘fiction’. Both also eschew codified methods in favour of more open-ended, experience-drenched, intuitive-eclectic approaches (Fairclough, 1995; Threadgold cited in Kamler, 1997a; Clifford Geertz cited in Phillips, 2002). Yet working between/with the two approaches has generated considerable tension for me: one pulls me in the direction of thinking about what I do as (serious, analytical) social science towards change, the other in the direction of understanding it as (playful, interpretive) quasi-fiction writing towards fun.

While I have fought (not always successfully) to avoid the linguistically dense, I have tried to be both self-reflexive and speculative in tone throughout the thesis. Indeed my understanding is that we cannot know the ‘thing’ of supervision directly: any ‘knowings’ are in some sense speculative and always perspectival. Hence my use of the idea of ‘figure’ (also referred to as trope or metaphor) as a way of evoking what I think are important, sometimes controversial, always elusive, dimensions of supervision without claiming that the meaning of supervision is exhausted by any particular representation. I will come back to this idea shortly.

Finally, as ‘postie’ educational researchers, if we cannot offer truth through our research findings, what can we offer? This has been an ongoing struggle for me – along the lines of “what is the point of this?”. Tentatively I would like to suggest that we think of this kind of research practice as one of hope. For it can function like this for the researcher herself: faced with a question, a conundrum, an impasse, a problem – “what is the nature of the often difficult relations between student and supervisor in supervision?” – research into that question becomes a concrete expression of her conviction that things do not have to stay the same. But more than just the researcher, the research subjects may find hope too – engaging in thinking and talking about some aspect of their lives often turns out to deepen or reinvigorate their awareness or experience of it, to open up new ways of approaching it or even just to comfort them as they live with it. (In the final interviews, most of the research subjects talked about how being part of the research had been useful for them in some way – typically supervisors talked about the value of becoming more conscious of their practice, and students talked about the value of having another person to bounce things off.) And then there is the hope the researcher has to offer others (researchers, supervisors, students) by way of her written account of the research and how it may open up new possibilities for thinking and practising.
Texts and Subjects

There are many texts subjected to analysis in this thesis. First, there is the supervision research literature that I read not only to situate my research but also for its discursive implication. Some of this literature is treated as data in Chapter 2. Then there are two versions of one university’s guidelines for masters supervision, the texts of which are analysed closely in Chapter 4. The other large set of texts (featuring in Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8) comes from data gathered in an empirical engagement with six supervisor-student pairs from five Humanities and Social Science departments (namely Education, English, Human Geography, Philosophy and Political Studies), some details of whom are given in the table below. For five of the six pairs, each data set comprises:

1. the transcripts of two, approximately one-hour interviews between me and each individual, the initial interview occurring soon after they joined the study, and the final interview taking place after the supervision had ceased;

2. the transcripts of two audio-taped supervision meetings, each supplemented by some written notes (usually sent to me by supervisor and student, separately, within 24 hours of the meeting), and the transcripts of interviews with supervisor and student (again separately), usually occurring within a week of the supervision meeting. Both the notes and the interviews asked the supervisor and student for their thoughts and feelings about the meeting.

For the sixth pair (who served as a pilot study and whose data is central to Chapter 3), I have one transcribed supervision meeting and their written notes.

Because of my study leave timetable, most of the data-gathering occurred in the second half of the academic year which meant that the supervisions were relatively far along. This had the advantage that most of the pairs were quite well established, having been working together for several months at least, and thus the rude insertion of a researcher and her audio-tape may have been less disruptive. Even so, I sensed my ‘interference’ as researcher – at times supervisor and/or student talk ‘out of the meeting’ to me on the tapes; more than once either supervisor or student commented later that they thought my ‘listening in’ had subtly altered the dynamics of the meeting. A disadvantage of the timing of the data gathering was that most of the meetings were focused on giving feedback on drafts and so the earlier stages of supervision are not well represented in my data (with one exception of the Education student who was part-time and still therefore at an earlier stage than the others).
My interest in this research is to explore the meanings mobilised within these diverse texts (research literature, university guidelines, empirical texts), not so much what the text-makers intended to mean as what their texts can be read to mean. Thus, in this research, the ‘individuals’ are less important than the systems of meaning (discourses) I detect in their writing and talking, or the figurative accounts (tropes) I have superimposed upon them. I have tried to underline this ‘impersonal’ focus by inserting a distanced quality in my data analysis. Further to this end, I have not given much detail about the individuals who participated as subjects in my research project (see Table 1 below), thus strategically diminishing them somewhat as the agents and origins of meaning. Instead, by way of “decentring the subject” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p.25), I have depicted them more as cultural actors in the ongoing socio-historical story of supervision, actors who are to some extent (but not only) speaking scripted lines, sometimes in spite of their expressed desire not to do so. So this thesis is populated with “textualised [rather than ‘real’] identities” (Britzman, 1991, p.28) – between these identities and those held by the living, breathing people who participated in the research there is a significant gulf. As an at least partly liberal humanist (and sociable) subject myself, who felt affection, respect and gratitude towards her subjects, this often left me feeling uneasy and ‘out of order’. I know full well that some of the tropes of supervision I offer here are not necessarily those that the subjects would offer and at times that has felt like a betrayal.21

To give a little context for the subjects: in each case, I knew the supervisor at least slightly before they joined the research project. (This seemed important given the vulnerability of the supervisors in revealing hitherto private aspects of their practice to a researcher who was also an academic advisor in the same institution.) In contrast, the student was included via an invitation from her/his supervisor. (One exception was a student I knew because I had previously taught her in a small masters course.) Because of the complexities around students’ consent in relation to their supervisors, I contacted each student to assure myself that they were happy with participating in the research and, as far as I could tell from that interaction, they were.22 An important contextual issue is that in the end all the students in this study were awarded first-class honours (A-grade or better) for their masters degrees and so represent a particularly high achieving group. This makes some of the anxieties and tensions expressed by my research subjects all the more interesting because we might expect to mainly find such effects in supervisions where the outcome is in doubt. I think the presence of these effects in all the pairs I talked with points to how inherently uncertain supervision is, for both supervisor and student, even under the best of conditions.

21 Patti Lather says the interpreter is “lost from the beginning, given the necessary failure of bearing witness to the original” (2002, p.301). This lostness operates for those interpreting their lived experiences of supervision as well as for the researcher interpreting those interpretations.
22 The research project was also approved by my institution’s Human Subjects Research Ethics Committee (ref: 1999/273).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Thesis Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1(^{23})</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, early 50s</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, early 30s</td>
<td>Masters thesis (changed supervisor, awarded first class honours)(^{24})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, late 50s</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, early 20s</td>
<td>Masters dissertation, (awarded A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male, Pakeha, early 40s</td>
<td>Male, Pakeha, mid 20s</td>
<td>Masters thesis, (awarded A+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male, Pakeha, early 40s</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, mid 20s</td>
<td>Masters thesis, (awarded A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, late 30s</td>
<td>Male, Pakeha, early 30s</td>
<td>Masters dissertation, (awarded A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, mid 30s</td>
<td>Female, Pakeha, early 20s</td>
<td>Masters thesis (awarded first class honours)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The Supervisor-Student Pairs

The empirical inquiry method I used was heavily dialogical – the texts arise from meeting transcripts (dialogues between supervisors and students), supervisor and student notes in response to questions posed by me, and transcripts of interviews with me (both different forms of dialogue between researcher and research subjects). Of such inquiry, we are warned: “dialogue not only reveals but often enough conceals the power relations and the desires that lie behind the spoken word … dialogue has a transformational as well as an oppositional dimension – an agonistic one” (Crapanzano 1992, cited in Gurevitch, 2001, p.89). This warning that dialogue conceals as much as it reveals is germane not only to the object of my enquiry – supervision – but to the process of enquiry itself. While I feel as if I have text, text everywhere (page upon page), I have only the merest fragments of any particular supervision and I have only used here the smallest subset of those recorded fragments. Moreover, even if I had every spoken or written moment on record, there would still be concealed dimensions that would elude me, as they would the protagonists themselves. The messy texts of lived experience are marked by an awesome irreducibility (Smits, Friesen, & Hicks, 1997) and the interpretations we make of them must grapple with this. To complicate things further, there are layers of interpretation here: in the first place, in the act of producing their texts, student and supervisor interpret selves and each other to me. Then, in a second-order interpretive dialogue – what Vincent Crapanzano calls the “shadow dialogue” (1992, p.214) – I interpret these earlier ‘primary’ dialogues in order to produce this text. By doing so, I hope to engage in yet further forms of dialogue with the scholars, researchers and practitioners (supervisors

\(^{23}\) In order to protect anonymity of supervisor and student, numbers do not correspond with coding on textual excerpts.

\(^{24}\) I don't have the exact grades awarded to the theses of two students (1 and 6). However I do know they received first class honours for their masters degree overall, and as the thesis is worth half the total number of points that comprise the degree I can deduce that they received at least an A- for their thesis.
and students) in the field and, of course, the examiners of this thesis. “Complex plays of power and desire [are at work] in the production and reproduction, the representation and interpretation of dialogues” (p.215): indeed.

Significantly, there will always be gaps between our versions. In this study, none of our interpretations were held up to each other to agree upon. Indeed ultimately, in the deconstructive mode, a text means “whatever the entity with the most power says it means, unless of course other readers continue to read it otherwise” (Lyn, 1998, p.87-88). As the writer of this text, I have the most power here and, in spite of my reservations about ‘telling the truth’ of supervision, my interpretation – ‘data analysis’ – functions as the forcible transformation of ambiguity into a kind of certainty, even if temporary:

As an act, drawing a line is inexact and violent … what every act of judgement manifests is not the value of the object, but the position of the judge within a structure of exchange. There is, in other words, no position from which to judge that would be outside the lines of force involved in the object judged. (Johnson, 1980, pp.107-107)

As the researcher-author, I find myself acting like a judge and doing a kind of violence to the data. In particular, looking ahead to Chapters 5 and 7, I want to acknowledge that none of my informants is likely to have thought of her or himself as either a Master or a Slave (indeed that is one of the matters that impels me to take this view) and none may like the prospect. I apologise if, in this ‘violent’ interpretation, I cause any of them sorrow. Having said that, while the position of the researcher-analyst-author is a powerful one, no less is that of the reader who must be convinced for the analysis to have a life beyond itself.

Another, and related, uncomfortable aspect of this research has been the rendering of private moments public, where the “goal of understanding – albeit through secondhand knowledge – is assumed to be within the reach of readers” (Britzman, 1991, p.28). I felt this acutely when I presented a paper based on the Master-Slave chapters at a conference only to have various members of the audience respond judgementally towards the protagonists. In spite of my protests that the supervisor and student were portrayed figuratively and were to be read as standing in for many supervisors and students, my sense was that some people could not hear that and continued to insist on attributing the moment of supervision dialogue to intentional agents. I have also found that readers are unused to transcribed texts of dialogues and are sometimes dismayed at (and judgmental of) the fragmented nature of the exchanges (as in “I would never talk like that”).

More concretely, my typical analytic ‘method’ in relation to my empirical texts was to read and re-read them, all the while mulling over other material (theory, research etc). Then, at some
unpredictable moment, some image or turn of phrase would spark a connection with my data. To explain what I mean let me describe the genesis of the Master-Slave metaphor. I had read the chapter on power in Ann Game’s book (1991), *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, many times without really ‘noticing’ her explanation of Hegel’s story (pp.66-73). Then, on yet another re-reading, I was suddenly confronted with the lineaments of supervision as I had been reading it in my data. So off I went to read Hegel (1977 [1807]) to see if I really could plot supervision onto his drama. Finding I could, I returned to the data to gather up the material that would illustrate the appositeness of this trope for supervision. Looking back, I don’t understand why I ‘saw’ the Master-Slave as a figure for supervision when I did – what I do know is that at some earlier time I had not, maybe could not have, seen it. Having given this preview of my methods, the reader will find further, specific notes on method in most of the subsequent chapters.

A final methodological matter is how little of the empirical data I gathered features here. This discrepancy arose because I wanted to have a big enough group of supervisor-student pairs to get some sense of variations in practice, even though my mode of analysis was to be a close reading one that can only deal with small amounts of text at any one time. Therefore, while I read all the data carefully, and more than once, only a tiny fragment of the material is represented here. That fragment though points to the wider body of data of which it is in some sense representative without being completely so. But there are only so many chapters that need to be written for a doctoral thesis and I think I have written enough. The data I have is rich and will allow me to write further ‘figurings’ of supervision in the future.

**Figures of Supervision**

The interpretive strategy I have used, perhaps more evidently in some chapters than others, is a form of “theorising as fictionalising” (Game, 1989, p.190) in which I forward an analysis of the cultural practices of supervision in the form of a figurative account. Of such accounts it can be said:

[I]magination must work in creative friction with a given world, there are rules as well as freedoms, there are hard edges of reality one must respect. There is a world out there that humbles and disciplines. There are silences not of our making. … Much of what we most want to know about the past [read ‘supervision’] we cannot know … or probably cannot know: ‘Were this fiction, I would know that all things said and left unsaid, all disruptions, were intended to signify. But this is not fiction, and I cannot be sure.’ (Griffiths, 2000, p.136, citing historian Inga Clendinnen)
Tom Griffiths is talking here about writing history— but his words apply well to other forms of social enquiry. Throughout the writing of this thesis, blundering around blindly in the Dark Side where everything is ‘just’ text and texts are but instances of discourses, I often pondered the slippage between fact and fiction, finding the boundary under question. But Griffiths reminds us of a signal difference: the researcher is bound in terms of what s/he can say in a way that the fiction writer is not—even though the latter is also bound. Moreover, the researcher is enmeshed in messy obligations that the fiction writer is not, obligations that are difficult to define in advance (Smits et al., 1997).

If theory is a vehicle or tool for “thinking otherwise” (as some argue, see for instance Ball, 1995, p.266; and Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p.11), then figures (in the sense of tropes or metaphors) might be seen as vehicles or tools for the imagination—intended to move the reader’s emotions as well as galvanise her thinking. Gareth Morgan (1986) argues that “theories, like readings, are interpretations of reality … [and] are based on metaphors that lead us to see and understand [our object of inquiry] in distinctive yet partial ways” (p.12). He uses the term metaphor as the generic term for figure of speech25 (as I will sometimes do) and, in his view, theories and metaphors are entangled. In the literature, there have been a number of articles that have explored metaphors for supervision, for example master/apprentice (Connell, 1985), guide/traveller (Clegg & Gall, 1998), parent/child (Clegg & Gall, 1998), mentor/mentee (Leder, 1995), older sister/younger sister (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000, 2001), resource/resource user (Clegg & Gall, 1998), a family drama (Johnson et al., 2000), even a loving partnership (Heinrich, 1991). Most recently Lee and Green (2004) have added a more theoretical perspective, suggesting there are two “arch metaphors” (p.6) for supervision, Authorship and Apprenticeship, and drawing from their substantial empirical data (approximately 100 interviews with supervisors) three metaphor systems: cultural-discursive apprenticeship, co-production and project management. (There is some overlap with how Lee and Green describe their metaphor systems as representing “available systems of description which offer clusters of conceptual possibility” (ibid) and my work on the discourses of supervision presented in Chapter 2.)

My work also takes up the idea of figure (trope or metaphor) as a fruitful way of thinking and talking about supervision. The more I have explored supervision, the more it has struck me that supervision is “so many things at once” (paraphrasing Morgan, 1986, p.339). Each chapter takes up a different metaphor for supervision, understanding each to offer a distinctive yet partial view. The successive chapters “don’t learn from their predecessors” (Stronach & McClure, 1997, p.2) as in a classical thesis structure. Rather, the sense I want to

25 Morgan says: in the Poetics, Aristotle “identifies the four tropes we now recognize as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Each of these tropes can be understood as a variety of metaphor, but they play somewhat different roles” (1986, p.346).
create for the reader is one of circling around the ‘thing’ (socio-cultural practice) of supervision, looking at it from different distances and angles, and in so doing seeing it differently every time. To foreshadow one of my metaphors, Paul Berliner describes jazz improvisation as “wanting to look at a tune from a whole bunch of different perspectives – from a textual point of view, from a melodic point of view, or from a rhythmic point of view” (1994, p.233). Like Berliner’s different perspectives, each chapter offers a different way of thinking about the ‘and’ between supervisor and student.

A Bird’s Eye View

Now to preview the chapters that follow. The thesis is divided into three thematic parts. The first part, *Sundry Discourses, Layered Relations*, looks at the plurality of public meanings available for thinking about and experiencing supervision. The founding figure for supervision that I offer in Chapter 2 is supervision as a series of objects of different discourses. This somewhat long-distance view of supervision brings its socio-historical situatedness to the foreground – how what we consider proper or normal for supervision is attached to broader and shifting understandings about social and educational relationships. Currently, multiple discourses construct supervision, supervisor and student in contradictory ways, providing a field of possibilities for misunderstandings but also for exploring new modes of practice. In Chapter 3, I develop the metaphor of supervision as a palimpsest-like triangular field of intersecting layers of relationships, some ‘old’ (that is, they pre-exist supervision like gender relations for instance), some ‘new’ (in masters supervision, nearly always the supervision relation itself for at least one of its participants). These relations are always present in the moment of encounter between supervisor and student and inflect the goings-on between them in unpredictable, often indefinable, ways.

In the second part, *Institutional Mediations*, I explore some of the ways in which the institution mediates supervision. Through an analysis of the texts of two versions of a university’s code for supervision, Chapter 4 offers two tropes: the first is governmentality through which I consider the forms of power that are mobilised by the text of the code; the second is fantasy through which I ponder the institution’s investments in particular understandings of supervision. Chapter 5 takes up the Hegelian metaphor of Master and Slave and argues that this is the architecture for supervision made most likely by the institutional context. While this asymmetrical structure may be troublesome in some ways for both supervisor and student, it is also vital to the production of knowledge and to getting the work done.

In the third and final part, *The Dialogues of Supervision*, there are three chapters that take a look at the intimacy of dialogues between supervisors and students. Chapter 6 functions as a short literature review on the idea of dialogue in relation to the field of enquiry. Then, in Chapter 7,
I return to the figures of Master and Slave to explore a moment of dialogue between supervisor and student where the inescapable, structural asymmetry of supervision captures the interaction as it is wont to do from time to time. Here I hope to show how this asymmetry is both productive and problematic for supervision (as I have asserted above). In Chapter 8, by way of interrupting or exceeding the potentially deadly fixity of Master and Slave, I offer the more dynamic metaphor of improvisation, again exploring it via a moment of dialogue. This metaphor attempts to throw light on the reciprocal and creative aspects of the supervisor-student relation that may well be crucial to the re-constitution of both student as researcher and the terms and boundaries of the discipline. Chapter 9 brings the thesis to a close.

In circling around supervision in this way, I hope to respect the intrinsic messiness of the desirable, contradictory, engrossing, tension-ridden, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes painful, pedagogy that supervision seems to be. I also hope to keep before the reader a central methodological problem, that of the unavoidable violence done when the ambiguity and undecidability of human experience are forced to speak as if they can tell the truth. Or as if, I the researcher, can tell their truth. Despite my own sometime desire to find and tell the truth of supervision, I cannot do it here and the tactic of ‘figuring’ supervision is intended to underscore this.

Finally, a note about the form of this thesis. Originally I had planned to publish all the thesis body chapters along the way as a series of separate studies addressing the problematic of supervision. I met this goal for Chapters 2 and 3 (which are consequently noticeably shorter) and publication details can be found on the opening page of both chapters. An early, but somewhat different, version of Chapter 4 was also published in a book. While the passage of time and life events conspired to thwart this plan for the remaining chapters, the style of the thesis – in which there is some repetition of ideas across chapters and where the references come at the end of each chapter – arises from this original, if only semi-completed, intention.
Part One
Sundry Discourses, Layered Relations

Part One has two chapters, both of which view the question of the ‘and’ in “supervisor and student” from a somewhat distanced standpoint. The theme across the two chapters is one of multiplicity and all the complexity and messiness that this implies. Chapter Two, *Fighting for Space in Supervision: Fantasies, Fairytales, Fictions and Fallacies*, explores a range of contemporary discourses that diversely figure supervision as their object, and supervisors and students as their subjects. Not all the discourses play out in any particular supervision relation but all are available to be deployed by way of making sense of supervision and for judging one’s own and the other’s actions. This discursive richness may offer opportunities of one kind or another for supervisors and students, but may also pose some challenges, even problems, for the relations between them.

In a similar vein, Chapter Three, *Mapping the Pleasures and Risks of Supervision*, explores the intersecting layers of relations – pedagogical, social, personal – that may come into play between supervisor and student. In the relations of supervision, the academic and the personal come together in an unruly mix: again my interest is in how that mixing can produce pleasures and satisfactions, as well as tensions and difficulties, for supervision’s protagonists.
Read together, I hope the chapters leave the reader with some sense of modern supervision’s complexity, as well as a feel for the burdens it may bear as a pedagogy that is the site of considerable hope and investment, as well as uncertainty and unease.
Right now, graduate supervision is a deeply uncertain practice. What’s more, in a context of proliferating graduate student numbers and diversity, inflating fees and credentials as well as intensifying accountability, the practical questions of how much supervision is needed or expected and how it is best done are loaded. For instance, in supervision workshops with Masters and PhD students, the same kinds of questions nearly always arise:

Exactly what is supervision, assisting or directing?
What can I expect from my supervisor, what does s/he expect from me?
How often should we meet?
How do I deal with difficulties that arise?
How can I maintain my supervisor’s interest?
Are there special techniques to keep a good relation between us?

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This chapter was published by the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 18 (3), 337-354 (Grant, 2005).
How can I maintain professional boundaries between us? What is OK, safe?
(Verbatim from workshop activity sheets)

The students’ questions are mirrored by those of new supervisors:

What are my responsibilities?
What role should I take at different levels of study e.g. how much intervention?
Who/what is being supervised – the student or the research?
How do you keep a student on track?
What are the relationships between experience, innovation, inspiration and control?
Does the supervisor need to be an expert in the subject area?
Who owns the work?
(Verbatim from workshop activity sheets)

Such questions have multiple, sometimes conflicting, answers. Moreover, they are rarely addressed in supervision, seeming to comprise a terrain of uncertainty which the student dares not speak of and the supervisor cares not to. This terrain is a fertile ground for student-supervisor misunderstandings.

Why supervision should be so uncertain is an interesting theoretical puzzle, as well as an important practical one. I want to focus on the former here by offering a particular interpretation of the contemporary scene of supervision. In my view, there is a proliferation of discourses (systems of meaning) that produce supervision as a cultural practice. While there are limits to the ways we can ‘sensibly’ think, speak and enact supervision, these limits shift and slide as a function of the rich discursive context. Such slipperiness is a mixed blessing for the lived experience of supervision: it is potentially problematic insofar as differently positioned supervisors and students may talk past each other, but also fruitful insofar as there are more possibilities for diverse and pleasurable supervisor and student subjectivities and supervision exchanges.

To make my case, I sketch the outlines of the Loyal Supervisor and Loyal Student subjectivities and the Proper Supervision constituted by several more or less powerful discourses of supervision. These outlines suggest some recognisable stereotypes which function as the fantasies, fairytales, fictions, and fallacies of my title. Then I will analyze and discuss several moments of discursive ‘richness’ in data from my research with Masters students and supervisors in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Finally, I will explore some implications of this way of theorising supervision.
Before I proceed, though, let me clarify my use of ‘proper’ and ‘loyal’. Proper, in this usage, signifies the ‘unnaturalness’ of all forms of supervisor and student subjectivities, indeed of supervision, because they exist as “effects of a compulsory system” (Butler, 1998, p.722). Thus ‘proper supervision’ of any kind is a matter of socio-historical contingency. I like the word also for its suggestion of morality, which offers us insight into the intensity with which students in particular recount experiences of having been ‘wronged’ by the other party to supervision. Moreover, as Erica McWilliam in her book *Pedagogical Pleasures* (1999) points out, the way our pleasures as teachers and students are understood as proper or improper has changed over time. I would add that more than one understanding of proper pleasures co-exists in the present especially in the relatively lightly regulated zones of education like graduate research supervision (so far, at least). This can be problematic especially where the teacher’s pleasures and the student’s are asymmetrical, such that one’s pleasure is another’s pain. My choice of the word ‘loyal’ is also a deliberate one. Following Joan Cocks (1989), I’m using it to mark a posture – a way of cultivating the self – which is faithful to a certain “cultural-political regime” (p.195). In life, not many of us are totally loyal to any one sense of self. Indeed, loyal subjects are, as I have already remarked, more stereotypical than real. Nevertheless, the idea that discourses privilege certain forms of ideal subjectivity is a useful one for making sense of some of the uncertainties in supervision as I shall show.

**Circulating Discourses of Supervision**

Discourse here means socio-historical systems of meanings and knowledges that “intertwine with power [to] create speaking-acting subjects” (Foucault, 1974, p.47). In this view, every way in which we can think of ourselves as persons and agents is an historically constituted effect. Supervisors and students are just such agents – human subjects who purposively act, although *always* in constrained sorts of ways. Because I am interested in exploring both the possibilities and the constraints for acting in supervision, ‘discourse’ is useful to me. As a concept, it situates our actions in the broader social context without suggesting that they are narrowly determined by any particular element of it.

The methodology I use here is genealogical. Through it, I am attempting to make supervision graspable as a “singular ensemble of practices” (Meadmore et al., 2000, p.465) with historical, although non-progressive, lines of descent. A genealogy points to a certain order in the proliferation of supervision practices: after all, I am arguing there are identifiable discourses at work. Yet at the same time, it illuminates the unruliness with which these discourses play out in the lived experience of supervisors and students. So, with an eye on the past, I explore here the present of supervision as experienced by supervisors and students. I am interested in how we come to variously understand and perform ourselves as supervisors and students, what pleasures and subjugations we experience through being subjects of discourses. My intention
in all this is to make the familiar strange (Meadmore et al., 2000) and therefore questionable, so that we might be moved to imagine how things could be otherwise.

To begin my task. The discourses of supervision are found in various sites: the international scholarly literature on supervision, local institutional policies and practices, ‘self-help’ manuals for supervisors and students, and supervisor-student interactions. The most powerful infuse almost every site, others only appear in some. However no discourse totally dominates the scene. In my view the four most powerful discourses competing for loyal subjects in arts, humanities and social sciences supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand at this time are the psychological, the traditional-academic, the techno-scientific and the neo-liberal. But there are others on the margins, in particular the radical and the psychoanalytic discourses and possibly an indigenous Kaupapa Maori one. Let me now give you a sense of how each discourse constitutes its Loyal Supervisor and Student, its Proper Supervision with its characteristic power relations. (I use capitals to mark these constructs as ideal-types which lived experience rarely matches exactly.)

Over the 20th century, the psychological discourse has become the way of understanding ourselves in Western societies (Rose, 1996b). When “we seek self-fulfilment” (interviewer cited in Foucault, 1991c, p.349), or understand feelings to be “most relevant for morality” (p.352), then we are the Psy-self. The Psy-self is made of many capacities (intelligence, motivation, satisfaction, self-esteem, emotions, personality, mental wellbeing etc) which are distributed unequally in populations but which can be measured in order to ascertain the position of an individual in relation to the norm. (The concept of the norm is a key psy-construct.)

The psychological discourse constitutes its loyal Psy-Supervisor as a caring, expert professional:

To take seriously, as PhD supervisor, the creative nature of PhD research, with all the difficult personal demands it must inevitably make on its students, means undertaking a very different kind of role and responsibility from the one conventionally adopted. The quality that supervision needs above all to offer is that of personal support. (Salmon, 1992, p.20, italics added)

While the Psy-Supervisor, as an expert or professional researcher, has a full and tested measure of key capacities such as intelligence, s/he is first and foremost a source of motivation and support for the Psy-Student. As a ‘whole person’ (comprising mind and body), s/he has emotions and personality, both of which are relevant to proper Psy-Supervision. (A problem, however, is that these crucial capacities are not formally measured
and so students, who want to assess their ‘compatibility’ with their supervisor, ask other students.) Likewise the Psy-Student is a whole person but one who is inexperienced and uncalculated with respect to the task of independent research and therefore in need of help. Proper Psy-Supervision is the process by which, through a supportive interpersonal relationship, the expert sensitively and flexibly (Hockey, 1996b) guides the novice along a developmental trajectory to maturity as an independent researcher. Much of the guidance takes the form of motivation and encouragement, therefore trust and respect for the personhood of the other are central. The power relations mobilised by Psy-Supervision are like those between the therapist and the client: a complex blend of the symmetry of mutual interpersonal respect and the asymmetry of dependent trust required from the guided towards the guide. Psy-Supervision requires the Psy-Student to confess her/his struggles and failings to the sympathetic, wise and professional ear of the Psy-Supervisor in order that s/he may be helped to be successful (as s/he should be). In the contemporary academic literature (Acker et al., 1994; Connell, 1985; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Salmon, 1992) this discourse is widely present, as it is in my data.

By contrast, the traditional-academic discourse of supervision – which originated in the elite 19th century Oxbridge liberal education for gentlemen – figures Proper Supervision less as an interpersonal relationship and more as an intellectual apprenticeship:

Since only a tiny proportion of school-leavers went on to university …, academics could persist in the conviction that they were catering for the brightest and most dedicated. That attitude manifested itself in all sorts of ways, not the least in the apparent indifference to students … There was indeed an icy, magisterial disdain in much of their dealings with us. And yet few of us resented it, because it was recognised by many – certainly by me – at a sign of respect. It was a wonderful liberation to be left to your own devices … It seemed to mark more surely than any other ceremony our entry into the adult world, our being responsible for ourselves. (Andrew Reimer cited in Johnson et al., 2000, p.135, italics added)

The Trad-Supervisor is a proven scholar and master of the discipline, her/his key quality is a shining intellect; the Trad-Student is the disciple who wants to learn what the scholar knows, bathe in his/her reflected glory (be known as the student of Professor so and so), eventually (perhaps) taking up the supervisor’s mantle. The figures of both have been historically male and masculine norms of academic life infuse these subjectivities (Frow, 1988; Green & Lee, 1995; Johnson et al., 2000). Proper Trad-Supervision, marked by formality and distance, offers the challenges of intellectual sparring and confrontation – “intellectual work [is] a confrontation between two people, student and author [supervisor], where the stakes matter” (Edmundson, 1997, p.40). It has an intimate character in that its proper context is the privacy
of the supervisor’s ‘rooms’. It is “highly personalised” (Yeatman, 1995, p.9) yet not interpersonal in the psy-sense. Indeed, it has been characterised as a pedagogy of indifference, (Johnson et al., 2000) or a trial by fire (Lee & Williams, 1999), from which only the fittest emerge. The power relations? Like the guru/disciple relationship, proper Trad-Supervision is infused with sovereign indifference from the Trad-Supervisor (“charismatic authority” (Weber cited in Yeatman, 1995, p.9)) alongside grateful, even eager, subjection from the Trad-Student who submits because they believe in the extraordinary qualities of the specific person who is their supervisor. Trad-Supervision is bestowed by the Trad-Supervisor on the student, on her/his intellect in particular, by an active process of confrontation with the limits of her/his understanding. The student may or may not prove worthy of the Trad-Supervisor ultimately:

It is the genius of the apprentice which is responsible for how he takes up into his own creative powers the exemplary virtues and skills of the master (Yeatman, 1995, p.9, italics as in the original).

Not all apprentices have the genius.

Other than in reminiscences like Reimer’s (cited above), this discourse is absent from most sites of supervision, probably because to many contemporary minds it is seen as elitist and out-of-date, wrong-headed even. However an interesting example of the apparently deliberate and satisfying deployment of this discourse is to be found in the following story of supervision which I have annotated with italics to highlight the power relations of Trad-Supervision:

I kept a very formal working relationship with my main supervisor and this ensured that I felt enough awe and intimidation to meet deadlines and work hard. I knew that if I worked with someone with whom I had formed an informal friendship, I would lack self-discipline. … My main supervisor was a person who spoke directly and frankly about what he thought about my ideas and direction. … The successful relationship that I developed with [him] owed much to the fact that I knew what I was going to get from him – intellectual guidance and rigour. (Behrendt, 2001, pp.212-213, italics added)

Here an indigenous Australian woman describes how she sought Trad-Supervision because of the advantages (pleasures?) she perceived it would bring her. An interesting feature of this description, however, is that it seems to report ‘choosing’ a mode of supervision – choice is a feature of quite a different discourse altogether. In ways similar to this example, Trad-Supervision does show its face in my data – but always in an uneasy coexistence with other discourses, as I will show.
The third influential discourse, the techno-scientific, originated with the rise of research universities from the late 19th century and the constitution of the social sciences in the image of positivist science. The Techno-Supervisor is a trained and expert scientist, the Techno-Student an inexperienced trainee. Underpinned by a technical rationality (Acker et al., 1994) which emphasises the means rather than the ends, Proper Techno-Supervision is a process:

whereby an academic researcher assumes responsibility for directing an orderly, co-operatively planned and executed series of activities … (O'Rourke, 1997, p.32)

Techno-Supervision is a predictable and orderly process of research skills training; the Techno-Student’s progress is “subject to improvement and control by devices such as skills training or introducing incentives for swift completion” (Acker et al., 1994, p.484). The power relations mobilised are those of the expert’s close surveillance of the efforts of the Techno-Student who must be trained into the right methods of research. The malleable and obedient Techno-Student listens, tries and reports; the Techno-Supervisor observes, judges, instructs. This discourse appears occasionally in the academic literature (usually accompanied by criticisms of its shortcomings), but almost never surfaced in my data – maybe because none of the students was doing positivist research. However, and unsurprisingly, the technological discourse is dominant in national-level policy debates about postgraduate ‘training’: its orderly and predictable trajectory informs the norms and funding arrangements for postgraduate research enrolment; as well, because of its affinity with aspects of neo-liberalism (below), it has come to set the terms for institutional accountability. Ultimately, because of this, it exerts pressure on supervision, in particular pressure on students to limit their ambitions (the scope of their projects) and make steady progress so they will complete on time.

Newest on the scene, the neo-liberal discourse of supervision is associated with the sweeping economic reforms of the 1980s. In reconfiguring education as a commodity, and educational institutions as commercial enterprises, it constitutes the Com-Student as an “autonomous chooser” (Marshall, 1997, p.598), a consumer of services, and the Com-Supervisor as provider of those services. (With the expansion of distance modes of supervision, there are now e-Com variants of these subjectivities as well.) Proper Supervision is the satisfactory exchange of services according to the terms of a consumer ‘contract’:

[N]ew contractualist technologies of managing individualised relationships are of a kind as to provide the structure that is needed [in supervision]. These are infra-legal mechanisms of contractual relationship which, within the relationship concerned, embed ways of making both parties accountable to each other for their respective parts within a shared project (Yeatman, 1995, p.10, italics as in original)
In this view, supervision is not valuable intrinsically as a ‘relationship’, nor for its role in producing scholars, but for the usefulness of the transferable skills it imparts and the credential (commodity) gained. The power relations mobilised are of a quasi-legal nature: both Com-Student and Com-Supervisor are parties to an explicit contract whereby both have specified rights and responsibilities. In addition, the Com-Student, as the service chooser and consumer, has the power of the purchaser and expects value for money. This discourse is rarely found in the scholarly literature on supervision and appeared infrequently in my data. With the commercialisation of higher education, though, it has been taken up by institutional administrators with a vengeance, producing a plethora of institutional practices designed to keep the customers happy – student satisfaction surveys, glossy handbooks, well appointed graduate student centers, supervision contracts, charters of rights, grievance procedures, as well as expanding coursework components and modules which reconfigure the curriculum as a smorgasbord of more easily consumed chunks of knowledge. At the same time it has other effects, some of which place tensions directly on supervision such as increased pressure on students to finish on time (i.e., within the period of the ‘contract’ which is the period covered by government funding). In its instrumentality, neo-liberalism is akin to the techno-scientific discourse (which may account for the latter’s seemingly strengthened position in policy debates): in particular, it privileges the rational specification of process (services) and product.

The powerful discourses described so far rely on a view of social relations in which supervision is understood as a fundamentally rational and transparent practice between autonomous individuals. There are, though, marginal discourses which speak back critically to this view. For instance, radical discourses (including progressive, critical, and feminist ones) have emerged from the upheavals of the 1960s and 70s to place social interests and power relations at the heart of supervision. Loyal Rad-Supervisor and Rad-Student are gendered, classed, ethnically situated, sexually orientated (and so on) and these social positionings play out in supervision. The power relations immanent in Rad-Supervision mirror those between differently socially located individuals in the wider society. Further, even where Rad-Supervisor and Rad-Student share social position/s, their interests cannot be the same because of their different, and unequal, institutional positions. The Rad-Supervisor is powerful in a way that the Rad-Student cannot be. Proper Rad-Supervision is a fraught terrain as these differently interested and weighted individuals often talk past each other. One response to this ‘problem’ has been an effort on the part of the Rad-Supervisor, and sometimes the Rad-Student, to overcome the power difference and establish a non-hierarchical, even power-free, relationship with the other:

My chief supervisor never had Dr, he always had his first name, because he was very egalitarian and democratic and we didn’t believe in all this bullshit about hierarchies of the university and that kind of stuff. (Interview subject cited in Middleton, 2003, p.52)
The radical discourses are producing a growing body of academic work within feminism in particular (see for example, Bartlett & Mercer, 2001; Conrad, 1994; Dowling & Jones, 1998; Hammick & Acker, 1998; Hassall & Wilson, 1998; Lee, 1998; Moses, 1992; Schroeder & Mynatt, 1993, 1999). Institutional policies and practices, however, are rarely infused by it – except in the form of anti-harassment policies or policies and codes governing the conduct of amorous relationships between supervisors and students. The radical discourse only occasionally surfaced in my data.

Another marginal ‘critical’ discourse is the psychoanalytic. It constitutes the Loyal Psycho-Supervisor and Psycho-Student as having unconscious desires which are activated by the structural inequality of supervision and worked through over the course of the supervision. Proper Psycho-Supervision is infused by processes of transference and counter-transference and criss-crossed by the Psycho-Supervisor’s and -Student’s desires for the other which, giving an erotic charge to supervision, make it work – for better and worse. The power relations of Psycho-Supervision are those of the analyst and analysand: the relatively stable and asymmetrical relations between the ‘unhappy’ one who needs the other’s talking cure; and the unpredictably shifting relations of transference and counter-transference that ensue in such heavily charged encounters. The psychoanalytic discourse appears in a small body of writing on supervision (see for example, Frow, 1988; Gallop, 2001; Giblett, 1992; Owler, 1999; Simon, 1995; Sofoulis, 1997; Threadgold, 1995), never in institutional policies and practices and, like the radical discourses, appeared only occasionally in my data.

New discourses of supervision will continue to emerge as social relations shift and new power/knowledge formations come into play. These discourses will offer different versions of Loyal Supervisor and Student and proper Supervision. For instance I have already mentioned an indigenous Kaupapa Maori discourse which may be operating in informal reports from Maori students. Some describe being supervised as a collectivity in which supervisors and students work together, understanding the success or failure of an individual as the success or failure of the group. (A Kaupapa Maori theory of education and education research more generally is described by Linda Smith (1999) and Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn (1999).)

**Fantasies, Fairytales, Fictions and Fallacies**

Why are individuals positioned within particular discourses? A Foucauldian view insists this is a matter of necessity, not choice. To be active participants in the world, we must be recognisable subjects and so, for reasons of social intelligibility, we are ensnared by discourses which structure our sense of self, our pleasures and desires. The discourses which hail us as their subjects offer us subjectivities which ‘feel right’, which satisfy and please us. In this
sense, they are entangled with, and productive of, the fantasies and fictions that motivate but complicate all our relationships. (This assertion is informed by many experiences of listening to students and supervisors talking about their hopes and frustrations around supervision.) But, because we have diverse social positions, we are the subjects of more than one discourse – and in the complexity that ensues we find contradictions and tensions that offer possibilities of an exciting and dangerous kind. Let me now offer four extracts from my data which show multiple discourses at work – traversing and structuring the narratives (Britzman, 1995b, p.232) – and my thoughts about the possible effects.

Example 1: A Student Speaks …

I see … the supervisor as the guiding hand maybe, who um – I am saying this in a kind of reserved way because I know that it’s not necessarily the reality of it. But as a person who kind of picks up the pieces where they’re needed and fills in the gaps and points direction and gives focus and clarity. And pushes a little and is realistic a little, you know, about how much can be done. Who is a kind of support, a fall-back-on person, who is constant throughout the process, the journey, of doing a thesis. And who can add, you know, I did pick my supervisor as somebody who could offer me things, intellectual things, you know, intellectual stimulation, and I respected her writing style and method of – although it is quite different from mine – I kind of respect it and thought I could learn a lot from that and it complemented my weaknesses of being fuzzy when I write. She could add clarity and structure to my kind of cloudiness. (Student 5, initial interview)

More than one discourse operates to produce this student’s understandings of her supervisor’s role. It seems from her tone that some seem to be more ‘legitimate’ to her than others – she can be more easily loyal to them. First, somewhat tentatively, (“I am saying this in a kind of reserved way”), she seeks the guiding and supportive hand of the Psy-Supervisor who will “pick up the pieces”, “fill in the gaps”, “point direction”, be “constant throughout the process.” As well, it seems this supervisor, in being able to “push a little” and be “realistic a little”, will have insight into her ‘soul.’ Second, but more surely, the student desires the Trad-Supervisor who will challenge her. The Trad-Supervisor will offer her “intellectual stimulation”, and teach her something that she lacks (“complementing my weaknesses”) through modelling scholarly method (“adding clarity and structure to my kind of cloudiness”). Third, the student positions herself with some certainty as the Com-Student – “I did pick my supervisor” – choosing her supervisor because of what that person could offer her by way of services.

Entangled (but not powerless) in a wide discursive net, the student expresses many expectations and desires, even fantasies, of her supervisor – to be taken care of, to have her deficiencies made up, to be intellectually stimulated, to learn something, to be given good
service. This is a potent cocktail of wishes, some which seem quite contradictory and, from a particular discourse’s vantage point, ‘unreasonable.’ (For instance, Proper Trad-Supervision does not offer the support looked for in the first half of the extract. These matters are ‘personal’ and have no place in supervision.) We cannot predict the outcome for this student and supervisor: incipient pleasures and dangers for both loom on the supervision horizon. On the one hand, if the supervisor meets the student’s wishes, then the student may be happy. Yet even this cannot be assumed – our desires to be taken care of, for instance, are often contradicted by our desires for autonomy. On the other, how likely is it that an ordinary busy academic will be able to fulfil the fantasies expressed here? Not very. (For instance, the skill base required for effective therapy, which is what Psy-Supervision is analogous to, is the fruit of intensive training. The interpersonal encounter is the central work of the therapist, not a part-time activity as the supervision meeting is for the supervisor who is ‘really’ an academic.) An order of disappointment seems likely, although this in turn will depend on her supervisor’s view of Proper Supervision. As well, the student opens her comments with a reservation – “I am saying this in a kind of reserved way because I know that it’s not necessarily the reality of it” – so perhaps if her desires aren’t met it won’t matter because she doesn’t really expect them to be.

**Example 2: A Supervisor Speaks ...**

I don’t think one has to be an expert to supervise. And I think that is a, to be honest, that is a view that I find frustrating dealing with some of my colleagues here who feel they have to be a specialist. And if I was cynical I would say that is a crutch to prop oneself up so one doesn’t have to supervise too many students. But then I think also we are a ... department that straddles the humanities and sciences and I think those among us who are of the more scientific mindset would be the ones who would see they have to be more specialists and, you know everyone is a product of their own sort of socialisation as scholars, and I think scientists do construct themselves as specialists and experts more than people in humanities in general who, to do a generalisation, are probably more generous ... (Supervisor 4, initial interview)

This supervisor is talking about supervising a student in a sub-field in which he is not a scholar. The psychological discourse, in which the supervisor’s authority rests on their training as a ‘professional’ researcher, offers him the Psy-Supervisor position in which it is fine to supervise under these circumstances: “I don’t think one has to be an expert to supervise.” Yet he is aware that some of his colleagues are positioned differently – as Trad- or Techno-Supervisors – and this allows them to ‘avoid’ what he sees as their supervision responsibilities. In this moment of discourse disjuncture, we can see how Proper Psy-Supervision makes mass graduate education possible in a way that Proper Trad-Supervision does not. (It would be impossible to supervise large numbers of students on the master/disciple basis of Trad-Supervision.) At the same time, although the supervisor is frustrated by his colleagues, the co-existence of the two discourses makes it possible for him to reason through his frustration by
speculating on the reasons for this difference. (He attributes the difference to diverse academic socialisations, an explanation which offers the possibility of ‘forgiving’ his colleagues for their actions.) However, his positioning as Psy-Supervisor is conflicted and incomplete as we can see when he returns to the issue a few minutes later in the interview:

\[I\text{ mean the thing is Barbara, that I can say that you don’t need to be an expert to supervise. However, I think if I was really honest – which I will be with you – there are sort of outwardly spaced rings of expertise and what [Student A] is doing is more central to the area that I would be involved in – in terms of reading, international colleagues, all that sort of thing. So I can place what she is doing and I think I can provide more informed critique. I would be less comfortable supervising a student doing what [Student B] is doing if that student was not of the known abilities that [he] is. So the fact that he has come through my knowledge of him at stage 3, and then first-year masters, gives me the comfort level to say, oh okay, I’ll supervise [him], yeah. … I will learn something from it. … I find that exciting. I find it an honour to work with students who sort of entrust me to supervise when you know I’m not published internationally on a topic like that. Whereas, I know it sounds conceited but I am internationally known [in Student A’s field]. (Supervisor 4, initial interview)\]

There is a thread of anxiety in the way this supervisor is negotiating the ‘choice’ between being Psy-Supervisor or Trad-Supervisor. It seems he doesn’t want to not be the Trad-Supervisor who is the leading authority in the field. There are benefits for his student, and pleasures for him, in this position: “So I can place what she is doing and I think I can provide more informed critique.” But we see here the pleasures offered by the Pys-Supervisor position as well: “I find that exciting. I find it an honour to work with students who sort of entrust me … .” What is the “honour”? Within Pys-Supervision, perhaps it is the implication that the student chose the supervisor for qualities other than academic profile, more personal ones say; within Trad-Supervision it may be more to do with some anticipated honour that will come in the form of ‘reflected glory’ as the supervisor behind a brilliant thesis.

Visible in this second extract is the fictitiousness of the dream of mass higher education as an extension of the privileges and status of the elite to the whole population (a dream which drives many students, employers and governments): the subject position of Psy-Supervisor which makes supervising a wide range of graduate students possible (because the Psy-Supervisor does not need to be an authority in each student’s subject area), is only really “comfortable” when the student is of “known abilities”, a top (or elite) student. This implies that in other circumstances it is not comfortable. Yet these other circumstances are the new reality of higher education which includes many more students with non-traditional profiles in the graduate cohort. Here we get a hint of the fraughtness of contemporary supervision in which – amid the contradictions of Psy-, Trad- and Com-Supervision – an individual supervisor, lacking extensive knowledge of the topic, supervises a student of unknown ability,
within a context of heightened accountability for outcomes. It is hard to see how supervision in this context can be other than uncomfortable, much of the time.

**Example 3: Another Student Speaks …**

Do I feel I am wasting [my supervisor’s] time? I’ve decided that that is my problem to an extent, not his. I mean he has reassured me on a number of occasions … I hate to class myself in the consumer category but I’ve paid fees and those contribute to his wages and I’ve got to make sure that I get the most from this relationship myself. ... And I certainly hate, I can’t stand students who choose to appeal to fee paying as an excuse for demanding service because I think that is what a university should be about … irrespective of whether you are paying fees or not and it is an absolutely appalling argument to make. … I think that, you know, I’m trying to make a contribution to [my discipline] and I think it is a small one but I think it is a useful one and, I mean I was fortunate enough that [my supervisor] got some funding from [an outside organization] and they chose to give me a graduate scholarship out of it, a small one, to help fund this research and there is an expectation that we will put a paper together and I will probably publish with [my supervisor] out of it too. (Student 3, initial interview)

This student seems to understand himself most loyally as the Trad-student. He asserts his autonomy in a number of ways: he owns the problem of whether or not he is wasting his busy supervisor’s time by requiring supervision meetings (“I’ve decided that that is my problem to an extent, not his.”). More tellingly, he sees himself as a scholar who is “trying to make a contribution to” his discipline; he relishes the expectation that he and his supervisor will “put a paper together” and publish from his thesis. He is supported in this sense of self by being chosen for a graduate scholarship, a process that includes him in an elite subset of students. At the same time, even though he says he “can’t stand” students who see themselves as consumers (the Com-Students), he quite self-consciously and strategically appeals to Com-Supervision to justify his demands of his supervisor on the grounds of a consumer contract: “I’ve paid fees and those contribute to his wages and I’ve got to make sure that I get the most from this relationship myself”. The neo-liberal discourse of supervision offers this student (and many others) a way to argue for something which would be difficult to argue for from the position of Trad-Student – for example, as an independent scholar-in-the-making, how can he justify asking time from his busy supervisor? There is an implication in that way of understanding yourself which suggests you shouldn’t really need help, especially at the expense of another scholar’s work. Being left to your own devices is, as Andrew Reimer’s quote indicates earlier, a mark of respect. So there is the persistent, ‘unjustifiable’ anxiety about taking his supervisor’s time, an anxiety which needs to be rationalised and dealt with. To do this, he takes up the position of the Com-Student, which he otherwise despises.
In this extract a supervisor is talking about her own experiences of being supervised in the USA some years earlier:

In retrospect, I am incredibly grateful for [my supervisor over-correcting my writing] now— and even at the time I knew— so after I got over the sort of oh god feeling— even at the time I was sort of grateful but not as grateful as I am now. And in a sense you sometimes need someone to tell you the ropes and he did that for me … because of his over-controlling personality really and he wanted to sort of mould me into this little version of him. … Yes, he could go around saying that's my student— which he does now anyhow. … His personality is kind of interesting as well, I mean he just wants to be loved, at a certain kind of level. He just wants his own kind of professional approval and I mean because of his own sort of bad family stuff, not having a father in particular, he just craves male, parental figure kind of approval, and he has to be loved and all this stuff. (Supervisor 3, initial interview)

Earlier in the same interview, this supervisor describes her experience as having been “incredibly fraught, and emotionally demanding, wrenching stuff” (p.6), a good deal of which she attributes to the way she was supervised by her main supervisor. Looking back though, she can see that she learned some useful things about academic writing from him: “In retrospect, I am incredibly grateful … .” Elsewhere in the interview she acknowledges this explicitly: “the one thing I can say is he taught me to write and made me able to write academically” (p.2). She employs Trad-Supervision to make sense of this experience of being supervised by a dominating academic who seemed to want to make a clone of her by saying: “in a sense you sometimes need someone to tell you the ropes.” This invokes the classic master-disciple relation of Trad-Supervision in which the student depends upon the experience and authority of the supervisor. Her story of supervision is that of Proper Trad-Supervision, an experience marked by trials and persistence on the part of the student, with a kind of indifference from the supervisor. Ultimately though the disciple’s success shines glory on the master: “he could go around saying that’s my student.” Yet, at the same time, we can also see her use of Psycho-Supervision to make sense of the supervisor’s controlling behavior towards her and her work which was very painful for her at the time. She sees that it was driven by his need to have his students look good and be approved by others. She says of him later: “So, he was sort of channelling me to be the kind of person they [the people he admired] would approve of in a certain kind of way … this is a driving force for him and for many people – the number one thing is people have to think you are smart” (p. 13). She interprets this drive as a product of his desire to be loved and approved (by other significant males in particular), a desire which she ‘knows’ to have been thwarted in his childhood: “because of his own sort of bad family stuff, not having a father in particular, he just craves male, parental figure kind of approval, and he has to be loved.” Having this way of understanding him helps her to make sense of the supervisor’s apparent obsession with being
an academic ‘top dog’; it also seems to allow her to reconcile the helpful dimensions of his supervision practices with the awful ones.

**Reflections on and Implications of this Interpretation**

A way of speaking about what we do has gone dead on us: Once we had a vocation, then we had a profession and now we find we’re service providers who produce ‘outcomes’. The rest of our present fate follows from that. (Eggert, 2001, p.8)

There is a sense in which both modern and postmodern, and maybe even traditional, forms of identity can be said to coexist in the contemporary world providing a complex pattern of overlaying and interaction. (Usher & Edwards, 1995, p.20)

While I support Eggert’s view that academic subjectivities have recently undergone certain sorts of changes, the interpretation I offer here does not uphold his pessimism. Rather than the ‘old’ ways of making sense of ourselves (discourses) being dead to us, in the scene of supervision they seem to compete with newer discourses for loyal subjects creating the complex social world of Usher’s view. Competition is an effect of the intensely political character of discourse which is always “in flux and characterised by martial relationships” (Kendall & Wickham, 2001, p.158) – so when some discourses establish themselves as dominant, as natural and commonsense, the marginal others appear as more or less ridiculous, outrageous, unethical, improper or unspeakable. Further, because discourses tend to be associated with particular social groups, they are more or less accessible to different individuals by ‘virtue’ of birth and inclination.

So, which discourses are likely to be most powerful now in the supervision of Masters research students in the humanities, arts and social sciences in a research university in Aotearoa New Zealand? Broadly speaking, I think the psychological discourse is in the ascendant, pervasively constituting supervision as first and foremost an interpersonal relationship. Given the impersonal nature of much of higher education, this is not surprising – Psy-Supervision offers an opportunity for pleasuring the relationship-hungry psy-selves that so many of us, students and supervisors, understand ourselves to be. At the same time, there will be certain effects – for instance, the trend towards supervisors not examining theses (because the tensions between being the supportive and motivating Psy-Supervisor and the objective examining Trad-Supervisor are seen to be too great) which will have unpredictable consequences. Given my own training (as a primary teacher) and subsequent marginal positioning within the academy (working as an academic advisor with students), my stance has been and remains inevitably complicit with Psy-Supervision and its trenchant criticisms of the elitism of Trad-Supervision. When I look back over a decade of work in the area during
which my colleague Adele Graham and I ran many workshops for supervisors and students, developed supervision ‘tools’, and advocated a certain kind of stance towards supervision (Graham & Grant, 1997; Grant & Graham, 1994, 1999), it is clear to me now how infused with psychological assumptions that work has been. I am not disavowing our work as such, but I have become more aware of the limitations of Proper Psy-Supervision. Every Proper form has its risks as well as its peculiar pleasures: psy-Supervision in particular has all the risks that come from trying to have a satisfying interpersonal relationship in a context of significant institutional and social differences and limitations.

Although Psy-Supervision is powerful, it competes with the traditional-academic discourse which is still a potent subjectifying force offering different kinds of persistent pleasures and risks. In contrast, neo-liberalism seems to have much less of a grip at the level of on-the-ground supervision practices than we might think (say, from Eggert’s view). It seems that the pleasures of customer satisfaction have yet to exert much force on students’ desires – maybe the implausibility of construing education as a consumer transaction (which appears to elude policy makers) is all too obvious to those who practice supervision.

If we take discursive complexity for granted, then dangerous multiple and contradictory fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies are to be expected in supervision. Where supervisor and student understand self and other through different discourses, they may simply ‘talk past’ each other, although sometimes to the detriment of the project and the student’s grade (future ambitions even). Or, as I have illustrated in the first example above, the co-existence of several discourses may legitimise ever-increasing and more diverse expectations which entail frustration and disappointment when the other party cannot meet them. More gravely, students and supervisor may not recognise each other as ‘serious’ about their role to the point of finding the other unacceptable, even unethical. This is because the subjectivities that discourses constitute are imbued with the laws of their own formation. These in turn give their loyal subjects a sense of ‘morality’, a sense of the ‘right’ way to be. In a heavily invested pedagogy like supervision, people who judge each other as acting wrongly may end up ‘talking against’ each other, accusing each other of negligence, over-dependence, harassment and the like with all the destructive and painful consequences that ensue.

But I want to close on a less troubled note. I want to argue that multiple and contradictory fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies do offer pleasures as well as dangers. What is potentially problematic turns out to be simultaneously problem-solving. In a real sense (as we can see in some of the extracts above), discursive richness can be fruitful, offering students and supervisors a range of possibilities for making sense of their experiences. Different discourses produce novel ways of thinking and acting which can be useful for addressing unanticipated situations, in particular providing resources with which to ‘resolve’ some of the
problems the complexity and ambiguity of supervision throws up. As well, more discourses mean more possibilities for diverse individuals to see themselves as the legitimate subjects of supervision. To have these fruits, though, students and supervisors may need to learn to find pleasure and possibility among the uncertainties that I identified at the opening of this paper, rather than understanding them as a sign of their own or each other's inadequacies. More, in the midst of such uncertainties, they must find ways to act as supervisors and students which bring the outcomes they seek. Indeed, universities have a responsibility to assist them, maybe through academic advising and other services. The interpretation I offer here is intended to encourage this ongoing work.
Chapter 3
Mapping the Pleasures and Risks of Supervision

Introducing my Standpoint

Traditionally conducted behind closed doors in spaces remote from undergraduate teaching, the intensity of the interpersonal relations of much postgraduate pedagogy is presumed but uninterrogated. (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995, p.32)

Good supervision is central to successful graduate research, yet it is a pedagogy which is poorly understood. This may be because of the assumed privacy and ‘uniqueness’ of each supervision (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000) but also, in the literature, it is undertheorised (Green & Lee, 1995; McWilliam & Palmer, 1995).

In my view, supervision differs from other forms of teaching and learning in higher education in its peculiarly intense and negotiated character, as well as in its requirements for a blend of

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27 This chapter was published in Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 24, (2), 173-188 (Grant, 2003).
pedagogical and personal relationship skills. These differences arise because supervision is not only concerned with the production of a good thesis, but also with the transformation of the student into an independent researcher. This transformation is effected through an individualised working relationship between the student and an ‘expert’ researcher (or two), a relationship which engages student and supervisor/s in productive power relations. This view sees supervision as an ethical practice through which student and supervisor are constituted as certain kinds of human beings (Johnson et al., 2000).

Perhaps in part because of this ethical dimension, supervision is often problematic in practice. When working with supervisors in supervision skills workshops, I usually ask them to recall their own experiences of supervision. Frequently their memories are painful, like these:

Both experiences … were both quite negative experiences really. Where I was basically just thrown into the deep end … I had to teach myself, had to give myself my own kind of emotional and intellectual support, and generally they were quite aversive experiences where I was basically left alone. (Supervisor 3, initial interview)

I just think that doing a PhD is probably some of the most lonely, depressing years of your life … you can’t see past the whole process and people have so much power over your life … I often found there was conflicting and contradictory and inconsistent stuff about what I was expected to do … [my supervision experience] was incredibly fraught and emotionally demanding, wrenching stuff. (Supervisor 2, initial interview)

As well, through my work with students, I am aware of how poorly equipped many are to participate in the supervisory encounter. My current research, which grew out of these experiences, is kindled by the twin desires to understand my own supervision practices better and to work more creatively and effectively as an academic developer.

This paper addresses two products of my study so far. I elaborate a map for supervision which is based on contemporary theories of education, as well as on my experience as supervised student, supervisor, and academic developer working with both students and supervisors. My purpose with the map is to point to the complex and unstable character of supervision. Alongside the map, to make it more ‘concrete’, I draw on critical discourse analysis to offer some preliminary and illustrative data from an actual supervision.

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28 My interest here is the mode of supervision in the British one-to-one tutorial tradition associated with the arts, humanities and social sciences, rather than with the physical sciences. However, from my experience of working with supervisors and students across all the disciplines for more than ten years, I think many of the issues raised here are relevant in both domains which, at times, overlap in actual practices.
A Map for Supervision

A map seems a useful device for elaborating my current understanding of supervision, especially if we think of the map as palimpsest-like, a surface from which earlier layers of inscription have been partially or completely erased to make room for newer texts. The older layers occasionally intrude into the newer, interrupting their meanings. The effects of such interruptions may be misunderstandings, ambiguities, excitements, contradictions, confusions, moments of unexpected clarity, fragmentations and so on. This is what I mean when I claim that supervision is complex and unstable. It is an interesting mixture of the personal, the rational and the irrational, the social and the institutional, full of possibilities of all kinds, a source of great pleasure to some students and supervisors:

\begin{quote}
I love it. It is the best part of my job. I really enjoy it a lot. (Supervisor 3, initial interview)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I do enjoy it, good fun. She enjoys it too. Oh it is just, good fun, I don’t know why. (Student 4, initial interview)
\end{quote}

However it is also a source of risk, as I shall show.

When explaining each layer of the map, working from what I think of as the most recent layer to the older ones, I also offer tentative ‘readings’ of some ‘texts’ of supervision-in-action for illustrative purposes. The texts I am analysing are the products of a supervision meeting between a supervisor and her Masters research student. I will treat these texts as traces of the layers of the map. In analysing the texts, I have been influenced by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 1997; Kamler, 1997a) because it makes links between discourse-as-language and discourses as the knowledge/power formations (Foucault, 1974) which enable student and supervisor to speak as ‘themselves’. In this understanding, discourses (in the second sense) speak through supervisor and student, constituting them as certain kinds of subjects, as well as being spoken by them (as in the first sense). I have also been influenced by my training as a literature student in the reader-response tradition (Lynn, 1998) of making personal meaning through the close reading of texts – although I understand ‘personal’ as more than individual. As the discussion progresses, my analysis will become increasingly speculative because some layers, in particular the ‘older’ ones, may be opaque in meaning to the person who ‘produced’ the text, let alone the hopeful researcher. This is because the workings of discourses occur as much outside our conscious control as within it. I think this tentativeness is a strength of my work and a necessary ingredient in any discussion of pedagogy.
Before addressing the map, I will describe some of the contextual dimensions surrounding and informing the production of the particular texts I have used to illustrate it.

**Text and Context**

The data I analyse here are two kinds of texts. One is the transcript of a supervisor and student speaking together in an hour-long supervision meeting; the other is two sets of written notes, each made by the supervisor and student separately within 24 hours of the meeting in response to some questions I posed.

There is a rich context to the production of these texts, some of the elements of which are as follows. The immediate context is the scene of this particular supervision meeting which is in the supervisor’s office. Both supervisor and student are European-born women, the supervisor is in her mid-30s, the student in her early 20s. The supervisor has read a complete first draft of the student’s thesis (for a Masters degree in a field of social science) and is giving the student feedback on it. The context is unusual in that although the thesis is due to be completed shortly the supervisor is new to the situation, having stepped in late in the day after two other (senior male) supervisors had been involved and withdrawn. Because of the late stage, there is some urgency to the supervision as there is much to be done to bring the thesis to readiness for submission and the deadline is close. (Other details that could be relevant here but for which I have no data include who asked for the meeting, how it was arranged, the room set-up, whether or not they had a drink while they met, and so on). Another unusual feature of the meeting is that there is a tape recorder running because the supervisor has asked the student if she is willing to participate in a research project. The student has ‘consented’. This means that in a sense there is a third person, an observer, in the meeting. It is difficult to calculate the disruptive effects of this ‘presence’ and how the student and supervisor may position and re-position themselves in response to it. The supervisor writes:

> Why [did I not apologise for being so late in getting back to the student]? I wanted to keep up the appearance of Super supervisor for the tape recorder. (you, God? Etc). Usually I do offer apologies.

(Notes)

In her comment, she suggests she is aware of my presence. However, as well as being aware of the external omniscient researcher’s presence she notes her awareness of an *internalised* omniscient Other, in this case God. In other cases this internalised omniscient Other might be the Super-ego, the conscience, the head of department, the absent masters of the discipline. While the researcher’s presence may be, is even likely to be, disruptive it is not the only other

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29 Because consent between a student and their supervisor is not straightforward, I met with the student to discuss her consent.
possible presence in supervision. I will come back to this in my discussion of the fourth layer of the map.

Another element of the context is the department and the student’s and supervisor’s positions within it. The discipline is commonly a male-dominated one and, in this particular department, the supervisor is one of few women academics among many men. Yet another element is the institution. It is a large research university which is responding to fiscally difficult times by attempting to position itself as the elite research university in a small country with a high number of research universities per capita. One strategy the university has used in pursuit of this objective over the last decade has been to actively seek to increase the number of graduate research students. This has been successful but there has been little attention to resourcing the students and many are dissatisfied with their experiences. There had also been a recent external quality audit which had criticised the university’s practices in this area in the previous year. As a result, there had been a flurry of activity on the part of the university including surveying each department to find out what resources they provided for their research students. The faculty that this department is part of had also surveyed, again by questionnaire, all its graduate students in an effort to find out what their perceptions were of their experiences. So, at this time, there was a climate of heightened sensitivity about the provisions for graduate students.

**The First Layer: Supervisor and Student**

The most obvious, perhaps most visible, layer of the map represents supervision as a simple relationship between student and supervisor:
Securely founded on a belief in the fundamental rationality and autonomy of every individual, the supervisor-student relationship is institutionally mandated and thus pre-exists the individual supervisor and student. The supervisor is a knowing authority, who is also in authority in the sense of overseeing the student’s work. The student does not know and therefore is in need of guidance. The relationship has a unilateral quality because its goal is that the supervisor teach the student something – a set of research skills, an appropriate disposition with respect to the production of academic work, the skills of writing a sustained and mature piece of academic work which is appropriate in style and substance to the values and mores of the discipline. This institutional character of supervision, while it is regulated informally as well as formally, can be made fairly transparent to the student and supervisor. Many universities, for instance, have attempted to do this by producing codes of practice which outline the responsibilities of the pair. (Elsewhere I have written a critique of the limitations of such codes (Grant, 2001).)

In the transcript of the meeting, the distinctive traditional roles of supervisor and student are immediately visible – the supervisor opens the meeting and sets out the agenda. The student agrees:
Sr: [deep breath], okay, now let’s see... try talking to this. What I’ve done is, um, I’ve written these small comments on a piece of paper and major comments, ten points yeah?

St: [overlaps] yeah

Sr: so shall I just go through ..

St: yeah [interrupts Sr to agree]

Sr: .. each of them and perhaps I need to go, if you want to give examples, get examples, I will refer to the small comments [cough] and if we have time [speaking more quickly] or if you want to, we can go through the small, through the small,

St: mhm (Meeting transcript)

This opening exchange sets the scene for much of what follows. Throughout the meeting, the supervisor talks the most; she also makes the most knowing comments. The student readily responds with sounds of agreement which frequently overlap with the supervisor’s speech; sometimes she speaks back to the supervisor to explain something further. She does not disagree with any of the comprehensive changes the supervisor suggests and she does not ask questions. Overall their respective positions seem clear: the supervisor is an authoritative knowing teacher and the student is an agreeable and co-operative listener. However, a problematic feature of the supervision relationship so understood and enacted is that students often feel somewhat powerless and this may be exacerbated when the supervisor will also be the examiner. Yet power is a dirty word and not spoken of in the codes and guidelines.

The Second Layer: Pedagogical Power Relations

I want now to trace the outline of another layer which lies below the first through adding the term ‘pedagogy’ as it is commonly used in radical education theories. Whereas we usually think of the teaching and learning relationship as dyadic between teacher and student, in pedagogy the matrix of relationships is triadic (imagine a triangle) between teacher, student and knowledge:
In this meaning of pedagogy, the relationships between teacher (supervisor), student and knowledge (thesis) are seen to be productive because all three are “active, changing and changeable agencies” (Lusted, 1986, p.3). Equally valuable, each is transformed through the processes of pedagogy. In a sense, the outcome of supervision is not only to teach the student skills but to teach the student how to be someone – a researcher, a scholar, an academic. Such transformation is effected through power relations which always work through the actions of an acting subject upon another acting subject (Foucault, 1986). To avoid the pitfall of according all power to the supervisor, it is important to recognise that both supervisor and student have the capacity to act.

At the same time, as an institutionalised pedagogy, supervision:

- imposes norms for capacities and conduct, ...
- is organised around techniques of moral supervision, ...
- embodies these techniques in unequal relations between the differentially constructed agents of teacher and student (Gore, 1993, p.125).
What does it mean to say that supervisor and student are differentially constructed? Some aspects of the institutional position of the supervisor are as follows: s/he is positioned as an experienced and successful researcher, an established authority in some area of her/his discipline, as ‘finished’, as an overseer of the student, as a source of various goodies including time, feedback, money, networks, recognition of the student’s worth, encouragement, and sometimes as the examiner. On the other hand, the student is positioned as not knowing, insecure, inexperienced, in process, needy, consumed by the project.

In this meaning of pedagogy, the thesis as the privileged form of institutional knowledge also has a position and is implicated in power relations: it is a culturally prescribed artefact; it is meant to be big, formal, disciplined and original (yet it so often feels slippery and unknown); it will be examined according to criteria which are often not clear to the student. In relation to the thesis, a central question that supervisor and student often struggle over is whose voice should be heard there – the student’s? the absent masters’ of the discipline? the supervisor’s? The complex matter of being a productive pedagogical power relation is often unaddressed in supervision, which is why I want to argue that this ‘layer’ is only occasionally visible.

When I look again at the meeting transcript, I think I can detect the power relations of pedagogy at work. For instance, much of what the supervisor has to say is about matters the student will have to do something about. Here is an exchange, quite typical, which illustrates this:

Sr: so, we, we won’t have straight away ..

St: yeah

Sr: .. the right question but you, I think you need to find an umbrella question ..

St: yeah

Sr: .. that captures it all.

St: mhm, mhm

Sr: So that’s one thing that you need to do. Aaahhm, ok, point 4 is rewrite your main introduction as a procedural introduction in that sense of ‘I want to discuss this topic and ..

St: right
Sr. .. then I want to discuss that topic and then I’m going to question whether I’m going to do this”, rather than already as the argument so ..

St: mbmm, mbmm

Sr: .. yeah, in your introduction write well here, this is already an argument

St: ok

Sr: so that rather goes into the conclusion and then Chapter 5 is, ah, yeah, rewrite your conclusion as a substantial ahm conclusion, “I have first argued a and then b.” (Meeting transcript)

The words the supervisor uses in the meeting and on the draft are intended to produce effects in the student and in her thesis. In this exchange, the supervisor is invoking disciplinary norms (indirectly, almost reluctantly) over the student’s work – and over the student’s body because reproducing the norms will require many hours of hard work.

However, the supervisor does not only discipline the student by directing her; she also encourages the student, hailing her as a good scholar. In so doing, she tries to engage the student’s desires in the task, to ‘persuade’ the student to discipline herself:

Sr: yeah, those are questions you probably have asked yourself at the beginning and forgotten about and now they are all come back … (Meeting transcript)

And later:

Sr: [long pause, pages turning] I had difficulties with ahm the notion of trust as it appears in chapter one ..

St: yeah

Sr: .. not because I don’t like it, cos I like it very much, but ahm there seem to be two different angles in which you build in the chapter, one is ahm following [this theorist’s] model, also of the three things that build a community … (Meeting transcript)

The student responded to this encouragement. When asked how she felt about herself as a research student as a result of the meeting, she wrote:
Good. I feel that although there is still a lot of work to do, [the supervisor] appreciates my work and behaves in a very collegial, equal manner towards me. (Notes)

During the meeting, the supervisor gave the student comprehensive and detailed feedback; in fact she reshaped the structure of the student’s thesis, while managing to suggest that she was just helping the student reveal what was already there. Afterwards, the student wrote that the meeting:

Motivated me greatly. I will certainly work with renewed impetus, as I now have some direction. (Notes)

In these comments we can see how the supervisor acts on the actions of her student. By previously giving her supervisor work for feedback, the student has already acted on the actions of the supervisor – the supervisor has had to discipline herself to the demanding task of reading the draft and commenting on it. Indeed the whole interaction has this action/reaction quality, like a dance.

**The Third Layer: Diverse Social Positionings**

But there is yet more to supervision than its ‘roles’ and ‘duties’ for supervisor and student, and its complex institutional character with tensions between discipline and freedom, dependence and independence, and its reluctance to speak of power. Supervisor and student also meet as ‘individuals’ who are implicated in mutual power relations which, produced through the workings of identity and their stereotypes, derive meaning from broader life experiences and social positionings.
Figure 3: Adding in the Layer of Diverse Social Positionings

The traces of identity are yet another layer in the map, perhaps more deeply ‘buried’ because much of what justifies higher education has depended on overlooking identity as an issue for its practices. These traces are found in the figures of the individuals who stand behind the labels of supervisors and student, ‘real’ people (variously gendered, classed, aged, ethnic, religious, sexually oriented) who take up the positions of student and supervisor – and a ‘real’ (and limited) object that takes up the (idealised) position of thesis. The relationships between the ‘real’ people are unpredictable and idiosyncratic. For one thing, these individuals take up their position as student or supervisor differently from how others do; they also have differing beliefs about how the other position ought to be taken up. More, in the intimacy of
supervision, student and supervisor respond to each other as more than student and supervisor, as embodied beings who are seen as gendered, aged, ethnic, sexual, and thought to be different, same, other. Social power relations will have many effects on supervision, for instance, through posing obstacles and derailments for communication. More seriously, they may provide the grounds for allegations and convictions of malpractice and abuse. In an example, Deborah Lee (1998) offers a case study from a UK university where a male supervisor is perceived by two separate women students as sexually harassing. She argues that this case study offers evidence of a supervisor’s “strategic exploitation of conditions which are actually integral and arguably necessary to this distinctive academic relationship” (p.299). Specifically she suggests that this individual’s institutional position as a supervisor and highly regarded researcher intersected with his social position as a heterosexual, gambling-addicted, unhappy male to produce a pattern of (unwitting?) harassing behaviour towards the women.

In the data, it is harder to trace the effects of the social positions the two people occupy and what this means for their supervision interactions. Indeed, trying to trace out the effects of social positions on the actions of individuals is always a difficult and unreliable matter:

> Often, the networks of power and social positioning in pedagogical relations can be made up of thin, stringy traces. They can be like the twisty and entwined chocolate bands running through a marbleized cake. Try to follow one of those bands. Better yet, try to extract one for a good look. It takes surgical skill.  (Ellsworth, 1997, p.7)

So what follows is even more tentative than what has gone before.

One partly visible band is that of gender. I can see traces of what have been identified by linguists (Holmes, 1995) as gendered language patterns – for instance, the supervisor uses many hedges in her talk, seemingly to soften the force of what she has to say:

> Sr: so maybe if you, if you look backwards your central question would be something like ahm would deliberative democracy offer a model of community? (Hedges underlined, Meeting transcript)

Likewise the student:

> St: I didn’t want to add much more other than um I just wanted to mention in the last two chapters the postmodern debate but just mention that there really um because that’s where [a theorist] has her

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30 Contemporary theories of language and communication emphasise “the abyssal space” (Readings, 1996) between self and other in every moment of dialogue. In this sense, no communication can be guaranteed in its transparency.
objection from but no yeah mainly I wanted to just kind of tie it all in together I think, yeah, it’s quite right I’ve gotta actually say it, making the argument clear, writing it in every chapter ...(Meeting transcript)

This communication pattern is common for women who, in the interests of maintaining reciprocity with their listener, use many linguistic devices to signal their good intentions.

As well, right at the beginning of the meeting, the supervisor takes a deep breath, almost as if she is drawing herself up into this role. Five minutes after the meeting finished, she wrote that she thought the meeting had gone thus:

Too fast, I spoke too fast. I was too imposing. Why am I that way always. Want to do too much for them. … (Notes)

And later, that she felt:

First ashamed of myself as the bully. Then I started to rationalise and justify it and came out quite all right after a while. I pacify myself, otherwise it is too hard to live with myself I suppose. But it is also trying to see the other side, the advantages of a supervisor who talks and who does offer feedback. (Notes)

What these reflections might point to are tensions some women experience in taking up positions of authority in which they easily feel overbearing and uncomfortable.

**The Fourth Layer: Eruptions of Desire**

Not only are student and supervisor separated from, unknowable to, each other by the “abyssal space” (Readings, 1996, p.156) of difference, but they are fractured in themselves, divided between their conscious and unconscious knowing and desires, unknowable to themselves:
In the relative intensity and privacy of supervision, supervisor and student make unconscious responses to each other. They may remind each other of former significant others (and thus in some sense there are others present in the supervision meeting), of themselves even. They may have strong feelings – of gratitude, resentment, frustration, disappointment, love – because of these remindings. This is the murky realm of transference and counter transference (Frow, 1988; Giblett, 1992; Simon, 1995; Sofoulis, 1997). It is fraught by the
supervisor’s and student’s desires – to please, to challenge, to do well, to earn glory, to demonstrate (or push towards) independence, to resist, to be respected by, to be recognised as clever, to become like, to become authoritative – desires for the (powerful or vulnerable) other. Often unconscious, sometimes confused and changing, these desires produce behaviours from both supervisor and student that are not amenable to rational explanation, that neither might wish to admit to in the public domain:

It has not been in the interests of academics generally or their postgraduate charges to show and tell what systems of encouragements or discouragements may have been at work in the daily mentoring of ‘pure’ research and thesis-writing. This is not to presume transgression, but to understand that such pedagogy is dangerously untranslatable as rational inquiry made public. (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995, p.32)

Roger Simon suggests it is the very way in which we have understood and practised supervision in higher education which produces its erotic character:

The context for learning will be erotic, where education has been historically and institutionally framed to proceed through intimate interaction and structural dependencies. (1995, p.100).

Indeed, it may be just that character that gives supervision much of its power as a pedagogy, that makes it mean so much, particularly to the student.

If the bands of power and social positioning are difficult to trace in pedagogical relations, then how is it possible to trace the workings of desire and the unconscious? For the moment, I have decided to focus on comments or questions that suggest unexplained ambivalences and contradictions. For example, what are we to make of these comments from the supervisor:

Too fast, I spoke too fast. I was too imposing. Why am I that way always. Want to do too much for them. … I felt that that was awful when I was a PhD student, so why? (Notes)

[A]fter the meeting, I am exhausted. I leave the meetings always exhausted and the student doesn’t have a chance to get exhausted. Bad economy. (Notes)

Maybe she is exhausted because of the struggle to take the position of supervisor as I suggest above. Or maybe it’s because she does too much of the work, that is she performs her position ‘badly’ (by her own or the institution’s or someone else’s standards). But, if so, why
the “always”? What drives the supervisor into a repetitively punishing pattern of interaction, one that she hated when she was a student?

The student writes that during the meeting she felt:

Gratefulness, bit of apprehension/fear, generally very well disposed towards her, friendly, but sometimes a bit worried about her apparent coolness/distance. (Notes)

Where does the gratitude come from? How does it affect the way she responds during the meeting? Is this why she seems so eager to agree throughout? And what about the note of dissatisfaction – what did she expect from the supervisor? What desires did she have that the supervisor left unaddressed or, more, thwarted? What were the effects of these unaddressed desires for the student? How can we find this out? Could the student answer this question even if she wanted to?

The student still felt ambivalent after the meeting was over:

[I feel] both motivated and overwhelmed. Excited and scared. (Notes)

How did this ambivalence affect her work? How did it make it harder? How did it affect the way in which she understood herself as a capable scholar?

Desire and identity make supervision opaque. They are dimensions no code can regulate and no literal reading of the body can guard against. In the delicate zone between encouragement and discipline that makes up much of supervision, the workings of identity and desire provide fertile ground for misreadings, resentments, confusions. Most of us are unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with these responses when they happen. Withdrawing into stereotypes (eg all women, or Maori, or Asians are like this) is of little help because the politics of identity and desire cannot be literally read from the body in this way.

Layer Upon Layer

Pedagogy as a social relationship is very close in. It gets right in there – in your brain, your body, your heart, in your sense of self, of the world, of others, and of possibilities and impossibilities in all those realms. (Ellsworth, 1997, p.6)

This is the map I want to offer, a map anchored to the stable institutional positions of supervisor, student and thesis but crisscrossed by unpredictable relations between selves and
social positions, between reason and desire, between past experiences, present actions, and future hopes. These relations overlap and intersect, confuse and interfere with, each other. Crucially for our understanding of pedagogy, the map expands pedagogical relations beyond the supervisor-student horizon in several directions. In one direction, it expands them to include the social positions of those who take up the places of supervisor and student. These positions exert their own ‘truths’ of the self, shaping the ways in which individuals enact themselves as student and supervisor as well as the expectations and desires they have of each other. In the map, we find the “interrelation and interaction of subjectivity and circumstances” that Bill Green and Alison Lee talk of (1995, p.41).

In another direction, pedagogical relations are expanded to include the absent masters of the discipline(s) – the supervisor’s peers whose voices are ‘spoken’ by the supervisor in her injunctions to the student. As well, the dynamic artifice of the thesis continually exerts disciplinary power along the way. The student negotiates the effects of this power relation in the struggle to write ‘right’; the supervisor experiences it in the delicately balanced process of giving feedback that incites the student to independence and creativity while simultaneously patrolling the borders of disciplinary coherence. Recognising that supervision-as-pedagogy always includes the ‘presence’ of the absent masters and the thesis is crucial because it points to the ways in which the supervisor – subject to the norms of a discipline, responsible to the student for their (supervisor’s and student’s) successful enactment of the properly authoritative academic self in the thesis, her/himself visible to peers in the external examination process – is unfree.

This view stands in contrast to much of the radical (feminist and critical) pedagogies literature in which the authority and power of the teacher has been read as if power is always negative in its effects, as if the teacher is the only one with power, and as if s/he is free to relinquish it. In the map I have drawn here neither supervisor nor student can escape the workings of power because it is the productive ground of supervision, it makes things happen, indeed it makes supervision what it is. In contrast to a view of polarised pedagogical power, this map suggests that both supervisor and student have power to act on the actions of the other – although with unpredictable and mixed effects. For instance it is unlikely that the student above would have guessed at how exhausted and self-doubting her supervisor felt after their joint meeting. Similarly, the supervisor probably would not have predicted the student’s ambivalence towards her, particularly given that she was stepping in at some cost to herself to assist the student complete her thesis successfully. The supervisor’s power to affect the actions of the student is potentially a source of pleasure and pain to student and supervisor – we see the student enjoying the direction given to her by the supervisor while the supervisor is agonising over some aspects of the exercise of her power. Likewise the student’s exercise of power – through ‘requiring’ her supervisor to read many chapters of writing, to think hard upon it, to speak to her about her work, to take her seriously as an academic subject – is pleasurable and
painful for both. However, to see power as inevitable and productive in this way does not mean that we should not scrutinise the workings of power in the form of supervisory authority – as Edward Saïd argues, all forms of authority are produced, are persuasive, suggesting themselves to be true, and all must be analysed (1998, p.874).

In the map I have drawn, we find the outlines of a sturdy triangular shape buried under the messy ephemeral lines of (too many?) relations. I do not see here the ‘homeliness’ (Green & Lee, 1995) of teaching but rather the exoticness of strange pedagogical lands, in which every supervision inhabits a parallel world with certain regular and recognisable features but much which is new and unforeseen. People are strange to each other. Supervision comes face to face with this strangeness in an intense way and must somehow, and often does, work in spite of this. We, supervisors and students, may even be able to relish it if we can learn to tolerate its instability. The view I offer here insists on that instability, on the complexity and unpredictability of supervision-as-pedagogy, on its situated and negotiated character.

A question I have been asked is how will such a map assist supervisors and students. In attempting to map the private landscape of supervision, am I not opening a kind of Pandora’s box full of fantasies and dangers for both student and supervisor? Is it not better to leave these matters of difference and desire unspoken, especially if by speaking about them I may in some sense bring them into being, through giving student and supervisor a language with which to accuse each other of maltreatment through abuse of power, or unresolved transferences?

To answer these questions, I refer to my experience over the years of listening to students’ stories of supervision troubles, sometimes breakdown. I have come to think that we do need to talk about these matters because they are important for students at least. They may be useful to help them understand that many of the difficulties of supervision and ordeals of graduate research are very predictable: the “mad” (Frow, 1988) process of being a graduate research student, of committing yourself to a daunting task in the hope that you will be successful while often feeling anything but, of putting your trust, your future, in the hands of someone who on a bad day barely seems to remember your name; the possibility that intense responses to your supervisor may be about older experiences in your life than the supervision relationship itself; your increased vulnerability if you rely on your supervisor for everything, or if you over-invest your supervisor with power and knowledge. These matters must also be important to the supervisor who is attempting, usually in good faith, sometimes apparently against all odds, to guide the student in this task, to assist the student to do the best s/he can, to have the most successful outcome possible.
Conclusions

In our mass higher education system, supervision can be seen as a remnant of more personalised forms of pedagogy from a time when there was greater social homogeneity between university teachers and students. Because of its personal and intimate character, there have always been many attendant pleasures and risks. Now, however, it is subject to a range of new pressures: more, and more diverse, students who have no previous experience of a close working relationship with an academic, some of whom are paying huge fees for their education, all of whom face a very competitive employment market. At the same time, many academics are dealing with the intensification of their work, and face teaching environments with dimensions of interpersonal difference for which they feel unprepared and unsupported. Meanwhile, university administrations are pushing for constant programme (and student ‘market’) expansion in their effort to chase funds in the battle to survive with diminishing government support. In many cases, the complex and potentially fraught pedagogy of supervision may not be withstanding these pressures particularly well.

It may be that we need to radically rethink the practices by which we credentialise, and socialise, graduate students. I think, however, we should beware simply eliminating supervision – if we do so, we may immeasurably diminish the pleasures some academics derive from their jobs and remove one of the few opportunities students have for working closely alongside an academic. A helpful repositioning of supervision may be one where its intimacy is respected without becoming a dangerous isolation. To do this, departments need to actively develop a culture where one-to-one (or two-to-one) supervision is not depended upon as the sole vehicle for the education of research students but where supervisors and students are expected to get (and provided with opportunities for) stimulus and support from the community of the department.

In a final note, I look briefly beyond supervision-as-pedagogy to the terrain of university pedagogies more widely. While I acknowledge that supervision is a particular and peculiar pedagogical practice, many of its pleasures and risks occur in other scenes of teaching and learning – in lectures, tutorials and seminars, laboratories, on-line discussion groups – in any places where students and teachers interact. In particular, I suggest this map offers a useful antidote to a view of teaching and learning which rests on the schematic simplicity of the teacher teaches (in the sense of formulating a rational plan of action) and, accordingly, the students learn (in the sense of enacting reliably and ‘successfully’ the objectives of the teacher’s plan). This persistent view, fed by bureaucratic and managerial discourses of education, but also by the mainstream discourse of educational research itself, continues to underpin pedagogies as apparently diverse as mass lecturing and self-directed learning. Yet if an orderly sequence of teacher plans–student enacts is not how it happens in the relatively direct encounter of supervision, then it is unlikely to be happening in other university
pedagogies. We need a different, perhaps more chaotic view of pedagogy, one which is capable of infusing our teaching and research practices with both an enriching optimism and a proper pessimism as to their efficacy.
Both the chapters herein address the role of the institution in mediating the relations of supervision. Chapter 4, *Codes for Supervision: Institutional Fantasies of Orderly Practice*, reads one institution’s ‘code of practice’ to explore the modes of governmentality (following Foucault) mobilised towards supervisor and students, and the fantasy of supervision (following Zizek) embedded there. I argue there that the form and language of the code installs the figures of Master and Slave as supervision’s dominant mode of relation. Then, in the chapter that follows, *Master and Slave: The Institutional Architecture of Supervision*, I pursue this idea via an engagement with the Hegelian trope of Master and Slave. I explain the Hegelian scenario in some detail before going on to map the lineaments of this trope onto those of supervision. In doing so, I draw on texts from the supervisors and students who participated in my research to illustrate the metaphor.

In arguing that the institution sets up the terms for the Master-Slave relation in supervision, I hope to draw attention to the ways in which the institution stabilises supervision. Such stability is supportive of supervision and its objectives because, on the one hand, the Master-Slave relation is crucial to the development of knowledge, including self-knowledge. On the other hand, often it is through the Master-Slave relation that the work on the thesis gets done (as I am only too aware from my own recent experience of writing this thesis). At the same
time, the Master-Slave relation is problematic for both supervisor and student in more than one way, although those problems will become clearer when I return to this trope in relation to dialogue in Part Three.
Supervision is unruly. The neo-liberal university responds to this risky waywardness by attempting to regulate it in different ways. One such way is through the promulgation of codes for supervision that seek to define its proper practice. In this chapter, after exploring some of the elements that contribute to supervision’s unruliness, I offer two readings of an institution’s attempts to write a code\footnote{Although this institution used the term “guidelines” to describe its document, in form and function it is similar to those of other institutions called “codes” (see for example the University of South Australia’s \textit{Code of Good Practice}).} for Masters supervision. In the first, I take two...
versions of the code (published in 1993 and 2001) and read them closely to detect the working of socio-legal powers (Foucault, 1991b) that universities mobilise in an effort to govern the subjects of supervision. In the second reading, I take up the metaphor of fantasy through which to think about a major shift in the second version of the code and to speculate on what some of its effects might be. My argument here is that the fantasy of supervision embedded in the code seeks to repress the unruly, anxiety-provoking aspects of supervision. Following Zizek (1999), the problem with this strategy is that the repression risks bringing into being the very things it seeks to conceal.

**Supervision’s Unruly Condition**

Traditionally conducted behind closed doors in spaces remote from undergraduate teaching, the intensity of the interpersonal relations of much postgraduate pedagogy is presumed but uninterrogated. It has not been in the interests of academics generally or their postgraduate charges to show and tell what systems of encouragements or discouragements may have been at work in the daily mentoring of ‘pure’ research and thesis writing. (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995, p.32)

I had [a student] before who was like that, who I … got quite anxious about and kept sort of hassling to have meetings and sometimes she would somewhat reluctantly participate in meetings, but then two months before the deadlines these chapters started coming in, not having seen any bloody bit of work before and they were brilliant. I had the occasional typo to correct but I had nothing to say because it was just great and she ended up getting the prize for the best thesis in the department, got a scholarship and she has now finished her PhD in Britain. (Supervisor 4, Initial interview)

[In being supervised] at a certain point you have to trust this other person at a level which is stupid if you are buying a house or something – I mean in a sense you are trusting this person with so much, that they are not going to advise you to do a topic that is stupid or has been done before … that they are going to give you good advice and how can you sign on a paper … the level of trust you have in that person is just so much higher that anything you sign wouldn’t guarantee it … it is likely to maybe even undermine it. Maybe, I don’t know. (Supervisor 3, Initial interview)

The unruliness of supervision features in supervisors’ and/or students’ accounts of their experiences (see for example, Acker, 1999; Bartlett & Mercer, 2001; Behrendt, 2001; Frow, 1988; Gallop, 2001; Giblett, 1992; Lee & Williams, 1999; Lee, 1998; Maheshwari & Malfroy, 2001; O’Brien, 1996; Salmon, 1992; Simon, 1995). In these accounts, we see that supervision proceeds – and succeeds – in unpredictable and unscripted ways, often marked by great

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*Practice: Research Degrees Supervision (1993)*: As the argument I make here applies much more generally than to the example analysed, I have used the more common term “code” throughout.
pleasures, hopes, disappointments and pains. What makes it so unruly? Perhaps supervision’s distinctive face-to-face intimacy and intensity, as Erica McWilliam and Patrick Palmer remark above, and the role of elusive dimensions such as trust, as Supervisor 3 suggests. Unlike the hierarchical, anonymous pedagogies of the lecture or the seminar, in which teacher-student contact is fleeting and apparently impersonal, supervision is much more a matter of a private teaching-learning relationship. Here the academic and the personal come together, as embodied power, desire, and difference form an intersecting and potentially disruptive matrix of social and personal forces enclosing an apparently academic activity. Let us look at each element of this matrix more closely.

First, power. There are two senses of power relevant to the goings on between supervisor and student. The first, and most obvious, is the zero-sum notion of power as something that one has only insofar as the other does not have it. In this sense power in supervision is structurally unequal. The supervisor, because of their institutional position and functions, is more powerful than the student. While supervisors are often unaware of the effects of this inevitable power asymmetry, students never forget it — although it has different effects on different individuals. Their sense of self as powerless in relation to the supervisor may engender a fear of behaving in certain sorts of ways — for instance, assertively — in case the supervisor ‘punishes’ them, perhaps by restricting the student’s access to them, assessing their work harshly, or obstructing future career options, or maybe simply by not liking the student. This sense can also produce a kind of everyday powerless behaviour such as passively waiting for the supervisor to decide how the supervision will proceed. (I explore the effects of this confronting, asymmetrical power relation in some detail in Chapters 5 and 6.)

But there is another meaning of power relevant to supervision, that is the power that exists because student and supervisor can both modify the actions of the other. This form of power depends on the possibility of resistance:

At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an “agonism” — of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation. (Foucault, 1986, p.428)

33 ‘Relationship’ connotes the interpersonal and connects directly with the rise of the psychological discourse of supervision in Western universities. When I work with supervisors and students, I find myself hardly able to think outside this discourse: for instance, I encourage them to think about supervision as a negotiated practice in which who you are, and who the other is, matters. ‘Who you are’ though is something more than simply a matter of ‘psychologised’ individuality. To keep a distance from the psy discourse, I will mostly use the term ‘relation’ to describe supervision in this thesis — but just at this moment I want the connotation of the interpersonal.
If agonism is at the core of power relations, what does supervision’s “mutual incitement and struggle” consist of? The structural circumstances of supervision set the scene but the ‘play’ of power relations between supervisor and student mean uncertainty in how the story will unravel. For example, in asking for supervision the student is competing for the supervisor’s time and attention among many other pressing and proliferating duties. Some students ask for ‘too much’ time; any time is too much for some supervisors. Even when a supervisor enjoys supervision, the pressures on her/his time may mean an ambiguous – even resentful – state in relation to particular moments of it and in relation to the student who is asking for it. Another such circumstance is the gulf between supervisor and student in terms of the significance of the outcome of the supervision and the amount of mental and emotional energy the task requires: a tremendous amount for the student, always less for the supervisor. Yet another circumstance is that supervision inevitably involves the supervisor disciplining the student – in Michel Foucault’s (1991a) doubled sense of the word – to act obediently towards (be disciplined by) the norms of the body of knowledge (the discipline) in which they are researching. Through discussion and feedback, the supervisor requires the student to think again, to read more, to revise written drafts – at times these requests are likely to be delivered confusingly or inadequately by supervisors or misunderstood, resented and resisted by students (much more so by some for reasons of politics, biography, or temperament). The feedback may well contribute to an uncomfortable deepening of uncertainty in the student, both about the quality of their work and about how to get “the kind of feedback they desire” (Knowles, 2001, p.7). There is also the need to ‘get work out of the student’, a process which is often fraught as the student resists and the supervisor insists. In making the claim that supervision is agonistic in these ways, I am not casting supervision as open warfare, although it is possible that agonism will slide into antagonism given provocation. I am speaking of the unavoidable tensions and dilemmas which run through supervision that supervisors and students need to find ways to work around or with. I am also suggesting that they will sometimes fail to negotiate these tensions happily.

In this view, supervision is lived out in various productive but constrained ways – productive in that between supervisor and student “a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up” (Foucault, 1986, p.427), but constrained insofar as the institutional context of the relationship proscribes the field of possible actions, making some responses more likely than others. The course of the power relations that obtain between acting subjects is much more unpredictable than the fixity of structural power might suggest. Thus, understanding power to be relational as well as structural is important for discerning supervision’s unruliness. It is the risks arising from this unruliness that institutions are concerned to manage: apocryphal stories of abuses of supervisory power circulate among students all the time and occasionally these stories become real grievances.
Then there is difference. Contemporary supervision is often a scene of difference unimaginable 50 years ago (Broekmann & Pendlebury, 2002; Humphrey & McCarthy, 1999; McWilliam, Singh, & Taylor, 2002) – in gender, ethnicity, social class, age, enrolment status, as well as overt sexual orientation and religious belief. Any of these ‘variables’ is likely to be entangled with the extent of the student’s and supervisor’s competing commitments, as well as their relations with the thesis and each other. While the neo-liberal university welcomes difference “because it means reaching potential markets that have hitherto remained untapped” (McWilliam et al., 2002, p. 122, citing Coccari & Javalgi), it responds to its riskiness with techniques for ensuring “procedural equity” (p.123), thus institutionalising indifference towards it. Yet the presence of difference in supervision means that social strains and tensions enter its intimate space, playing out in the power relations between supervisor and student in sometimes confusing ways. There is a growing body of literature around difference in supervision: probably the biggest focuses on gender relations in supervision, both cross-gender and same-gender (see for example, Bartlett & Mercer, 2001; Conrad, 1994; Dowling & Jones, 1998; Hassall & Wilson, 1998; Heinrich, 1991, 1995; Johnson et al., 2000; Lee, 1998; Moses, 1992; Schroeder & Mynatt, 1993, 1999; Smeby, 2000). But there is also literature on overseas or NESB students (see for example, Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994; Ballard & Clanchy, 1992; Barraket & Brown, 1999; Light & Cox, 2001; Maheshwari & Malfroy, 2001; Wisker, 1999). While some of the discussion emphasises the way social differences may produce distinctive “hierarchical power relations” (Collins, 2000, p.63), or influence patterns of communication in supervision (Conrad, 1994), much of it shows these differences unpredictably confound the extant supervisor/student inequality (Linden, 1999). Because of this, stereotypes based on identity categories (such as “women/Maori/Asians communicate like this …”) are an inadequate ground for responding to the challenges of supervising across difference – this can be disappointing for supervisors looking for clear-cut answers to messy supervision situations. Difference, then, can contribute to the agonism of any particular supervision but in difficult to discern ways.

Desire is another troublesome element that contributes to supervision’s unruliness. Discussions about supervision usually refrain from explicit considerations of desire: it is the student’s intellectual work that is supervised. Yet pedagogical relationships of all kinds are “riven with vulnerability and anxiety – as well as pleasure and excitement” (Jones, 1996, p.105). As a particularly intense and private pedagogical relationship, in supervision the student is known ‘personally’ by the supervisor (and vice versa although in a different way34), and her/his work is subjected to intimate scrutiny. Moreover, the feedback process is more embodied than usual which poses challenges for both supervisor and student. Therefore the emotions that Alison Jones speaks of are also likely to be more intense. Jones goes on to

34 In Chapters 5 and 6, I explore the likely asymmetry of the student’s heightened awareness of the supervisor in comparison to the supervisor’s of the student.
describe two discourses of desire which produce (and are produced by) desiring subjects in educational institutions: desire as lack, which the student experiences as the desire to be filled up with the knowledge of the supervisor, and desire as a force of positive production which is experienced as an “energy that creates things” (Grosz cited in Jones, 1996, p.106). The first kind of desire produces the student as a feminised subject who, passive and lacking, seeks the masculinised supervisor to fill ‘her’ with ‘his’ knowledge: domination and subordination are eroticised, hence the connection between structural power and desire. The second kind of desire produces both teacher and student as mutually desiring subjects who desire to produce knowledge together – in this sense, desire is a function of the second kind of power relations above and is a force for positive production. As these complex and contradictory desires – of “the controlled, normalised, ‘empty’, disciplined person as well as the excited, passionate, ‘full’, knowing, acting subject” (ibid) – are mobilised in the supervision interaction, they do not remain safely contained in the mind but animate the body (McWilliam, 1995a). Others have written about desires in supervision (see for example, Frow, 1988; Gallop, 2001; Lee, 1998; Simon, 1995; Tong, 1999). In a dramatic – even horrifying – argument, Jane Gallop suggests the consensual, desiring, committed sexual relationship stands as the paradigm – if “exorbitant” (2001, p.159) – case of what supervision might be at its best: “a wider, more diverse, more human relationship” (“fulfilling”, “intense” and “rounded”) rather than the “casual, short-term, impersonal, uncaring relation that is the norm” (ibid). Although desire mostly does not play out in the way Gallop describes, like difference, it contributes to the unruly agonism of supervision.

Yet another element of unruliness in supervision is its implication in the production of new knowledge (Threadgold, 1995). Unlike undergraduate assignments, which largely depend on recycling existing knowledge, Masters theses contain independent intellectual work that is in some way original or creative. The trajectory of producing such work is always unpredictable – there is much that can go wrong – and it may be more so for a novice researcher. In supervision interchanges including feedback, the supervisor will engage in the simultaneous work of questioning and conforming to the limits of disciplinarity – this messy, open-ended process can be difficult for the student who may be seeking reassurance and certainty. Any one supervisor’s or student’s style of producing academic work is also likely to have highly idiosyncratic aspects, contrary to the neat descriptions in many textbooks that seek to guide the novice researcher.

35 In Chapters 5, 7 and 8, I explore the conditions of these different forms of desire via the metaphors of Master-Slave and improvisation.

36 Jessica Benjamin suggests that in the analytic relationship it is essential the analyst acts as a “real person with my own subjective relationship to rules and limits” (Benjamin, 2004, p.42). Likewise for supervision – it is important that the supervisor enacts their own relationship with the rules and limits of the discipline. In doing so, and being explicit about it, they may help the student to learn that to be a researcher/scholar is not a secure place of knowing but an uncertain one of interminable learning.
In the private intensity of the supervision of a novice researcher, the academic and the personal are inseparable.\(^{37}\) This became clear time and again in my data, not only in relation to the persons in the supervision or the choice of thesis topic but also to the process of carrying out the research. One incident in particular stood out in the meeting transcriptions. It was a conversation between a supervisor and (mature woman) student about the lack of time the student had to work on her thesis because of a four-day a week job and responsibilities for her two-year old child. Somewhat hesitantly, the supervisor attempted to explore with the student how she could get more time, through making suggestions about her child-care arrangements – an intensely personal matter, touching on the student’s emotions and ethics. Although many university campuses include subsidised child-care facilities, as well as health and counselling services, in pedagogy “bodies and emotions are assumed to be irrelevant” (Jones, 1996, p.105). (Note that the title of the code analysed below is Supervision of Theses, not of Graduate Research Students.) Yet supervision’s unruliness, arising from the interplay of the personal, the social and the institutional, is unavoidable: this makes supervision a particular problem for governmentality.

**Codes to Regulate Supervision’s Unruliness**

The reliance on the professional wisdom of the professor … has been stripped away to allow both the professor and the [graduate] student to be thoroughly liberalised: to be rendered transparent, accountable, standardised, observable. (Kendall, 2002, p.137)

Codes for supervision are official documents which purport to guide the practice of supervision, typically by specifying the responsibilities of supervisor and student. They emerged on the scene of higher education in the early 1990s,\(^{38}\) driven by a range of new pressures on postgraduate education: the increase in graduate research students, the amalgamation of institutions with different supervision cultures and the need for shared values and principles (Whittle, 1994), a lack of research tradition in new universities, anxieties about reported problems in supervision, a desire to improve practices in the face of public criticisms from students. These pressures coincided with the ascendance of neo-liberalism, also called “new managerialism” (Davies, 2003, p.91), as the logic of higher education. Each of the pressures represents a form of risk to the managerialist mind which in turn devises practices to manage that risk through making its subjects accountable via carefully specified ‘responsible’ self-conduct expressed in the logic of “contractual obligations” (Kamler &

\(^{37}\) This point is developed further in Chapter 3.

\(^{38}\) An article entitled “Quality: How the universities fared”, in Campus Review (Sept 21-25, 1995) reported on the Australian Quality Committee’s review of postgraduate provision across universities and listed whether or not each institution had a code of supervision practice. The UK Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals included a Code of Practice for Postgraduate Training and Research in its 1986 paper Academic Standards in Universities (Beasley, 1999, p.129).
Threadgold, 1997, p.47; Threadgold, 1995, p.46). Codes are one such risk-management practice – others related to supervision include policies to cover matters such as workload (numbers of students, numbers of hours per student) and dispute resolution, ‘training’ for new supervisors, and the withdrawal of the supervisor from the PhD examining process (a recent phenomenon at this university).

Over the last decade, the implementation of codes has been so effective that they are now widely understood to be an element of ‘best practice’ in postgraduate education. They are advocated by influential bodies like the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education which gives, as one aspect of its mission, “promulgating codes of practice and examples of good practice” (QAAHE, 2002). Not everyone in higher education shares this view. For example, Frank Furedi, professor of sociology, sees the deployment of codes as part of a wider trend towards infantilising university students:

New regulations and codes of behaviour have been devised to ensure that supervision is structured and clearly recorded. In this way it is being transformed into the kind of instrument used to deal with naughty children. Supervisors are also under pressure to live by the paper trail. (2004, p.21)

This view turns up often enough in my work with staff – it may be underpinned by a refusal to have academic practice transformed into quasi-policy and trust replaced by accountability, or by a sense of threat to autonomy (“no one can tell me how to supervise”), or by an understanding that such documents simply cannot capture the ‘reality’ of supervision. I have sympathy with all these points of view including the indignant one – in my experience, there is an important sense in which no-one can tell another how to supervise. Moreover there is something about supervision (and pedagogy generally) that is “radically alien” to the logic of accounting (Readings, 1996, p.151). Yet new supervisors and students often welcome the code because (at least at first glance) they feel reassured to learn what it is they should properly be doing or expecting in supervision – although what to do if they don’t get what they expect (supervision’s usual condition) is another, much more complex, matter.

Given the persistence of patterns of supervision practice across countries, it is not surprising that many codes have common features (Beasley, 1999; Bills, 2002). A likely format is two lists describing the responsibilities of the supervisor and the student, although some extend this list to include other institutional parties such as department or graduate advisors. From a commonsense view, the bilateral list seems sensible because it declares in a reasonable manner that both parties to supervision have responsibilities, thus suggesting an organised, reciprocal

39 The texts of some are so alike the reader can only conclude that institutions are copying each other’s (usually without acknowledgment I might add!).
relationship in which there is a degree of mutual accountability. However, in the analysis that follows, and by way of driving a wedge into the logic of the codes, I will show that this framework is infused with contradictory forms of power that undermine its apparent orderliness.

**Governmentality in the Code**

[L]iberal governmentalities will dream that the national objective for the good subject of rule will fuse with the voluntarily assumed obligations of free individuals to make the most of their own existence by conducting their life responsibly. At the same time, subjects themselves will have to make their decisions about their self-conduct surrounded by a web of vocabularies, injunctions, dire warnings and threats of intervention, organized increasingly around a proliferation of norms and normativities. (Rose, 1996a, pp.45-46, italics added)

As sites of liberal governmentality, higher education institutions dream good, self-governing supervisors and students and mobilise three co-existing but distinctive forms of socio-legal power towards that end. Foucault describes this as “a triangle [of] sovereignty – discipline – government” (1991b, p.102). In overlapping ways, each form of power is implicated in the production and regulation of different aspects of subjectivity: the juridical (sovereignty) regulates the prescribed/prohibited, the disciplinary regulates the normalised, and the governmental the risky. Core to the project of liberal governmentality is the idea of ‘freedom’: “assent and compliance are willingly given” (Kendall, 2002, p.137) by its subjects who work to bring their conduct, their ‘selves’, into order on its behalf. Let us now look at each form of power more closely, connecting it to the everyday practices of supervision.

Juridical power is the sovereign, constant power of the law (Foucault, 1991b). A form of power that works through “injunctions, dire warnings and threats of intervention” (Rose, 1996a, p.46), its goal is the obedience of subjects to the law. In modern universities, because of the way juridical power contradicts the ideals of the collegium as a group of peers gathered freely in pursuit of higher learning, it has a shadowy, background character, mostly functioning as a last resort. To date, the terms of juridical power have mostly been set by the collegium and only occasionally has external state law intruded. (This is slowly changing: within the last ten years, for example, state laws relating to harassment and equity have had to be integrated into university policy and regulations.) In supervision, juridical power functions through the relatively heavy hand of formal statutes and regulations for graduate research or policies, such as those governing examination of theses, resolution of disputes, or misconduct in research. However, while supervisors and students know that a set of statutes and

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40 In this application of Foucault I am indebted to Warwick Tie’s work, in particular early versions of his paper *The Psychic Life of Governmentality* (Tie, 2004).
regulations governing graduate research qualifications exists, these injunctions do not often come to the forefront of supervision. Often neither supervisor nor student know their details and are uncertain as to their absolute efficacy. Indeed, in practice, the law can be put aside if there is good enough reason – in this kind of situation, from a student’s point of view, it is useful to have a powerful supervisor.

In contrast, and more in keeping with the goals of the liberal university, the characteristic form of power has been disciplinary rather than juridical. The goal of disciplinary power is to establish “forms of self-mastery, self-regulation and self-control” (Rose, 1996a, p.44) in individuals so they, understanding themselves “as free and civilised “ (ibid), govern themselves in ways that serve the interests of the institution. This is achieved by establishing norms for subjectivity via a proliferating microphysics of power, thus putting certain kinds of behaviour beyond the pale. Supervision, as it is commonly construed by supervisors, is largely a practice of indirectly teaching the student (usually via modelling) forms of mastery, self-regulation and self-control. A crucial technology in this regard is the supervisor’s feedback although, as Sally Knowles writes (1999), there has been little investigation into the pedagogy of feedback in supervision. Some of what the student is meant to learn is discipline specific (such as how to make an argument, what counts as evidence, what voice will be authoritative); other techniques may be more generic to the academic subjectivity (such as defining and planning a research project, time management, goal setting and prioritising, critical reading etc). That the student must become (if not already be) ‘independent’ in these ways is a central, animating idea of graduate research education.

The third form of power in Foucault’s governmentality triangle is government. In order to provide security to the population, governmental power seeks to regulate the risky through practical means (rather than legal or normalising ones):

No doubt throughout the ages humans have reflected upon the conduct of themselves and others, but such thought becomes governmental to the extent that it seeks to render

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41 This may be gradually changing at this university as, since early 2003, there has been a compulsory orientation to supervision seminar for all new academic staff at which they are given a précis (and folder) of most of the relevant documents. The point, though, that the regulations can usually be set aside if you know how to ‘work the system’ still stands.

42 The pedagogy of feedback in doctoral supervision is the subject of Sally’s doctoral thesis (in process).

43 In Foucault’s article Governmentality (1991), somewhat confusingly the term “governmentality” seems to refer to the overarching historical phenomenon of modern socio-legal powers while “government” (but sometimes also called “governmentality”) refers to its pre-eminent mode of power “which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security” (1991b, p.102).
itself technical, to insert itself into the world by ‘realizing’ itself as a *practice*. (Rose, 1996a, p.41)

Governmental power requires its subjects to conduct “their life responsibly” (Rose, 1996a, p.46) and to avoid risk. In modern neo-liberal societies, this form of power is ascendant and, within higher education, its goal is to manage the risks (fiscal and otherwise) arising from education’s unruliness. In pursuit of this goal, over the past 15 years governments and institutional managers have abandoned trust in the judgment of professionals and spun an ever-expanding web of devolved accountability practices in which all institutional subjects must engage. Thus the emergence of national qualification frameworks, institutional charters, internal and external quality assurance practices and agencies, public audit processes, and so on. In universities:

risk management has now achieved the status of a high priority, institution-wide system of communication … a system into which the local disciplinary-specific or ‘craft’ knowledge of the academic must be plugged in order to count as the proper knowledge of the truly professional worker. (McWilliam et al., 2002, p.120)

“Craft” knowledge is construed here as *in situ* (unruly) knowledge; professional knowledge, in contrast, is orderly and amenable to being codified. Another example of the pervasiveness of risk management from this institution is a relatively new approval form for proposed academic programmes: it has a section called *Risk Management* where the proposer is asked to “Comment on any significant risks associated with developing, establishing and delivering the programme, and how they will be managed.” (p.5). In other words, what chance of harm does this new programme bring and how will you manage it?

In the analysis that follows, I treat these three forms of power as an analytical schema through which to trace out the workings of the university’s desire to govern supervision’s unruliness. The texts that I read through this schema are two complete versions of the institution’s code for supervision: the earlier one (1993) addresses Masters supervision only, the later one both Masters and doctoral supervision (2001). In offering this reading, I acknowledge it is not likely to be the one that many supervisors or students would make, although the concerns I raise may have real effects in the experience of both.

**Supervisor and Student as Targets of Power: The Earlier Code**

My first object of analysis is the text of the 1993 version of a particular university’s code of supervision practice, reproduced verbatim below. All textual features are as in the original document except that I have added line numbers to make cross-referencing my analysis easier.
Before proceeding, note the general style: a brief preamble announcing the document as a “statement for the guidance of supervisors and students” (l.3), followed by two lists of responsibilities for the supervisor and student separately, with some additional “notes” to each. It is interesting that the term ‘code’ used by other universities is eschewed in spite of the document being written in the same style – it seems to mark a reluctance to have the document read as prescriptive in any way. Yet the assertive tone of the document belies this reluctance.

1. THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

2. SUPERVISION OF THESES AND DISSERTATIONS AT MASTERS LEVEL

3. Senate has approved this statement for the guidance of supervisors and students and with
4. intent to minimise the risks and problems of personality clashes, inadequate supervision,
5. or unsatisfactory students. It is not intended to detract from full compliance with course
6. regulations set out in the Calendar.

7. As part of the general supervision of a student’s progress, supervisors should:

8. (a) give guidance about the nature of research and the standard expected, about the plan-
9. ning of the research programme, about literature and sources, attendance at taught classes,
10. and about requisite techniques (including arranging for instruction where necessary);

11. (b) maintain regular contact, for example through tutorial and seminar meetings, in
12. accordance with faculty/departmental policy and in the light of discussion of arrangements
13. with the student;

14. (c) be accessible to the student at other appropriate times when he or she may need advice;

15. (d) give advice on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work so that
16. the whole may be submitted within the scheduled time;

17. (e) request written work as appropriate, and return that work with constructive criticism
18. and in reasonable time;

19. (f) arrange as appropriate and convenient for the student to talk about his or her work to
20. staff or graduate seminars;

21. (g) ensure that the student is made aware of the inadequacy of progress or of standards of
22. work below that generally expected;

23. (h) give the student a written appraisal of the work achieved at regular intervals.

24. Notes:

25. (i) It is implicit in the above guidelines that if a supervisor is absent from the University
26. for an extended period because of illness, leave, or other reasons, either an appropriately
27. qualified replacement supervisor will be appointed by the Head of Department or the
28. students will be advised they can contact the absent supervisor through the Department
29. office.

30. (ii) Particular care needs to be taken with overseas students who may need in the early
31. stages very frequent contact, and often advice, particularly in relation to (a) above, of a
32. seemingly elementary kind. The assistance needed may include help with language
33. problems and advice about language training where necessary.

34. The responsibilities of the student include:

35. (a) responding to the arrangements proposed and the advice and instruction given by the
36. supervisor;

37. (b) discussing with the supervisor the type of guidance and comment he or she finds most
38. helpful and agreeing on a schedule of meetings;

39. (c) taking the initiative in raising problems and difficulties, however elementary they may
40. seem;

41. (d) maintaining the progress of the work in accordance with the stages agreed with the
42. supervisor, including in particular the presentation of written material as required in
43. sufficient time to allow for comments and discussion before proceeding to the next stage;

44. (e) providing as prescribed by the department/faculty a brief report or reports to the Head
45. of Department through the supervisor.

46. Students are reminded that compliance with the course regulations and the quality of their
47. work is ultimately their responsibility. The role of the supervisor is to assist them to
48. achieve the best result of which they are capable. The student’s co-operation is essential.

49. Accordingly, if students consider that their work is not proceeding satisfactorily for
50. reasons outside their control, or if they consider that they are not establishing an effective
51. working relationship with their supervisor, they should discuss the matter promptly with
52. the Head of Department or Dean of the Faculty concerned. While all students may have
53. recourse to the contact network and to the Mediator, strictly academic matters are not
54. generally covered by University Harassment Policy.

55. May, 1993

Although the text is largely silent on the unruliness of supervision (the play of power,
difference and desire), it speaks eloquently of its orderliness. In what follows I will analyse the
forms of power (juridical, disciplinary, governmental) mobilised towards the supervisor and
the student as the subjects of the guidelines.

The Supervisor

In the text of the code, the supervisor is subject to all three forms of power but the dominant
mode is disciplinary (normalising). Juridical power is targeted at the supervisor along with the
student in the preamble: “Senate has approved this statement for the guidance of both
supervisors and students” (l.3). However the force of this injunction (i.e. that ‘Senate wishes to
guide you’) works over supervisor and student asymmetrically because the supervisor
-especially the experienced supervisor- is more likely to understand the limits of Senate’s (the
university’s governing body) power to enforce the terms of the code. As well, while the
preamble names the possibility of an “unsatisfactory student” (l.5), it does not name the
parallel possibility of an ‘unsatisfactory supervisor’. This suggests the institution is reluctant to make the supervisor the explicit target of juridical power. Governmental power is not mobilised towards the supervisor at all. The norm of supervisor’s autonomy (freedom from regulation) is underscored by the way in which the student is charged with responsibility for compliance with regulations and the quality of the thesis (l.46-48). Likewise the final paragraph which deals with the possibility of supervision’s failure does not address the supervisor, thus implying that the supervisor is not accountable for acting to remedy an ineffective supervision, the student is. For the supervisor, in the terms of this text, there is no accountability.

Disciplinary power, however, is mobilised towards the supervisor in various ways. First, the supervisor is normatively positioned as the dominant figure in supervision, given precedence in both the preamble and the body of the text and in the longer list of responsibilities (eight compared to the student’s five) that suggests there is more for the supervisor to do. Second, the good/proper/normal supervisor “should” guide, advise, request, arrange, ensure, give written appraisal – all active, directive roles in contrast to the student’s largely submissive ones (as I will come to). Third, throughout the text, the supervisor’s autonomy is also emphasised. For instance, in the note about the supervisor’s absence (l.25-29), the supervisor has no responsibility – the HOD or an unspecified someone in “the Department office” (l.28-29) must sort out the details of how the student will be provided for. Neither is the supervisor named as someone who should act if the supervision is not going well in the final paragraph about supervision difficulties, as I have already remarked. The fourth normative element embedded in the text is that the supervisor’s integrity is beyond question, that they always supervise as best they can (because it is not possible that they will be unsatisfactory).

However the list of the supervisor’s responsibilities contains some problematic items (for the supervisor and/or the student). For instance in items (a) and (g), the supervisor is charged with giving the student guidance about the “standard” expected (l.8, l.21) in research and academic work (among other things). In practice this is difficult: such standards are by and large not explicit (functioning more like “craft knowledge”), and are often difficult to make explicit in ways that the student understands (as we shall see in Chapter 7). In another instance, in item (g) the supervisor is expected to make the student aware of “inadequacy of progress” (l.21) – again in practice it is often difficult to decide when the student’s inadequate progress has reached a point where it should be raised, given that ‘inadequate progress’ in research and writing is almost a norm of academic life and maybe especially in the life of the graduate research student. When and how to do this is a complex matter requiring judgment and care, as any supervisor knows. The risk of demoralising the student always lurks. Experienced supervisors (like Supervisor 4 in the opening of this chapter) describe cases where they thought a student wasn’t going to make it, much to their concern, but who then does, much to their surprise. The trajectory of producing academic work often does not seem
to be particularly smooth or predictable. The disciplinary injunctions here, while seemingly reasonable, hide much of the complexity of supervision in practice – and in that complexity lies some of supervision’s dangers for supervisor as well as student. Jennifer Sumson, writing about facing a problem in her own practice as a university teacher, describes turning to her institution’s code for guidance. She found that, on the one hand, it over-simplified the ‘moral messiness of these multifarious obligations’ of professional practice (Sumson, 2000, p.173) while, on the other, it ignored the constraints on, and competing ideals of being a university teacher. She cites Caputo to make a point very much like that made by Supervisor 3 in the opening of this chapter:

The obligations that arise from our professional responsibilities are unpredictable, both in their timing and in what they require of us. In his words: “[Professional] obligation is not like a contract I have signed after having had a chance first to review it carefully and to have consulted my lawyer. It is not anything I have agreed to become a party to. It binds me. It comes over me and binds me.” (Sumson, 2000, p.173)

She concluded that the effect of her institution’s code was to “shift the blame” (ibid) for the problems that arose onto the teachers (although equally we can understand some codes, functioning like a ‘buyer beware’ contract, as shifting responsibility onto the student as consumer). By turning academic craft knowledge (largely gained by experience and always requiring complex judgment) into a codified account of the role of supervisor, the institution seeks to define the domain of proper practice and reduce risk.

There are other potential problems in the way in which the forms of power are mobilised towards the supervisor in the text. The normalisation of supervisor integrity and autonomy, and thus a reluctance to directly regulate the supervisor’s private work of supervision, may explain the use of the “should” in relation to the list of supervisor’s responsibilities and the preference for the term “guidelines” over code. But the ambivalent meaning of “should” may well leave the supervisor with the difficult (ethical) question of when does the should apply and when does it not, that is when have they fulfilled their role adequately, where should they draw the line. Moreover, in a culture marked by a skewed power relation that privileges the supervisor, the “should” also lacks conviction. In the event of ‘should have but didn’t’, what are the explicit (or implicit) material consequences for the supervisor? None in the document because the supervisor is not accountable – the student is. Yet, in my experience, some students do submit theses believing in their ‘excellence’, only to be stunned by a less than excellent result with all the consequences, for instance in terms of scholarships, entailed. When they tell the tale of their supervision, it is sometimes apparent that the guidance and feedback given was either inadequate, or contradictory, or even punishing. This may not always be the supervisor’s conscious intention but, in the closeted space of supervision, who
can speak to the supervisor with knowledge and authority about their feedback? Not the student – in spite of the institution’s injunction in this text that they do so (as we see below). Overall, in several ways this text actively constitutes the supervisor as unruly (beyond the law and unaccountable) in the name of autonomy.

The Student

The text subjects the student to all three forms of power, but the dominant mode is governmental. Moreover, given the stakes for the student, the tone of the guidelines is somewhat threatening. From the opening lines, the student is positioned as subject to the law of the institution (the juridical subject), subject to this document which is authorised by Senate: “Senate has approved this statement” (l.3). The opaque origin of the document (the status of the Senate would be unclear to most students and some supervisors) amplifies the perceived power of the text because, if the status of Senate is unclear, then so are the document’s institutional ramifications. In the penultimate paragraph the student is further reminded of their subjected status by the closing charge that “compliance with course regulations ... is ultimately their responsibility” (ll.46-47). Disciplinary power also pervades the text through a range of messages that seek to normalise the student as passive and obedient. Some messages are not aimed directly at the student, for example, if the supervisor is away, “either an appropriately qualified replacement supervisor will be appointed by the Head of Department or the students will be advised they can contact the absent supervisor through the Department office” (ll.27-29). These phrases imply that important decisions have already been made, and will continue to be made, on the student’s behalf. In a more direct targeting of disciplinary power though, the student is normalised through the specification of her/his responsibilities, which include “responding to the arrangements proposed and the advice and instruction given by the supervisor” (ll.35-36), and “providing as prescribed by the department/faculty a brief report or reports to the Head of Department” (ll.44-45). The student’s “co-operation is essential” (l.48).

Somewhat contradictorily, governmental power works to position the student as also actively responsible (accountable) in several ways. First, s/he is accountable for her/his own success – or failure. While the student clearly requires supervision (as defined by the list of supervisor’s responsibilities), s/he is positioned as the independent author of their own success: “students are reminded that compliance with the course regulations and the quality of their work is ultimately their responsibility” (ll.46-47). This phrasing is suggestive of actuarial documents in which the reader is threatened by the small print that nearly always turns out to be difficult to understand and mainly concerned to protect the institution that produces it. Another related (and problematic) feature of the text is that the list of the student’s responsibilities is not exhaustive: “The responsibilities of the student include ...” (l.34, underlining as in the original). One effect of this may be the student can never be sure if they have done
everything they should, if they really have been the responsible student. This becomes especially important if they have a grievance with their supervisor. Second, the student is also accountable for the effectiveness of the supervision: her/his responsibilities include “discussing with the supervisor the type of guidance and comment he or she finds most helpful” (ll.37-38) and “taking the initiative in raising problems and difficulties, however elementary they may seem” (ll.39-40) – forms of accountability that position the student as powerful service-seekers (customers) who know what they need and can act freely in pursuit of their own interests, to the extent of making suggestions about arrangements to their supervisor as their service-provider. And lastly the student is accountable for auditing their own behaviour and acting as their own advocate in the event of difficulties: the text requires them to approach their Head of Department or Dean (effectively for the student the sovereign powers in the academic hierarchy) and explain their difficulties.

Let me take up this latter – issue of resolving difficulties – to explore how the forms of power mobilised by the text, as well as the absence of any acknowledgement of the unruliness of supervision, produce a double-bind for the student subject. As an accountable subject, in the event of problems such as work “not proceeding satisfactorily for reasons outside their control” (ll.49-50), or where they are “not establishing an effective working relationship with their supervisor” (ll.50-51), the student is urged to “discuss the matter promptly with the Head of Department or Dean of Faculty” (ll.51-52). The word “promptly” is problematic here in that while the general thrust of the paragraph appears to give the student a voice (they may discuss this matter), by qualifying this (that it should be done promptly) their voice is potentially silenced. How does this work? The student with supervision problems is likely to be caught in a dilemma: as a disciplined (passive and obedient) subject, if they act quickly in raising the hue and cry, they risk getting offside with their supervisor unnecessarily by appearing too demanding or hysterical and not knowing their place. But when is it too late? In my experience, students in supervision difficulty typically blame themselves – a likely reading of lines 50-51 in which it is the student’s job to establish a good working relationship. Moreover, because their list of responsibilities is not exhaustive, they can never be sure they have done all they should have. By the time they realise (if they ever do) that the supervisor is partially – or perhaps mainly – responsible for the wretched state of affairs between them, they wonder whether they can still legitimately act, as accountable subjects, at all. Because, along with everything else, they have not acted promptly as required. This textual invocation discounts the structural inequality of supervision, as well as the complexity of deciding whether or not it is the supervision that is being ineffective (or some personal flaw that is producing the problems). It also overlooks the way in which such actions might put students at risk (of falling out with their supervisor or HOD), and ignores the social diversity that would make such actions effectively impossible for some students.
There is a strong sense in this text that the student is the prime addressee and ‘in control’ of supervision. Yet this is very problematic. For while it is legitimate, according to this text, that a student may say what kind of guidance they need, in practice many students will not state their needs unless invited to by the supervisor because they have not learned how to in their previous experience as a university student or, as a student pointed out, they have learned not to. (And this does not touch on the real probability that they do not know what their needs are because they do not yet understand the nature of the task that lies ahead.) The text cannot address the complex issues around what constitutes the boundary between ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ demands and the kinds of effects these issues produce (uncertainty, ‘forgetfulness’, avoidance, frustration etc). For example, perhaps wisely, many students err on the safe side by making too few demands of their supervisors with unfortunate implications for the effectiveness of their working arrangements. Ironically, this text is more protective of the supervisor in that the ultimate outcome is not their responsibility (neither in terms of compliance with regulations nor academic merit). At the same time, the student who was structurally already more vulnerable and less knowing is positioned somewhat incoherently between docility/obedience and independence/initiative. S/he emerges as the party with the least power yet the most responsibility.

Overall the effect of the text is to position the supervisor as autonomous and self-regulating and, unlike the student, above the law and beyond regulation. By contrast, the student is thoroughly subject to both, and somewhat contradictorily constituted as both submissive and singularly accountable. In endorsing these polarised roles for supervisor and student, the text embeds the terms of the Master-Slave relation for supervision that I explore in Chapters 5 and 7.

**The Emergence of ‘Supervision’: Another Version of the Code**

The latest (in 2004) version of the code is different from the version above in several ways, the most striking of which is the emergence of ‘supervision’ as a textual object. Published in September 2001, and now addressing both Masters and doctoral students, the document is almost twice the length of the previous version. The text incorporates, with some revisions, most of the earlier version. Most noticeably the preamble has increased from one paragraph to two, there is a whole new section addressing both students and supervisors on how supervision should be conducted, and the list of the supervisor’s responsibilities has almost doubled. In what follows I read this version for shifts, if any, in the mobilisation of the three forms of socio-legal power towards the subjects of the document. Again, I have reproduced the full text here with all formatting as in the original (except for the line numbering).

1. Senate Guidelines on Thesis Supervision
2. The following statement is intended to provide guidance for appropriate supervision of
thesis research students and supervisor - student relationships for Masters degrees which
have a major research thesis component and all Doctoral degrees that have a supervised
research component.

6. Students are reminded that compliance with the degree regulations and the quality of
their work is ultimately their responsibility. The role of the supervisor is to assist them
to achieve the best research results of which they are capable. A good and co-operative
working relationship between student and supervisor is essential if a high quality thesis
is to be produced. Information on academic statutes and degree regulations is given in
the Calendar.

12. Students and Thesis Supervisors

13. Students and their thesis supervisors should meet before the student enrolls for a
Masters thesis or is registered for a Doctoral thesis to discuss the thesis research project,
the resources required to carry out the proposed research and their availability, the
supervisory expertise and support that will need to be available to bring the research to
successful completion, and to clarify the respective obligations of supervisor and
student in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. Such discussion is not intended
to have any effect on the need for full compliance with regulations for the particular
degree and the student and supervisor should also read and discuss the relevant
regulations so that they are both clear about the requirements for the presentation of
the thesis and completion dates.

23. At the commencement of the thesis, research students and supervisors should meet to
discuss and agree on clear goals for the first year of thesis research and the frequency
of supervisory meetings. As a guide these meetings should be at least once a month
but in some research areas and/or at same stages of thesis research, they may need to be
on a weekly basis.

28. If the thesis research being undertaken requires ethics approval before the research can
be initiated, the thesis supervisor should discuss the ethical issues and give guidance
on the ethics approval process. It is the student and supervisor’s joint responsibility to
make the application for and to ensure that formal ethics approval is obtained.

32. The student and supervisor should discuss any other commitments that they might have
and any anticipated absences, which will interrupt normal supervisory contact during the
period required for completion of the degree.

35. At the end the first semester of thesis research the supervisor and student should have a
substantial review of research activities and achievements and discuss progress towards
achieving the identified goals for the thesis research or the provisional year of registration
in the case of the PhD programme. Reports on progress required by the Department or
the University should be prepared and submitted.

40. At the end of each year of registration the student and supervisor(s) should meet to review
progress for the year, the research directions, identify any issues that are impeding
progress or have/will interrupt the normal supervisory process and establish goals for the
coming year and complete the formal annual report requirements for the particular degree
for which the student is enrolled.

45. In the event of a breakdown in relations between the student and the thesis supervisor,
recourse is usually to the Head of Department in the first instance.

47. Approved Postgraduate Committee 13 August 2001
49. As part of the general supervision of a student’s thesis research, thesis supervisors should:

51. (a) give guidance about the nature of research and the standard expected, about the planning of the research programme, about literature and sources, resources and their availability, and about requisite techniques (including arranging for instruction where necessary);

55. (b) discuss with the student the level of contact needed, for example through meetings, tutorials or seminars and ensure as far as possible that this contact is maintained;

57. (c) be accessible to the student at other appropriate times when he or she may need advice;

58. (d) inform the student, in advance, of any proposed periods of absence either on research and study leave or any extended leave of more than 4 weeks, and in these periods of absence, either make alternative arrangements for another staff member to take up temporary supervisory duties or provide contact details so that supervisory contact may be maintained with the student;

63. (e) give advice on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work so that the whole may be submitted within the scheduled time;

65. (f) request written work as appropriate, and return that work with constructive criticism and in reasonable time;

67. (g) draw the student’s attention to any courses or workshops that are offered which will help the student overcome problems identified in written expression or other aspects of writing theses;

70. (h) draw to the student’s attention any important new results or concepts that may have come to attention of the supervisor through the supervisor’s contacts with other professionals and researchers;

73. (i) provide guidance in fieldwork in the case of field based research;

74. (j) direct the student to other experts in the field of research if appropriate;

75. (k) arrange as appropriate for the student to talk about his or her work to individual staff or in seminars and to have practice in oral presentation of the research subject;

77. (l) ensure that the student is made aware of any inadequacy of progress or of standards of work which fall below that generally expected;

79. (m) direct the student to appropriate sources of information on “administrative” matters, e.g. the length of the thesis, the recommended style and layout, the number of copies required, regulations regarding extensions, possible sources of research funding;

82. (n) establish early on the style and layout to be used in written work (e.g. Modern Languages Association (MLA) Handbook or a source from the Selected Bibliography in: Guide to the Presentation of Theses, available from the Library and at www.auckland.ac.nz/1br/instruct/theses.htm);
86. (o) ensure that in the final stages of thesis preparation that they are available to read drafts 
87. and provide prompt and appropriate written comments on those drafts.

88. The responsibilities of the student include:

89. (a) taking the initiative in raising problems or difficulties, including difficulties with 
90. accessing sources or resources;

91. (b) discussing with the supervisor the type of guidance and comment he or she finds most 
92. helpful, and agreeing on a schedule of meetings;

93. (c) responding to the arrangements proposed and the advice and instruction given by the 
94. supervisor;

95. (d) maintaining the progress of the work in accordance with the stages agreed with the 
96. supervisor, including, in particular, the presentation of written material as required in 
97. sufficient time to allow for comments and discussion before proceeding to the next stage;

98. (e) deciding when he or she wishes to submit the thesis, taking due account of the 
99. supervisor’s opinion, and ensuring that University deadlines are complied with.

99. Approved Postgraduate Committee 13 August 2001

100. Approved Senate 3 September 2001

The Supervisor

In the previous text, the supervisor was the target of juridical power (that of the university’s 
Senate) to a limited extent, but not of governmental power at all: disciplinary power was the 
dominant mode. This pattern continues in the new text but intensifies in that there is a 
strikingly increased scope and specification of normative supervisor responsibilities. The 
original eight items has increased to 15. Some (a, b, d and k) are existing material rephrased: 
for example, the note about absence in the earlier version (that was not addressed to the 
supervisor as such) is now an item on the list. No longer seen as properly “implicit” (l.25, 
1993 version), the injunction has become forcefully explicit and its subject is now clearly the 
supervisor: “[thesis supervisors should] inform the student, in advance, of any proposed 
periods of absence …” (l.58). Some items (g, h, i, j, m, n and o) are entirely new including the 
suggestion that the supervisor should inform the student of layout and presentation 
requirements (n), should direct the student to other experts or colleagues when necessary (j, 
k), and should be available to give feedback in the final stages (o). The note in the previous 
version about giving particular care to “overseas students” is gone and a new (possibly 
replacement) item gives the supervisor responsibility to inform students about writing 
assistance available to them (g). While I am reading these textual moves as primarily 
disciplinary, that is working to normalise autonomy, they could also be read as governmental 
in that they seem to set up an expectation of the supervisor as “the self-auditing academic 
subject” (McWilliam, 2004, p.162). However, in the absence of any specific reference in the 
text to how the supervisor is to be held accountable for fulfilling the listed responsibilities, it
seems that the institution is ‘choosing’ not to mobilise governmental power here even though, theoretically, it could.

The Student

The student is still the main specific target of juridical and governmental powers. Her/his “compliance with degree regulations” (l.6) and “University deadlines” (l.98) is required. However, this form of power seems to be mobilised towards the student more forcefully than in the previous version because of the way in which the reminder about their compliance with the regulations comes much earlier in the text (line 6 rather than line 46). Indeed the new text is bracketed (in its opening and closing lines) by “injunctions [and] dire warnings” (Rose, 1996b, p.46) towards the student that serve to heighten the threatening intimations of its message, in some contradiction to the text’s offering itself as guidance for good practice (ll.2-3). Disciplinary power continues to be targeted at the student via the list of her/his responsibilities. The list remains somewhat token as, in the prefatory line, it still claims to only “include” (l.88) (by implication) some of the student’s responsibilities rather than fully accounting for them. The list remains at five, although two items have been revised: the main change is that the third, rather vague item in the 1993 version, enjoining the student to take “the initiative in raising problems or difficulties” (l.39, 1993 version), has been moved to first place on the list (l.89) and been made more concrete to include “difficulties with accessing sources and resources”. (A sore point among postgraduate students is often the unevenness of resource provision for them across, and sometimes within, departments. An troublesome implication of this reworded item is that supervisors can solve resource issues – this is usually not the case, especially in the humanities and social sciences.) The repositioning underscores the importance of the student’s raising difficulties (acknowledging perhaps that students don’t do this often or early enough but not acknowledging any of the reasons why). The other change is that the final item on providing reports to the department/faculty has been replaced by an entirely new one governing the submission of theses and written in such a way that it can address both Masters and doctoral students even though they are governed by different regulations on this issue.

Proper Supervision

While there is no marked change in the patterns of forms of power directed at either supervisor or student separately, there is a major textual shift that has implications for both. The previous version of the code implicitly construed supervision as the sum of two discrete, complementary rather than reciprocal, sets of responsibilities: the supervisor’s and the student’s. It also mobilised governmental power (that seeks to regulate the risky) as the raison d’etre for the code (ie the “intent to minimise the risks and problems” l.4, 1993 version). In the new version that rationale has disappeared and in its place we find an intensified targeting
of disciplinary power in the rationale to “provide guidance for appropriate supervision” (l.2). Moreover the guidance is directed at both supervisor and student – or, I should say, “student and supervisor” because this is the order unfailingly adopted in the new version (l.9, l.12, l.13, l.23 etc). Let us look at these two shifts more closely.

In terms of the first, disciplinary power targeting the object of supervision, “appropriate” (l.2) (normal/good/proper) supervision is no longer left implicit but is now described in the second paragraph of the preamble as “a good and co-operative working relationship between student and supervisor” (ll.8-9). Moreover such supervision is asserted to be “essential if a high quality thesis is to be produced” (ll.9-10). In the new long section immediately after the preamble, six out of the seven paragraphs outline a more detailed view of what is meant by “a good and co-operative working relationship”. In terms of the second shift, targeting both supervisor and student as if they are the same, the new section as a whole is addressed to “students and thesis supervisors” (l.12, my italics) and each paragraph names both as its subject. Notably in this section the text is much less vague about various practical aspects of supervision (such as frequency of meetings) than the previous code. By and large though the text of the paragraphs works normatively rather than prescriptively – all contain at least one “should”, and all but one of those shoulds is aimed at both supervisor and student acting together. For example both “should meet before the student enrols” (l.13, underlining as in original), “should meet to discuss and agree” (ll.23-24), “should have a substantial review” (ll.35-36). This device serves to amplify the message that normal supervision should be joint, a message that also intimates what normal supervisors and students look like: what is suggested here is a pair of rational, organised, well informed (ie thoroughly orderly) speaking equals. Yet this orderly relationship between equals bears little resemblance to the reports from the flesh and blood supervisors and students in my research (as well as the many I have spoken to in workshops, conferences and other research projects over the years): they experienced supervision as decidedly yet often productively unequal, but also unpredictable, uncertain, sometimes anxiety provoking, often enjoyable, and always susceptible to other variables (such as workload, other deadlines, feelings or not of confidence about the work, changing regulations inadequately communicated, personal lives, etc etc).

**Supervision Grievances: A Small Tale of Textual Restlessness**

The seventh paragraph in the new section deals with the vexing issue of grievance in supervision. Liberal governmentalities, by definition, are uneasy about modes of power that encroach directly on the freedom of their subjects (in particular the juridical), preferring modes that work through consent (particularly disciplinary but also governmental). This ambivalence can be seen in a small story of textual restlessness in relation to the issue of how to guide the student’s course of action in the event of a problem or grievance. This story can
be traced over a sequence of four versions of the code (the two analysed here are third and fourth in that sequence).

The first version gave the student a single option in the final paragraph:

> Accordingly, if students consider that their work is not proceeding satisfactorily for reasons outside their control, or if they consider that they are not establishing an effective working relationship with their supervisor they should discuss the matter promptly with the Head of Department. (Sept 1991, italics added)

Here governmental power is mobilised towards the student as the responsible self-auditing subject. This subject will diligently report concerns of risk to their HOD who, in turn, is construed (implicitly) as someone able to assist the student resolve these concerns. The mention of the HOD also hints at the workings of juridical power because the HOD may well be the sovereign on the student’s horizon.

In the second version of the code, the text is modified to be much longer. The new text is italicised here:

> Accordingly, if students consider that their work is not proceeding satisfactorily for reasons outside their control, or if they consider that they are not establishing an effective working relationship with their supervisor they should discuss the matter promptly with the Head of Department or Dean of the Faculty concerned. While the Head of Department or Dean may refer some matters to the mediator, generally such issues do not come within the mediator’s role and students should not seek to involve the mediator until the above approaches have been made. (Sept 1992, italics added)\(^{44}\)

This version makes two new moves: first, it provides the accountable student with an additional route for addressing problems – approaching the Dean (and upping the juridical ante?). Second, it acknowledges another possible route – approaching the university’s Mediator – only to suggest this option is not ‘really’ available because “such issues” (as “work not proceeding satisfactorily” or “not establishing an effective working relationship with their supervisor”) do not come within the “mediator’s role”. (Note the Mediator’s name is not capitalised while Head of Department and Dean of Faculty are – this minor textual feature

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\(^{44}\) The institution was explicit about the purpose of this amendment: the new version was circulated to Deans and Heads of Departments with an attached memorandum from the Assistant Registrar (28 Sept, 1992) that said, “The supervision guidelines have been extended to … dissuade students from taking supervisory matters to the Mediator” (final paragraph).
works to lower its status.) In this text, the force of the phrasing “should not seek” functions juridically by asserting a ‘law’ that a student would transgress as their peril.

In the third version, the final sentence is rewritten so that the paragraph now reads:

Accordingly, if students consider that their work is not proceeding satisfactorily for reasons outside their control, or if they consider that they are not establishing an effective working relationship with their supervisor they should discuss the matter promptly with the Head of Department or Dean of the Faculty concerned. While all students may have recourse to the contact network and to the Mediator, strictly academic matters are not generally covered by University Harassment Policy. (May 1993, italics added)

The injunction to appeal first to the HOD or Dean still stands, but the second option has been modified to be less juridical and more disciplinary: instead of forbidding the student from approaching the mediator (now the “Mediator”), the student is now more gently discouraged on the grounds that “strictly academic matters are not generally covered by University Harassment Policy”. “Not generally covered” suggests ‘not normally’. Although this leaves the possibility that the abnormal will occur open (and that the student’s grievance may indeed be covered), it frames it as unlikely. As well, invoking the Harassment Policy mobilises a couple of problematic possibilities: one is that it puts (or scares) the student off as their grievance does not figure in their minds as (the dirty word of) harassment but something else eg neglect, disagreement etc; the other is that it offers the student a ready-made phrase to label their experience in a way that amplifies their sense of being the victim of unjust or abusive treatment. (This is not to say that there are not real cases of harassment in supervision, of supervisor by student or student by supervisor, but the existing policy of the university would cover these.) Raising the Harassment Policy here is a red herring because it hides other aspects of the Mediator’s role including the more general function of assisting in conflict resolution between members of the university over all sorts of issues that usually include personal as well as professional or academic elements. Indeed, the term “strictly academic matters” suggests the institution’s reluctance to consider that in supervision the academic and the personal may well be thoroughly interwoven in ways not usual in other forms of university pedagogy. It seems as if the institution, unable to countenance the personal and desiring only to deal with the academic, insists that the student (and supervisor) can separate them. Thus, in the text, the academic project is explicit (“Supervision of theses and dissertations”) but the personal project (supervising the student’s becoming a researcher) remains hidden. But it does remain, with all the unruliness entailed. What may be at stake in the insistence on the border between academic and personal matters in supervision is the fragile status of the thesis as the student’s independent work.
Interestingly, after all this, the all-new text of the current version of the code gives a much shorter, less ambiguous instruction:

In the event of a breakdown in relations between the student and the thesis supervisor, recourse is usually to the Head of Department in the first instance. (ll.45-46)

The revision marks both a return and a departure in relation to previous versions. The return is to the one-route procedure given in the original version. The departure is that the text more directly acknowledges the possibility of a breakdown in which *either or both* supervisor and student might be implicated – instead of framing it as the student’s failure as previously. The new textual injunction now structurally addresses student and supervisor, both in its language (grammatically it addresses no-one in particular) and in its placement in a section of the document that speaks to both parties. Interestingly, as the supervisor becomes the subject of this issue for the first time, the text shifts from mobilising governmental or juridical power to disciplinary: it now ‘suggests’ a route of action rather than prescribing one.  

**Comments**

Looking across both versions of the code, some shifts in the mobilisation of socio-legal powers are visible, suggesting the institution’s continuing unease over just how to govern its supervisor and student subjects. While both versions explicitly situate themselves as guidance for students and supervisors, both seek support from the prescriptive and forbidding juridical power of the Senate and its regulations (laws). This form of power though is more forcefully targeted at students. The earlier version also explicitly situates itself as a practice of risk management (the domain of governmental power), but the later version seems to de-mobilise governmental power in favour of fortifying the gentler hand of disciplinary power that ‘rules’ its subjects through normalisation. By a more detailed specification of norms for supervision (for both, but especially for the supervisor), the institution seeks to convince the subjects of supervision to bring themselves to order along lines that are incontrovertibly good and proper. (Like most readers, I find myself unable to disagree with any of its prescriptions.) In contrast to juridicality or governmentalism, this form of power is much more congruent with the liberal university as an institution which values above all else autonomy. All the same I found the withdrawal of governmental power in favour of disciplinary a somewhat curious reversal in the modern context because in so many ways governmentalism, and its associated mode of managerialism, has the high ground in many institutional processes right now (and, in this institution, the recent flow of revised regulations and new policy documents in the area of

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45 Curiously there is no mention here of the now separate policy for dispute resolution in supervision. This policy does not conform to the suggestion above, but instead offers a range of alternative routes (including access to the Mediator) to assist a clearly preferred informal resolution of the problem, before defining the formal process in which the HOD or Dean must be involved.
postgraduate education is evidence of this). One way in which this shift makes sense is to know that, between 1993 and 2001, the institution installed dispute resolution procedures which, detailed in a separate document, take up the burden of regulating the risks of supervision. Yet another way to understand this shift is to consider who the main target of the code might be.

The primary target of the earlier version was the unruly (unsatisfactory, ignorant, failing or blaming) student. The student was the only object of juridical power – subject to the law – and bore the brunt of governmental power through being the singular target of accountability. This pattern continues in the latest version of the code. Moreover, in the textual restlessness between four versions of the code described above, the core issue at stake is how to govern the actions of the student with a grievance – whom should s/he be allowed to approach. This has changed in that the student is now no longer the only target of the injunction. This textual shift is one of several in the latest version of the code that work to reposition the student as the accountable subject who is in control of supervision. For example, when both student and supervisor are mentioned together, the student is now always mentioned first as if they are the most important party. As well, in yoking together the ‘fact’ that the student is ultimately responsible for the outcome of supervision (the “quality of their work”, ll.6-7) with the ‘fact’ that “a good and co-operative working relationship between student and supervisor is essential if a high quality thesis is to be produced” (ll.8-10), and in moving the injunction to raise problems (ll.89-90) to the top of the list of student responsibilities, there is the strong suggestion that the student is responsible for the effectiveness of the supervision.

Yet a closer look at the recent version of the code shows that it is around the supervisor that the most substantial textual changes swirl. For one thing, the emendation of the note about absence to speak much more directly to the supervisor suggests the institution’s anxieties about unruly supervisors who just up and desert their students when they go on leave. For another, the strikingly increased specification of the supervisor’s responsibilities suggests again that it is now the supervisor whom the institution seeks to govern more effectively.46 It seems that the supervisor is supervision’s wild card – the out-of-control supervisor is the ultimate spectre of risk. One of the problems for the institution is that its own norms of supervisor autonomy and integrity (which are actively mobilised in the code, as I have discussed with respect to the 1993 version) get in the way of addressing this risk directly by proposing more stringent accountabilities for the supervisor. Those norms notwithstanding, in the latest version we find disciplinary power mobilised more strongly in an attempt to control supervisors through a more nuanced and fine-grained normative view of what good

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46 The phenomenon of the supervisor’s responsibilities proliferating has also been remarked on by Paul Corcoran and Anne-Marie Priest (1999). They note that between 1991 and 1999 the lines dedicated to explicating the supervisor’s role had trebled in the University of Adelaide’s Code of Practice, while those related to the student and the institution had ‘merely’ doubled
supervisors should do. In this move, the code may be seeking more accountability from the supervisor via intensifying the “distantiated relations of control” (Rose, 1996b, p.55) it can exert over its supervision through normalisation. This may also help us understand why the institution is intimating that it is the student who is in control of the supervision – the institution is seeking to get the student to control the supervisor because it cannot.

In the current version of the code, as in the former, the unruliness of power, difference and desire are almost entirely absent. What is new, however, is the emergence of a compelling fantasy of supervision as a cooperative and orderly effort. The emergence of this fantasy seems to mark an awareness on the part of the institution that its subjects are not simply amenable to being governed via rational argument but require something that moves them more deeply.

**A Fantasy of Orderly Practice**

_It didn't go in [to supervision] with any expectations because I had absolutely no idea of what supervision would be like. I didn't know anyone who'd done a thesis before though I knew that you had to have a supervisor and they were supposed to help you. … As long as, I thought, as long as I can relate to the person and not be frightened to talk to them. Well I suppose I expected her to tell me to read particular books, you know, who was important in the field. But she really didn't do that very often. … I didn’t have too many expectations. Probably a good thing because then you don’t get disappointed. (Student 1, initial interview)_

In the “dream of liberal governmentalities” (Rose, 1996a, p.45), each form of socio-legal power has its fantastical subject who embodies that power: the juridical fantasises the law-abiding subject, the disciplinary the normal, and the governmental the accountable. Above, I have teased out the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between the code and its power-ridden subjects. Now I want to turn my attention to the similarly fantastical object of supervision which the latest version of the code creates, a thing animated by equally fantastical subjects: the autonomous supervisor who is out of reach for juridical or governmental powers, and the contradictorily compliant _and_ accountable student who, thoroughly subject to both, is in control of supervision.

The idea of fantasy taken up here comes from the work of Slavoj Zizek, who describes it in this way:

_The standard notion of the way fantasy works within ideology is that of a fantasy-scenario that obfuscates the true horror of a situation: instead of the full rendering of the antagonisms that traverse our society, for example, we indulge in the notion of_
society as an organic whole kept together by forces of solidarity and co-operation. … However, the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy cannot be reduced to [this]. The first, rather obvious thing to add is that the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real that it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal … (Zizek, 1999, pp.91-92, italics added)

In Zizek’s view, fantasies emerge on political landscapes where pervasive social anxieties exist. The apparent work of the fantasy is to conceal the horror that causes the anxieties in the first place. However, there is a sting in the tail of this process which is that, while the fantasy does indeed conceal the horror, it also “creates what it purports to conceal” (ibid). This is a useful way of thinking about the dream of supervision indulged by the code because it foregrounds the unconscious, irrational elements of governmentality, allowing us to consider how they might be greater than the rational, having more of a grip on us (such that we find them compelling and difficult to distance ourselves from). The grip works most effectively when such fantasies “resonate with widely held affective sentiments” (Tie, 2002, p.245), such as the “ultimately consensual society” (p.248). As well, this metaphor for supervision provokes us into thinking about what horrors the code might set in train even as it seeks to repress them. In what follows, I re-read the new section of the code for the “fantasmatic scenario” (Zizek, 1999, p.91) – the fiction – of supervision it sustains.

If there was a fantasy of supervision embedded in the earlier version (1993) of the code, it is that of autonomous Master and obedient Slave – the orderly but polarised relation that is the subject of Chapters 5 and 7. In the 2001 version, however, a very different fantasy emerges in the new section which addresses student and supervisor. Moreover this section comes before the separate lists of responsibilities, perhaps inciting a different reading of them. In the opening paragraph of the code, and for the first time, supervision is described as more than “thesis supervision” (l.1), but as also a “supervisor-student relationship” (l.3, italics added). Throughout the text of the new section, in the insistence that supervisor and student are jointly responsible for planning the project, arranging meetings, applying for ethics approval, reviewing progress etc, the fantasy of supervision has a decidedly interpersonal flavour compared to that of the previous version. This fantasy indulges in the idea that supervision is an orderly, mutual ‘relationship’ between two individuals who function as speaking equals so as to discharge a range of joint responsibilities. It is no longer just the student who must be

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47 By way of an example, Zizek (1999) reads the safety instructions on airlines with an eye to the fantasmatic scenario of the airline crash that they support – instead of a “full rendering” of the horror, the story told is that if the passengers follow the methodical, orderly actions outlined by the crew and supported by various technologies – oxygen masks, lifejackets, whistles, lights – all will be well. The horror that is repressed is not only the inevitable helplessness and chaos but also the likelihood that only those who behave most ruthlessly in their own interests will survive.
“co-operative” (as the previous version asserts in l.48), but the supervisor as well. Interestingly, this fantasy emerges at an historical moment in which the psychological discourse of supervision is gripping the imaginations of some students and supervisors. Many relish the intimacy and face-to-faceness of supervision, seeking “relationship” as an antidote to the overwhelming impersonality of the massified higher education system. While the fantasy in the text does not simply embrace this idea of supervision, it seems much closer to it than the previous version. I have already remarked that it seems strange that the dispute resolution procedures are not mentioned in the new code – this absence however is entirely consistent with the trend to suppress the unruliness of supervision under the fantasy of supervision as harmonious and co-operative.

The horror of supervision that the code seeks to repress through its fantasy of supervision as a pre-eminently co-operative and reasonable student-supervisor relationship is that, for many reasons, supervision is ungovernable. The fantasy represses the problematic power relations between supervisor and student in supervision, and all the ways in which the personal is implicated with the academic. It represses the unruliness of the production of new knowledge in which supervision is implicated and the institution’s lack of control over its supervisors. It also conceals the related horrors of the many ways in which institutions position students so that they are by and large unable to ‘take charge’ and in which many aspects of institutional life make it increasingly difficult for supervisors to supervise well. The powerful suggestion the fantasy makes is that, if only we obey its conditions, all will be well. The corollary of this, as Sumsion (2000) points out, is that if things do not go well, it is our own fault. For, in the event of being asked to account for ourselves against the terms of the code through institutional or legal due process, who of us, supervisors and students, will be able to look into the ‘judge’s’ eye without a sense of horror and despair at our own excesses and failings?

Yet, following Zizek’s argument, the problematic instability of the fantasy is that it works to create the very horrors it intends to conceal. In seeking “to minimise – if not eradicate – contingency from human interaction” (Tie, 2002, p.245), contingency becomes unacceptable, a sign of failure or irresponsibility. Let me trace out some ways in which this might happen with respect to supervision. For one thing, the fantasy of supervision as an orderly “co-operative working relationship” (l.8-9) sets up expectations that ill-equip either supervisor or student for the reality of unruly supervision: supervisors are sometimes late for meetings, phones do sometimes ring, students usually will not take the lead on establishing the terms of supervision, they do sometimes (usually?) get behind on their work, they do sometimes write badly etc. Both supervisor and student will suffer being compared with others (via stories in the staff-room and the student common-room) and found wanting. Moreover personal matters of liking each other (or not) enter supervision and private lives (children, health, other work commitments) constantly intrude on the capacity of both to meet their responsibilities in an orderly fashion. Over time, issues arise between supervisor and student that require
thought and judgement on the part of one or both to address. Misjudgements and mistakes will be made. Setting up supervision in such strong and fantastical terms may well risk making the lived experience of supervision more disappointing especially for the student for whom it matters so much (and who is not usually in a position to become more experienced in supervision over time as the supervisor is). Trust and tolerance – even forgiveness – are often required in the uncertain scene of supervision, but none of this is mentioned in the code.

Another effect of the code with its copious specifications is that some productive practices – those untalked-about “systems of encouragements or discouragements” (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995, p.32) – may be put beyond the pale, recast as outrageous and horrifying to all sensible people. Chances are that in this more heavily normative environment the antagonisms of supervision will be more deeply felt and less forgivable because “proper supervision should not be like this!” Likewise the subjects of supervision become always at risk of ‘over (or under) stepping the mark’: most of us are both much more and much less of an academic subject than any list of norms could ever specify. Yet the code works to normalise certain forms of subjectivity with the consequence of casting other forms into the realms of the abnormal, the unacceptable, the intolerable, the unforgivable. For instance, the code averts its eyes from the truly terrifying prospect of the brilliant student – the creative anarchic independent student who turns the tables on the supervisor, who does not need supervision – indeed, in asserting that supervision is “essential if a high quality thesis is to be produced” (ll.9-10) this student is impossible. The code also casts out the brilliant supervisor who brings out the best in their research students but through unorthodox means – the sort of supervisor of whom students say afterwards, “It was terrible at the time but what I learned from him/her was invaluable” (as Supervisor 3 says in Chapter 2).

For the supervisor, a consequence of the ensuing disappointment may be a sense of self-doubt or personal failure and perhaps then the development of a cynicism towards the code and its seemingly ‘unrealistic’ terms, and towards students who do not fit the norm (obedient/compliant and autonomous/motivated in the right proportion). The repressed but still immanent threats from difference and desire (from a sense of inadequacy in the face of language and cultural differences, to frustration with ‘unrecognisable’ students who do not conform to the supervisor’s ideal of the good student, to wariness about charges of harassment) may increase the supervisor’s sense of uncertainty and perhaps their desire to

48 Frank Barrett writing about improvisation in organizations: “Hannah Arendt (1958) noted that the one antidote to the predicament of unpredictability is forgiveness” (1998, p.611). This struck a chord with me when I read it because, in my role as a member of the institution’s Resolve Network (an outreach of the Mediator’s Office), occasionally I have been privy to supervision disagreements (and other kinds of interpersonal clashes) where both parties have some elements of ‘right’ on their side and the only way forward is via a shift in disposition towards each other. Indeed the successful practice of mediation largely depends on the willingness to forgive.
avoid difficult aspects of the task, or potentially difficult students (for instance, those who are not like them). This is made more likely, it seems to me, by the way in which the code works to shift accountability to the individuals without disclosing the institution’s accountability to either of them. (This is particularly the case for the supervisor because the list of supervisor responsibilities encompasses many of the institution’s accountabilities to the student – although the problem, from the institution’s and the student’s point of view, is how to hold the supervisor accountable for those things.)

For both supervisor and student, another possible consequence of the disappointment is that the ordinary agonisms of supervision (for example, the supervisor’s struggle to get the student to work in a disciplined way, the student’s struggle to get recognition from the supervisor, their shared but unequal struggle over the emergent thesis) become more intense, transforming into a painful and opposed antagonism that casts the working relationship into disarray and leads, in the worst case scenario for the institution, to a litigious student. For it is the student who is most likely to overreact to the vicissitudes of supervision – when embroiled with everyday supervisory shortcomings, the painful self-doubt inherent in scholarly work and the anxiety generated by contracting time-frames may become anger and frustration. This is likely to find its target in the supervisor. Moreover the suggestion of impropriety that the code produces for certain behaviours or their absence may produce the student’s desire to have order restored and an erring supervisor forced to mend their ways. In these ways the horror of unruly supervision may well come back to haunt the institution because the terms of the code set up strong expectations, especially for students of supervisors. Yet it is possible that a supervisor might meet all the responsibilities outlined in the code and still be negligent (or abusive or exploitative), and it is also possible that a supervisor might counter-charge the institution with making it impossible for her/him to meet the requirements of the code. Finally, to return to (and adapt) the opening quote from Vargas Llosa, it is not just what the codes say, it is also their intimations that are important. The fantasy I have described here intimates the possibility of ‘togetherness’ in supervision, a possibility that is only ever intermittently likely to find fulfilment in practice.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter I have given two readings of a particular university’s code for supervision. In the first reading, I sought to tease out the forms of socio-legal power mobilised by the institution towards the subjects of supervision and some of their problematic effects. In the second, I took up the metaphor of fantasy in an effort to name the irrational dimensions of the governmental project to order supervision and to suggest some of the dangers that the project sets loose. What unites the readings is my desire to destabilise the apparent ‘sensibleness’ of the logic of ‘codifying supervision’. Instead I have argued that supervision is a pedagogy where the academic and personal come together in an unruly combination and
that it is in some important and fruitful sense ungovernable. Certainly there are enough tales from the field\textsuperscript{49} for us to know that ‘good’ supervisions sometimes proceed in strange ways, disorderly ways, ways institutional codes do not begin to imagine. (The word ‘good’ itself hides an essential aspect of the problem: does ‘good supervision’ describe a good experience or a good outcome? Currently higher education institutions appear undecided, strategically deploying academic outcomes for one purpose and student experience outcomes for others.)

This is not an argument against codes per se. In some senses they state what is already, although implicit, an “organised framework” (Deutscher, 1994, citing le Doeuff, p.41) for supervision, derived from tradition and experience. By framing the private space of supervision, the institution mediates it, making some forms of power relations more likely than others, proscribing the open field of play and thus ensuring the subjects of supervision are more recognisable to each other and the institution. This is likely to assist a first-time supervisor or supervised student (especially perhaps one from a non-traditional background) to understand what some of their legitimate responsibilities and expectations might be. At the same time, codes are limited tools, able only to do particular work. In effect many codes install a binary of good supervision/bad supervision thus ruling out the more likely (in practice) messy middle zone that constitutes ‘good enough’ supervision. As well, in misrecognising supervision as orderly, codes are unable to address many of the messy tensions that confront supervisors and students within the lived experience of supervision. For instance, how do you get timely feedback from your supervisor, or written work from your student? When and how do you help the student who is homesick or lost in the blind alleys that surround every research project? How do you deal with a supervisor who is never on time for meetings or who makes you feel small and stupid in how they address you? How much do you edit the student’s work when the expression is inadequate to the standard expected? These questions will persist as long as supervision is practised.

In closing I want to remark on another ‘horror’, one that looms for me as an academic advisor working with colleagues and students in this area. Imposed through the legal-administrative arm of the institution, the code treats supervision as a list of duties to be discharged. Such a view threatens to close the conversation about what counts as good supervision, especially consideration of its complexity, and how that kind of supervision may be fostered. Yet this is a conversation that we need to open up and keep open. It is a conversation that must include supervisors and students as well as managers. In contrast to the code’s figuration of supervision as a standardised practice, I want to suggest an understanding of supervision as

\textsuperscript{49}The field I refer to here includes casual reports of colleagues’ supervision experiences given in workshops and conversations, as well as those which came up in the supervisor interviews in this research study – see, for example, Supervisor 3 in Chapter 2 – and the growing body of ‘confessional’ supervision stories written by supervisor-student co-authors (see for example, Bartlett & Mercer, 2000; Chapman & Sork, 2001; McAlpine & Weiss, 2000; Taylor & Dawson, 1998).
“interminable” (Felman, 1997; Readings, 1996, p.159), as animated by the positive play of power and desire, and as a matter of asymmetrical obligation between supervisor and student that can never be fully accounted for. This admittedly complex theorisation seems to me a more fruitful way to think about what takes place between supervisors and students – a risky business marked by inevitable but often productive tensions, dilemmas, uncertainties, pains and pleasures. The contingencies of supervision require much from its participants: trust, good will, patience, thoughtfulness in conversation and feedback, perseverance, courage. And more. In the chapters that follow, in which we enter the intimate space between supervisor and student, this complexity and unpredictability will feature.
Chapter 5
Master and Slave: The Institutional Architecture of Supervision

In this chapter, difficult but foundational aspects of supervision are construed through Hegel’s trope of Master and Slave.\(^{50}\) This is a structuralist account, in a sense, because it attends to the relatively fixed and unequal power relations that a more Foucauldian view of power (such as that emphasised in Chapters 2, 3 and 8) tends to obscure. While my broader thesis is that supervision is mostly messy and unpredictable, I want here to explore what the assertion of supervision’s messiness obscures: that is, supervision’s somewhat stable asymmetrical and agonistic\(^{51}\) aspect. In taking this approach, my intention is to shock (a little) in order to place into question views that would suppress supervision’s sometimes painful contradictions and

\(^{50}\) Hegel refers to the lord and bondsman in his original text but Master and Slave is the more common modern usage – see for example the work of Jessica Benjamin (1988) and Alexandre Kojève (1969). The Master-Slave outcome can be understood as stable, intransigent, overbearing (as Hegel seems to suggest) but also as shifting, reversible, unstable (as Benjamin proposes (1988, p.223), as a way around hardened domination in heterosexual relations). The understanding I develop here has elements of both polarities: that there are relatively enduring elements to the Master-Slave asymmetry in supervision, but that there can be shifts and reversals between supervisor and student, and also in response to relations between the supervisor qua Master and other Masters, the student qua Slave and other Slaves, the student qua Slave and other Masters. In his discussion, Hegel doesn’t really deal with anyone beyond the primary couple.

\(^{51}\) In spite of the Hegelian focus in this chapter, my use of agonistic is akin to Foucault’s: “a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation” (1986, p.428).
tensions. I highlight here that these tensions are not just about individual failure or accident, but are more about supervision’s stilted architecture.

In the first half of the chapter, I give a reading of Hegel’s story of the Master and Slave. Then, in the second, I go on to elaborate how I see this trope plotting onto supervision. Drawing on illustrative interview data from supervisors and students, I argue that the supervisor-student-thesis relation has some strong parallels with Hegel’s Master-Slave-thing relation. Moreover, an Hegelian reading offers us insight into some of supervision’s complexities.

**Two Opposed Shapes of Consciousness**

The relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won … (Hegel, 1977 [1807], pp.113-114)

Hegel explains the difficult process through which the self becomes an independent, knowing self-consciousness as a struggle to death between two individuals. At the outset of the struggle both selves have subjective certainty of being individuals but not yet knowledge. For Hegel, this process must be intersubjective (although intrasubjective readings are possible) because the existence of knowing self-consciousness depends on recognition from another self-consciousness: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (1977 [1807], p.111). The knowing I is always mediated by the recognition of the other: in order for the human self “to be really, truly, ‘man’ (sic), and to know that he is such, [he] must, therefore, impose the idea that he has of himself on beings other than himself: he must be recognized by the others” (Kojève, 1969, p.11, in a commentary on Hegel). The outcome of the struggle to wrest recognition from the other is the capitulation of one self-consciousness (who then, recognising, becomes the Slave) and thus the victory of the other (now, recognised, the Master). Mutuality is not possible in this scenario because the tension that arises when two self-consciousnesses meet must break down. In the Hegelian view, life depends on this breakdown, the process of contradiction and dissolution, for “movement, change, or history” (Benjamin, 1988, p.32). The Master-Slave account indeed is part of Hegel’s larger project of...

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52 I am not alone in taking up this metaphor in an educational context – for instance, Jim Garrison claims “master/slave relations are sadly relevant to education because they permeate the educational hierarchy” (Garrison, 2004, p.96). In relation to supervision, I don’t share Garrison’s sense of sorrow – the idea of Master and Slave in supervision is disturbing, but it is also evocative of complex, productive, often pleasurable relations which offer benefit to the student: “only the slave grows in such relations” (Garrison, ibid).
explaining how human selves come to know – in the ‘best’ (for him, “scientific”) sense – through a progressive and dialectical process of contradiction and resolution (from thesis to antithesis to synthesis). For Hegel, knowledge of self and the world is motivated by intersubjective desire: “it is human to desire what others desire, because they desire it … human history is the history of desired Desires” (Kojève, 1969, p.6). This thesis seems particularly relevant to supervision as an unusually intense and intersubjective form of pedagogy.

To explore Hegel’s Master-Slave story more slowly, it has several moments each of which is characterised by ambiguity and contradiction. Moreover, at each moment, there is a double movement in that every action the self makes is reflected in the actions of the other. In the first moment, the self realises that an other, like itself, exists. In the ensuing moment, by seeing itself as an object in the experience of that other, the self comes “out of itself” (Hegel, 1977 [1807], p.111), becoming alienated from itself. In order to return to itself, the self must be recognised by the other:

Each is for the other the middle term [of mutual and reciprocal recognition], through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other. (1977 [1807], p.112)

To restore the truth of self-certainty, the self must supersede the otherness it confronts. This is because the other is also a limit to the self’s freedom: because it is another subject, the other’s world does not revolve around the self and the other can never recognise the self enough. Herein lies an irony – that the unity of self-consciousness rests on duplication, “that independence involves dependency” (Game, 1991, p.69).

Attendant on this moment of alienation is a struggle. In the story, mutual recognition and equality are not an option if two self-consciousnesses are to continue in a relation to one another. If they settle for the symmetrical power relations of sameness, they would be dead to each other, unable to differentiate self from other, unmoved by desire, and no longer in relation. They would “leave each other free only indifferently, like things” (Hegel, 1977

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53 I wish to acknowledge Ann Game’s (1991) reading of Hegel as an important stimulus for my own. Even more influential, however, was my friend Avril Bell’s reworking of Hegel’s narrative in relation to Maori-Pakeha relations and the Gurevitch reference she shared which offered the Hegelian take on dialogue that features in Chapter 7. I would also like to acknowledge Lisa Guenther, Helen Charters and the rest of the 2003-2004 writing group for their encouraging and thoughtful feedback on an early draft of this chapter.
So the final moment of the story is a struggle for recognition between two self-consciousnesses. For both to survive, for desire to stay alive, they must struggle to the death (although not literally because that would profit neither): one must triumph – by being recognised – while the other capitulates – by recognising. What emerges from this struggle are:

two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman. (1977 [1807], p.115)

In other words, the Master and Slave. Now a triadic structure of power relations emerges: the Master, having won the struggle, becomes the power over both the other self-consciousness (the Slave) and the things of the world which are the objects of his desire (life). In contrast, the Slave in facing death has been fearful – “its whole being has been seized with dread” (1977 [1807], p.117) – and, in choosing life and the things of the world over autonomy, has submitted. His relation to the things of the world is very different from the Master’s as we shall see. An asymmetrical power relation binds the Master and Slave, in which “recognition is one-sided and unequal” (1977 [1807], p.116), but the relation is unstable for it is riven by two paradoxes that are particularly problematic for the Master.

One paradox arises from the mediated nature of the relations between Master and the other two terms. The Master’s relations to both Slave and the thing are mediated by the other term: his relation to the thing is mediated by the Slave and his relation to the Slave is mediated by the thing. In the first matter, while the Master has power over the thing, he cannot work on it directly. The Slave does. The Master merely consumes and annihilates the thing, obtaining only a fleeting enjoyment of it. In contrast the Slave, through working on the thing, forms and shapes it, thus staving off the fleetingness of desire and finding permanence instead. In this way the Slave, though dependent on the Master, possesses the Master’s independence with respect to the thing (life). In the second matter, of the Master’s relation to the Slave being mediated by the thing, the thing (which is independent) holds the Slave in bondage and thus the Master through his power over the thing also has power over the Slave: “What the bondsman does is really the action of the lord” (1977 [1807], p.116). (At the same time, the

54 I think this aspect of the Master-Slave relation may be important for helping us understand why students – and sometimes academics in mixed-discipline writing groups – are often reluctant to engage with each other over their work. They cannot easily see the value of doing so because they see themselves as the ‘same’. Lacking a ‘Master’ to look towards, they are all ‘Slaves’ and thus there can be a lack of desire.

55 Hegel is ambiguous on whether this outcome is permanent or continually negotiated – a strong inference in his work is that it is permanent but he also seems to suggest that the Slave holds the key to ‘true’ Mastery through his transforming work: “The future and history … [belong] to the working Slave”, whereas the Master “either dies or preserves himself indefinitely in identity to himself” (Kojève, 1969, p.23).
Slave sees the independence of the thing and, through this, comes to see his own. Thus, ironically, in working on the things of the world, the Slave achieves a kind of reversal in the relationship because, unlike the Master, he satisfies his desire for self-presence: “through work, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is” (1977 [1807], p.118). The complex relations which mediation brings for the Master mean that his power is subject to limitations through dependence. In contrast the Slave’s relations with both Master and the thing remain immediate. Thus, as we can see in Figure 1 below, the relations between Master and Slave are not only asymmetrical but also complementary rather than reciprocal (Benjamin, 1988, p.65), or (more brutally) they are “unequal and opposed to one another” (Kojève, 1969, p.16).

Master (the victor)

“Consciousness existing for itself … the power that rules over this given-being [the Slave]”, has abiding autonomy, but his certainty of himself (his ‘I’) is mediated by the Slave’s recognition. The Master’s relations to both the Slave and the thing are immediate and mediated through the other. (Kojève, 1969 pp.15-17, italics as in original)

Slave (the capitulator)

“Consciousness … that exists for another … [and] for which thingness is the essential-entity”. Slave recognises Master “in his human dignity and reality”, but is bound completely to – and rules over – the thing on which he depends; he transforms it by work but does not consume it. The Slave’s relations to both Master and thing are only immediate. (Kojève, 1969 pp.16-17)

Thing

“the object of Desire”, is autonomous of the Slave, but transformed by the Slave, and enjoyed/consumed/destroyed by the Master (Kojève, 1969 pp.17-18)

Figure 1: The Asymmetrical Relations between Master and Slave

The other paradox concerns the apparent independence of the Master and dependence of the Slave. While the Master is independent, is recognised by the Slave, and has power to direct the Slave, he is also dependent on the Slave for recognition as the Master, a recognition which cannot satisfy him coming as it does from a mere Slave. The very certainty of self that self-consciousness allows is undermined for the Master: “What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is therefore, not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself.” (Hegel, 1977 [1807], p.117, italics as in original). His mirror is a Slave consciousness and does not reflect what he needs to see. As Kojève exclaims, “this is what is

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56 This figure somewhat reworks the map schematised in Chapter 3: it offers a deeper analysis of the first, the supervisor-student, layer. It also show more clearly the complementary asymmetrical aspect of supervision in which the relations the supervisor has with student and thesis are not mirrored by the student’s relations with supervisor and thesis.
insufficient – what is tragic – in his situation” (1969, p.19). In contrast, when the Slave looks at the Master, he sees an independent consciousness that is implicitly himself: “this is his advantage” (1969, p.21). In this way the Slave comes to know what he truly is, while for the Master the conditions of knowledge are contradictory and his “victory is also his downfall” (Game, 1991, p.71).

Both paradoxes described here suggest ways in which the Master’s victory is a hollow one, producing ongoing difficulties for him – and, by association at least, for the Slave. Likewise for supervision, as we shall see in what follows.

**Supervision as Struggle and Strife**

When supervision is looked at through the trope of Master and Slave, certain of its lineaments come into focus, while others are obscured. (I return to address this limitation by offering another trope in Chapter 8.) In what follows, I draw some parallels between Master-Slave and supervision, illustrating this metaphorical account with extracts from my supervision research data.

In some obvious ways the supervisor-student relation mirrors that of Master and Slave: centrally, supervisor and student are bound in an asymmetrical power relation. Like the Master, the supervisor by virtue of his position is independent and does not have to ask the student’s permission. He is recognised by the student as a knowing self and as a figure of academic authority:

> I was very happy when I was assigned [my supervisor]. … [his] students always get, the last few A plus grades in the department have come from him. (Student 3, initial interview)

> [I was told] if you want to do [that topic], then go and see [my supervisor] because she is really the highest authority on the [that topic] in the Department. (Student 6, initial interview)

> [I expect a supervisor to] tell you when you are doing something manageable or not. They have all sorts of experience that you just don’t have. I’ve never written these things off my own jack before … So you go in there with some great big question and drop it on the table and they go, “oh well, you wouldn’t want to do that would you because you’d be spending ten years or all of your life trying to find out. How about this, or how about that”. And so they lead you to finding what the question is, or aid you in finding your way to a handleable question or an issue that you can get your teeth into. (Student 4, initial interview)

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57 Throughout this section I will use the Hegelian ‘he’ when referring to either supervisor or student.
He has power over the student in that he can direct the student’s actions – for instance to attend meetings, to listen to what he has to say, to prepare writing, to do readings, to make corrections to drafts and so on:

Probably a couple of months into supervising a new student, I come to a quiet, intuitive assessment as to how much freedom to give a student and how much responsibility they are going to take. And if they strike me as someone who is going to operate best under a set of structural conditions, then I give it a timetable of meetings and, if they aren’t, then I leave them be and figure they will come to me. (Supervisor 4, initial interview)

I very rarely allow [students] to come in with nothing written and I have trained them up quite well now … So if they say can I come and see you, I will say (a) what for, and they will say well I’m having a few problems with making some progress and I will say well what have you – I’ll talk it through on the phone – what have you done, what have you got, write that down and write a plan for the future, what you are going to do for the next piece of work that you are going to hand to me, bring in a contents page, even if it is vague … I give them little written tasks to do and they have got to plonk [the writing] down on the desk and I’ve got to look at it either beforehand or at that meeting. (Supervisor 2, initial meeting)

At the same time, because of his structural position, the supervisor is in some ways oblivious to the student:

[My feelings during the meeting are] something I don’t normally think about after – and I do realise that sometimes I go away from a session with a student feeling it didn’t work that well. But often I don’t analyse it and don’t think why, and just go on to the next thing. And often, as in this case, [the student’s] organised it – like this is the class that we both do which came right after it so we had to stop and you immediately race off to a class and you forget all about the student. (Supervisor 1, post-meeting 1 interview)

I think … that the students are more interested in who the supervisor is than vice versa … who are you, you are an interesting person or – whereas you don’t have much time for thinking about who your students are, or what they are about and psycho-analysing them … when you are a graduate student, [you wonder] who is this person, and could I be this person or what would it be like to be an academic and what would it be like to be in that role … (Supervisor 3, final interview)

This is an inevitable and problematic feature of the asymmetry of supervision. For the supervisor, the student and his project is only one (or two?) thing to be noticed and remembered among a multitude of others, whereas for the student both supervisor and project loom large on their horizon.
Through directing the student’s labour, and through consuming the student’s work, the supervisor has power over the thesis:

“My supervisor] is always asking me to take [certain words] out and I am always trying to tone them down a little bit, but I don’t particularly want to take them out. (Student 3, initial interview)

“My supervisor’s influence] was enormous in the sense that I sort of went, I want to say this and she says well if you want to say this you have to spend a whole lot of time doing this and, you know, a whole lot of space in your dissertation doing this … and I’m like, oh my God do I have to? ‘Yes’. (Student 4, final interview)

Yet, like the Master, the supervisor must beware of destroying the student:

I just accept that students don’t write as well as I’d like and that some just need, you know, a lot of guidance and I figure the best way to learn is actually to see suggestions rather than telling – I think it is a bit demoralising to say this isn’t any good, go away and sort it out. (Supervisor 4, final interview)

The supervisor must find ways to overcome the student dialectically but “only insofar as [the student] is opposed to him and acts against him” (Kojève, 1969, p.15), leaving him life and consciousness:

So I am hoping that [my supervisor] will hold me together – hold the process together long enough for me to produce a piece of work. As long as she doesn’t put so much pressure on, you know, if she puts huge amounts of pressure on me later on I will collapse. She’s got to walk a very fine line if she is going to keep me … (Student 5, initial interview)

If the supervisor ‘overcomes’ the student completely, then the student is destroyed – either becomes a lifeless replication of the supervisor or gives up – and is no longer able to work on the thing. Indeed the student who gives up, who ‘dies’ to being a student and to working on the thing, destroys the supervisor qua supervisor. The supervisor understands that this outcome is possible and seeks to avoid it not only for themselves but also for their students. The quote above suggests that some students have insight into their supervisor’s desire to ‘keep’ them and even take a certain comfort from it.

Like the Slave, the student in submitting to supervision is positioned as subordinate to the supervisor, as recognising but not recognised:
I guess that [the student] should consider that [supervisors] are really busy and they have important things in their lives, so I should try and be flexible with meeting times and so forth and not always be ringing them about little things that I can work out for myself. Be considerate in that way, be flexible and listen to what they have to say … just I guess be respectful towards them and considerate because your thesis isn’t the most important thing to them. (Student 6, initial interview)

Sometimes as I said before, I know he is a busy man and sometimes it is a bit off-putting for me because you have seen his office, although he tidied it up last week by the look of it, you know, mountains of stuff, stuff everywhere, on chairs, sometimes I go in and he has to move things for me to sit down. On his coffee table – I don’t know why he has one – and it is a bit intimidating because it just re-emphasises to me that he is a busy man and I will go in and he is typing away – I will go in and say do you have time for a few words now, five minutes now? He will turn around, of course I do. The deep breath. … I don’t know – it could be completely me. I know he is a busy man and sometimes I get the feeling that I am imposing on him. (Student 2, initial interview)

In the second quote we see the intense scrutiny the subordinate makes of the dominant player in supervision – what is noticed and how it is interpreted. The nature of supervision sets the conditions for the production of “overdetermined and affect-laden image-texts of academics” which students trade in “pubs, cafeterias, hallways and student offices” (Simon, 1995, p.98).

The student is dependent on the supervisor, needing the supervisor to register to be a student, needing his approval, needing his advice:

I had a long phone call with [my supervisor] the following day and she understood completely. She just had a sense of what I was saying. I felt that she fully understood where I was coming from and what the issues were and gave some quite practical advice. (Student 5, final interview)

Reading this, we get a sense of some of the deep satisfactions for the student in getting the supervisor’s advice and understanding. But, like the Slave, the student is also fearful in their condition as Student:

I mean it is a bit melodramatic to say it, and I don’t – it is probably to a little extent that I feel a little bit of a fraud – I mean I’ve got a bachelor’s degree from this university and I certainly don’t feel like I deserve one, and I will graduate with a masters soon I hope – and I certainly don’t feel that I deserve it. I mean I don’t. (Student 3, initial interview)

[Doing a dissertation] you are setting the course and that is kind of a freaky experience because you know you are so used to having your entire education where you … take your notes in the class and they
lecture you on these things, you know the salient points are A, B and C and so you go and look for A. But there is no sort of template like that. That freaked me right out. (Student 4, initial interview)

This fear may be expressed in many ways: perversely, as gratitude towards the supervisor for supervising him, or as unwillingness to recognise the contribution of the supervisor to the work:

I don’t think [my supervisor] had much input [into the ideas that formed my thesis]. Because we never really talked about the two [books] generally as a whole. We never had discussions like that. I always said, “okay I’m going to do [such and such a topic] now”, and she’d say, “okay off you go, see you in two weeks”. And I’d go off and I’d think about it and I’d have ideas and I’d come back and she’d say basically, “this seems fine, sounds fine or you might want to” – I think at one stage she said to me “you should look at [further texts] because that could be helpful”. (Student 6, final interview)

Commonly the student’s fear is expressed through a wariness to offer up information to the supervisor about the ‘condition’ of the work. Supervisors understand the likelihood of this wariness and develop different, more or less ‘masterful’ strategies to get work from the student:

I sort of forced [the piece of writing] out of [the student’s] hand and flipped through it, just looked at it, and I was delighted to see she had actually written something. You know, really pleased. And then she whipped it away again. She wasn’t going to let me keep it. … I wasn’t keen to actually keep it, I wanted her to give it to me when she felt happy with it but it was, it was most peculiar. I think she was signaling to me, I’ve done something but I am really not that confident with it. (Supervisor 2, post-meeting 2 interview)

The student’s fear may also lead him to disguise aspects of the process and self: the lack of progress made, perceived obstacles, ambitions for the work and so on. As the Slave, the student is afraid of the supervisor’s criticism, of being found wanting, ultimately of failing:

Well I don’t want to say [to my supervisor], you know I’ve had this month off, because I don’t think you ever do have a whole month off and I’ve actually done, I think I don’t want her to know that I haven’t done work every day on my thesis, which is what I am aiming for. (Student 5, post-meeting 2 interview)

Fear may also mean the student feels uncertain of his ‘rights’. He will wait patiently (maybe later grumbling to other Slaves) while the supervisor takes a long phone-call in the middle of a meeting, or gives poor feedback, or delays the return of work and so on:
I know he is a busy man. Like ... I handed him that chapter, he said to me “a bit of light weekend reading” ... be said that, implying he was going to read it over the weekend. I went away from that little discussion thinking he was going to read it in the weekend. I came back on Tuesday with that next chapter thinking that he might have something to discuss with me, he might have my chapter, but he said to me “I haven’t had a chance to read the chapter” ... occasionally that has happened. It hasn’t been anything major though. It has just kind of put me out a little bit. I though oh damn, I wanted to know what he had to say about that. (Student 2, initial interview)

Finally, like the Master-Slave-thing relation, supervision is also triangular in structure (as I have discussed in Chapter 3, and illustrated here with Figure 1) – the relations between supervisor and student are mediated by the thesis, those between supervisor or student and thesis are mediated by the other:

I have this belief, a hope, an idea, that [my supervisor] won’t let me hand in anything that is really crappy – she’ll be too worried about how it reflects on her. (Student 5, initial interview)

Well the odd thing about being a supervisor is that I mean students do say, tell me where I am going wrong, as though you know. As though ... there is a sort of magic correct thesis that ... you have, that you know about and that you just have to get them on track to get there. And there is some sense in which that is true, but there are a lot of senses in which it is absolutely not true and that they need to work out that for themselves you know. (Supervisor 2, initial interview)

Mediated relations are indirect, containing problematic elements of dependence and ambiguity, and so are subject to distortions as I will come to in my discussion of the paradoxical features of this view.

Hegel’s Master-Slave is similar to the metaphor of Master-Disciple (Frow, 1988; Giblett, 1992) in that it casts intersubjective struggle or agonism (in the sense of irreducible tensions) into view. Notably, in Hegel’s story, the relation is inaugurated by the Slave’s capitulation to the Master which gives the latter existence through victory. Likewise in arts, humanities and social sciences supervision, the relation is nearly always inaugurated by the student’s request that a particular academic take up the role of supervisor for him. If we understand this request in itself to be a kind of capitulation (students often talk about it with a mix of excitement and anxiety), it might help us to understand why students are so reluctant thereafter to take a more active role in the supervision. In some ways supervision can be

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58 This way of understanding the student makes sense of the overwhelming reluctance of students to use the “Negotiating Supervision: Guidelines for Discussion” document with their supervisors. In workshops where we discuss them, the students can see the sense in them, but they laugh nervously at the suggestion of taking them to
understood as a complex condition in which supervisor and student are always/already Master and Slave because of their different institutional positions and roles in supervision and, *at the same time*, as a state in which the struggle goes on, culminating (possibly – but this is always uncertain for the student) in the student attaining the status, if not the identity, of Master (as in Master of Arts). If this is so, then there may be a mutual struggle for recognition, in which mostly the supervisor is recognised and the student recognising (as in Master-Slave), but in which there may be moments of reversal as well as the student seeks the supervisor’s recognition. This can take place through seeking feedback, for instance, or other reassurance that the work is going well:

*I say a lot [to my supervisor], I always say “this [my work] is terrible”. I always ask her if it is okay or whatever. (Student 6, initial interview)*

*I said to [my supervisor], look … don’t pull your punches. I want to know what you think and if you think it is absolute bollocks then I want to know why but if you think it is good say so. But I don’t want to not have to deal with it or, if it is rubbish, I want to know it is rubbish. (Student 4, initial interview)*

It may be looked for in the supervisor’s demeanour in meetings or in other things the supervisor says and does, for instance whether or not it shows that he – the student – is seen as an adequate partner for intellectual discussion:

*I think the very first time I went to see [my supervisor] she – I sat down and it was on a low chair – and she said oh no, no, no and she made me change chairs so we were equal, on the same level. So I mean she was always really good. (Student 6, final interview)*

*I took much pleasure from [my supervisor] asking about a reference I was talking about for a paper he was writing; I guess it was a form of validation. (Student 3, post-meeting 1 notes)*

In practice the supervisor-student struggle within supervision occurs throughout the work of communicating over the transformation of the thing, a process which is fraught with misapprehension and misunderstanding. As for Master and Slave, the student’s work is in some important sense ‘really’ the action of the supervisor – understanding the supervisor to be not only himself a Master but also standing in for the other absent Masters of the discipline:

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*a supervision meeting. They are afraid that they will be seen as uppity or untrusting and that, in that moment, they will poison the supervision even as it begins.*
I had a rather ambivalent relationship with [my supervisor]. In one respect I wanted to write what I thought they wanted to hear so that I could get a good mark and I was under the impression perhaps falsely that what I really wanted to say they wouldn’t like. (Student 3, final interview)

But even so, the student must do the work in order to die to himself qua student-Slave and emerge as the Master (in the sense of a Master of Arts). The supervisor knows this is how it must be, the student often resists and resents this knowing. He is sometimes disappointing to the supervisor, seen not to be committed enough:

You see [the student] uses words like muddling along and I just hate it. I hate muddle and I hate anybody saying they will muddle. You can’t write when you muddle. Muddling is not what we are doing here. I don’t want to muddle. I don’t want to waste my time or her time muddling. And part of the thing about disciplining is saying, okay, if you are doing writing, if you are doing academic work, you are not muddling. That is not something you are doing so don’t say you are. Forget that particular story. (Supervisor 2, post-meeting 1 interview)

In supervision, the student struggles to ‘forgo’ the thesis, to complete it and let it go in an imperfect state:

Knowing [my supervisor] and knowing what she expects for an A, I don’t think I can give that much because I know it would mean a lot of time – the more time I can give to it the better it would be obviously. I am not a fast worker, I am not an incredibly sparky person when it comes to, you know, getting the flow and – so I really have to work quite hard at things to get them out there and balancing that with the realities of how much time I have got. (Student 5, initial interview)

Jeez that’s a weird thing, handing it [in] – letting it – actually putting it into someone else’s hands. (Student 4, final interview)

The struggle between the student and the thesis can come to include a struggle between the student and the supervisor as this extract shows.

Ultimately, though, in handing in the completed work the student has to come to assert his independence with respect to the thesis because (as we have seen in Chapter 4) he is judged as accountable for its quality. At this point the supervisor’s power over him through the thesis is destroyed, and with a successful outcome (the award of the Masters degree) the relation may dissolve anyway because both supervisor and student are now the ‘same’ in some sense:
[After it was all over] I wanted to go and talk to [my supervisor] about the [PhD] application process … and I said are you busy … and be sort of e-mailed back and said “as a post-graduate student now, I consider you a colleague and I have always got time for a colleague”. (Student 3, final interview)

The shift to colleague/same may be more likely post-PhD because the doctorate, rather than the Masters, is understood to be the rite of admission to the community of scholars. Moreover, in this move the student and supervisor may realise the possibility that Hegel’s trope is ambiguous about: they move to “mutual and reciprocal recognition which alone can fully and definitively realize and satisfy man” (Kojève, 1969, p.21). In order for this to occur, the Slave must cease to be Slave, he must overcome himself as Slave. Aspects of this complex struggle (just who is struggling with what at any given moment may not be clear) can be intensely pleasurable for both, but it may also be fraught and frustrating at times – as we will see in Chapter 7.

Having attended to some of the more obvious ways in which the Master-Slave-thing relations are fruitful for viewing supervision, let us now explore the ways in which the paradoxes described above are also recognisable there.

**Stilted Relations**

In the first paradox we see that, for all his ‘power over’, the Master/supervisor is not really in charge. We see that he desires the things – ‘research project’ and ‘thesis’ – but that his relation to them is always mediated by the Slave/student. Unsatisfyingly for the supervisor, he can only *consume* the things the student produces, he cannot give them objectivity or permanence himself. In this stilted relation, in which the ‘powerful’ supervisor is in some important sense powerless, the student possesses the supervisor’s independence with respect to the things and, because the supervisor’s relation to the project and thesis is mediated by the student, the supervisor is dependent on the student:

> I do have a sense of its completed self [the thesis]. … The thing itself might be somewhat different from my view of it, but I can see there is a project, I can see the shape of it, I can see how it can work, I can see where the data can come from, I can see where the theory can come from and I can see how it can then come together … Now I never have with [this student’s], I never have, and I feel bad about that. I feel really bad about that because I feel that that’s – if I were in her shoes if I could look into my head I’d be quite terrified by that. (Supervisor 2, initial interview)

And so the student labours over the research while the supervisor is only able to listen, read and give feedback. Frustrations arise for the supervisor over the pace of the student’s work,
over its quality, over the student’s ‘refusals’ to respond to feedback in ways the supervisor intended – or hoped – him to. So does anxiety:

*It is anxious making … It is like in a sense … I am working on my own project. And if you are working on a project and you have a sense of it, you can work with it confidently. But if you are working on a project and you really can’t grasp it, you are anxious about it. It is the same sort of thing.*

(Supervisor 2, initial interview)

And sometimes excitement and pleasure:

*One I had last year … I really enjoyed because I only had the one student and we literally spent about the first seven or eight months reading this enormous amount of [particular] stories because it was a genre approach … it was a brilliant thesis, it turned out to be really good … it was a classic sort of supervisory role where I really enjoyed it.*

(Supervisor 1, initial interview)

Seen in this way, we can begin to imagine the ways in which a frustrated, or anxious, or excited relation between supervisor and thesis might infuse the supervision more generally and play out in the supervisor-student relation in destabilising, although maybe productive, ways.

Likewise the supervisor’s relation to the student is mediated through the things of the project and the thesis. This too is likely to have effects on the supervision over time – the supervisor who feels disappointment in the too-obedient student (who does not struggle much and who is least likely to be judged as ready for doctoral study), the student who feels his supervisor is uncaring of his personal circumstances and only interested in the work, the inescapable burden to trust (supervisor of student to do the work diligently and well, student of supervisor to give good advice). The entanglement in which the supervisor’s relation to the student is mediated by the thesis, and his relation to the thesis is mediated by the student, gives us some insight into why it is so difficult to answer the question of what is being supervised (the student or the thesis) satisfactorily. While this question is frequently asked of me in workshops on supervision, there is no simple answer, because student and thesis are in some sense inseparable.

The dependence of the Master on the recognition of the Slave (the second paradox) sets up a relation in which the Master’s ongoing need for recognition from the Slave may inflect the relationship in unpredictable ways. For instance, in how the supervisor comports himself in front of the student:
[My supervisor] had a big smile on his face when he showed me the frontispiece of his Masters thesis. … I am not sure why he showed it to me … I think he was proud of it. (Student 3, post-meeting 2)

There are intimations of bondage in supervision: the supervisor needs the student to be the supervisor and, in a different way, the student needs the supervisor to be the graduate research student. Without the student who ‘needs’ to be supervised, and who through that need offers the supervisor recognition as a scholar (independent self-consciousness), the would-be supervisor is merely an academic. He is barred from the recognition, status and pleasure attached to the position of supervisor, let alone those attached to being the supervisor of very good students:

I find it an honour to work with students who sort of entrust me to supervise when you know I’m not published internationally on [their] topic. (Supervisor 4, initial interview)

Through an Hegelian lens, the supervisor needs the student’s recognition in order to exist as the supervisor: his prized “abiding autonomy” (Kojève, 1969, p.15) as the supervisor is a function of his dependence on the student’s recognition. It is likely then that the supervisor may solicit this recognition in various ongoing ways – in what kind of students the supervisor attracts:

And yes, if you are not taking on the best student in your class then, gee, what is wrong with you. (Supervisor 3, initial interview)

And also in the way the student speaks to her/him, in who decides where they will meet, when, for how long and under what conditions, in how the student responds to feedback etc. However, because the student is merely a student, his recognition of the supervisor is not in itself ultimately satisfying for the supervisor and may actually undermine the supervisor’s certainty of the truth of himself. For instance, a supervisor may be unsure that he is giving the student good advice:

As [the supervisor] who is ultimately responsible for giving blessing to a piece of work in one sense, it is a sort of a leap of faith when [students] are writing stuff and you are saying well this looks internally consistent in terms of what I am reading. It sounds convincing, yes, you have referenced it fine but no I haven’t read any of this. You know, there is that sort of sense of possibly walking on thin ice if [students] had read stuff and just got entirely the wrong opinion of it and potentially it could be an external examiner who says well you know that is an outrageous interpretation of so-and-so. (Supervisor 4, final interview)
The student cannot give his supervisor recognition on this matter, only other Masters (examiners) can. Like the Master, the supervisor is in the impossible position of seeking recognition where he cannot satisfyingly get it. But also, *like the Slave*, the supervisor fears the judgment of other Masters, of being found wanting. This fear also infuses the supervision in unpredictable complex ways and plays out around the process of choosing examiners and the thesis being examined.

In this analysis of how the Master-Slave paradoxes infuse supervision, it seems that the supervisor bears the brunt of the subsequent tensions. However, the tensions play themselves out in the supervision relation by stilting, even distorting, communication within it. So both supervisor and student (and indeed the thing) feel their force.

But some things are different for the student. In contrast to the supervisor-as-Master’s fixity, the student-as-Slave is “ready for change; in his very being, he is change, transcendence, transformation, ‘education’” (Kojève, 1969, p.22). Thus, for the student, there is the same ironical outcome as for the Slave. Through working on the thesis, through authoring it, the student comes to permanency and objectivity: “by freeing the Slave from Nature [through mastery of it], work frees him from himself as well, from his Slave’s nature: it frees him from the Master” (Kojève, 1969, p.23). The student’s self-consciousness is ultimately stabilised through the work – although in practice this effect may well be post-supervision, occurring upon the awarding of the degree, or later.59 Throughout then, the student has something to struggle for, his life maintaining a dialectical (transformative) tension in relation to a positive ideal (attaining the autonomy of the supervisor), while the supervisor cannot go beyond himself and only consumes with fleeting satisfaction. One insight here is that fear (such as the Slave feels in relation to the Master) *and* disciplined work (such as that which the Slave carried out on the thing) are necessary for the “beginning of wisdom” (Kojève, 1969, p.24). This insight seems to me to have some value in theorising supervision which surely is a process implicated in the getting of wisdom. This insight connects with the critical work on trauma in supervision (Lee & Williams, 1999) but it suggests, somewhat dissidently, the productive necessity of ‘trauma’. To be clear (on such a contentious topic), I am not suggesting here that supervisors do or ought to deliberately seek to traumatis their students, but that forms of fear may well be inevitable – and productively so – for the student in the process of supervision, from the moment of asking (with the possibility of being rejected) to the moment of submitting (with the possibility of failing). Another insight is that “only the slave grows in

59 Maybe for some this never occurs at all, as academics who describe persistent experience of fraudulence would attest. Judith Brett argues in her critique of academic writing that it is “writing that never leaves school, that never grows beyond the judging, persecuting eye of the parent to enter into a dialogue with the society and culture of its time … always seeking the approval of a higher authority, the academic writer endlessly defers responsibility” (1991, p.521). But maybe fraudulence is a necessary aspect of ‘knowing’, a thread (that may unravel at any time) that prevents knowing from becoming monolithic and tyrannical.
such relations” (Garrison, 2004, p.96): what does it mean for supervision that only the student grows as a result of it? What are the implications for the supervisor, who already often experiences academic life as lonely and burdened? How does this complicate what the supervisor seeks from the student? Answering these questions is difficult because we are probing here in the realm of the unconscious – supervisor’s and student’s – which is inaccessible to rational enquiry. When Michel Foucault remarks: “There’s so much pleasure in giving orders; there’s also pleasure in taking them” (1976, p.55), he is pointing to this unconscious dimension of supervision, a dimension in which the architecture of Master and Slave can be deeply pleasurable.

**Some Reflections on this Reading**

Reading supervision through the trope of Master and Slave may seem pessimistic. I do not intend this effect for, as Foucault says above, pleasures lie in this relation, as does productivity. For, in Hegel’s account, the movement of desire occasioned by this asymmetrical binding (a relation of differentiation) is essential for the development of knowledge. The supervisor is indispensable to the student because the student must have an object of desire in order to come to know: he must have someone in the position of Master in whom he sees the truth of what he himself can strive to become. At the same time, for both supervisor and student, there is an uncontrollable aspect of coming to know – uncontrollable from the supervisor’s point of view because the student must do the work and uncontrollable from the student’s point of view because, although he must do the work, he does not know what it is he has to do. He can only find out through doing it. The intersubjective condition of coming to know is the problematic ground for the often-unaddressed question of whose work the thesis is. In our individualistic academic tradition, convention has it that the thesis must be the work of the student but supervisors (and examiners) know that often it is not this simple – that most theses bear the marks of the interplay of two academic self-consciousnesses at least, and some bear the mark of the supervisor’s thought and labour much more than others:

> There is always a very interesting tension between, you know, the extent to which this is the student’s work and has to be the student’s work, and that varies hugely. For some people I have hardly done a thing to it and other people I have put quite a lot into it and, you know, there are my sentences looking back at me. (Supervisor 2, initial interview)

> So I feel that it is mine. I produced it but it partially belongs to them as well … I see huge amounts of [my supervisor] in it because he was … quite an inspiration for my work in general. He comes through also because you tend to cite your supervisor’s work a lot because a lot of the readings in undergrad and papers in first year masters are your supervisor’s or at least your department’s works. A lot of them. And [my supervisor] had a lot of articles that I cited because he has written a lot. I don’t know
whether that is biased because of the department or whether it is because he is the leading person, academic, in that field. (Student 2, final interview)

This came up more than once in my research, showing quite different kinds of interplays in different supervisions. Yet this incalculable interplay occurs in an educational system which insists on attributing merit to individuals.

There are limits to the Master-Slave drama as a trope for supervision. At the most abstract level, perhaps, one limit is that it most obviously maps onto the traditional discourse of supervision which is now contested by a range of others (as I have shown in Chapter 2). However, there is nearly always a residue of the traditional discourse in actual supervisions, perhaps because, as I have argued in the previous chapter, it continues to be mobilised by institutional policy and practice. This residue makes trouble for subjects constituted by other discourses, some of whom will find the idea of the Master-Slave relation repugnant and unethical. Also the Master-Slave relation will map onto some supervisions less neatly because of the limitations under which they operate, for instance those where supervisors are not experts in the topic. Although I am not sure if this variable in supervision necessarily changes the meaning of the relation, it may make the supervision-as-Master-and-Slave more fraught because the student distrusts the supervisor for not being the expert (the Master) and the supervisor (especially if inexperienced or working with a ‘weak’ student) worries as well. (The data extract from Supervisor 4 in Chapter 2 gives us a glimpse of this.) Having said that, Master and Slave may map neatly onto some particular supervisions—for instance those animated by congruent disciplinary or personal fantasies. Even so, there is always more than one set of fantasies at play in supervision and we can see that it might be problematic if one party is enacting the Master-Slave and the other is not.

Another limit to the application of Master-Slave to supervision is that the inaugural struggle between Master and Slave that allows each to “come to light” (Kojève, 1969, p.12) does not occur in the same way for supervisor and student. This is because the institution mediates the relationship, setting its terms independently of any particular pair (as I have discussed at length in Chapter 4). Neither is it as settled as Hegel’s trope seems to suggest. In supervision the struggle is likely to be embedded within the ongoing interactions between supervisor and student, although no less vital to the process and outcome of supervision (the vigour of its

60 In making this point it occurs to me that, in the ‘original’ traditional model of supervision, the supervisor was often seen as remote and uncaring—perhaps a strength of this dissociation between supervisor and student was a less tangled relationship between the supervisor, student and thesis. This ‘strength’ has been lost with the ascendance of the psy discourse of supervision with its heightened attention to close contact, support etc and more emphasis on ‘relationship’. Can we understand this as a form of feminisation of the academy—and does it in turn signal a problem with the so-called feminisation of institutions, in particular for those engaged in massified work, for example in terms of sustainability?
identities, its tensions, its productivity, its transformative effects), and it may never be really settled.

Yet a further limit to the simple translation of supervision into Master-Slave is that, while in Hegel’s story the Slave works only to satisfy the Master’s desires, in supervision the student is placed in a more complex field of demands to satisfy. As well as pleasing the desires of the supervisor, he is often trying to satisfy those of other Masters (the examiners, for whom the supervisor can never completely stand in), as well as his own – for instance in being ‘true to his own voice’ or experience as a researcher:

*I didn’t stop to strike up a conversation with [the marginalized people in my research site] and here I am writing a thesis purporting to an extent to speak for them and trying to champion their particular causes. I mean that is – there is some contradiction there and my methodology I think is quite – [my supervisor] called it very frank – but I mean … what I am trying to do is say that I am not writing this thesis from sort of the objective whatever – I am not writing it from above, I am writing it from my body and from all the difficulties [in my research site] and the particular experiences I had. And in the end I think that writing a thesis too is quite a personal experience and it is more about finding a way for me to think through these things than anything else. And I am quite keen for that to be clear.* (Student 3, post-meeting 1 interview)

In some cases (I have met many over the years of teaching thesis writing workshops), the student is trying to satisfy the desires of others, for instance his research subjects or identity group:

*[The thesis] is my work but … it is shared with particularly the people of … the [named] community at large. Because [my research site] is a community-based organisation and I did it because of them and I did it for them as well as being a thesis.* (Student 2, final interview)

This profusion of desires and relations that impinge on supervision shows a more complex field of recognition to be at stake than in the Master-Slave relation. Whereas Hegel’s Master wants a ‘good’ (dutiful, submissive) Slave who is unceasing in his recognition of him, the supervisor more contradictorily wants a good student both in the sense of being dutiful and in that of being brilliant, creative and independent (that is, a student who puts recognition from the supervisor second to his own ideas). While the Master sees the Slave as one with animal life, the supervisor wants the student to exceed himself, to escape his slavishness, to show himself a Master. In particular, the supervisor wants a student who will be recognised as good by other Masters, which in turn will bring recognition from those Masters to him. This is partly because of the distinctive task of graduate supervision – which is both reproductive of academic selves and productive of new knowledge – but also because other power relations
are contingent upon the original supervisor-student-thesis one, relations which for the supervisor include other Masters and the norms of his discipline, some of whom/which he may be in a Master-Slave struggle with. These limitations suggest a more dynamic and unstable scene between supervisor and student than Hegel’s drama does.

**Concluding Reflections**

The Master-Slave reading of supervision offered in this chapter is an oppositional one to those that would foreground supervision as joint and mutual. Those views, be they technicist, psy or neo-liberal, repress supervision’s inherent contradictions, struggle and tensions and in so doing do not serve institutions, supervisors or students well. They make certain understandings of supervision unlikely, even impossible, and they work to place the messy complexities of supervision into the sphere of individual failure. They obscure, even deny, the very real, productive and often pleasurable differences between the positions of supervisor and student and the challenges for pedagogies aiming to produce strong and ‘independent’ academic work. The reading put forward here places these others into question.

The Master-Slave reading also gives food for thought about the supervisor’s relation to the thesis and how it inflects the supervision, a tension in supervision that is not much considered in the literature. Supervisors have anxieties, ambitions for, and uncertainties about the student’s thesis which may be more or less compelling under certain circumstances – for example with particular students, or when background events make the outcome of the thesis more critical to the supervisor’s sense of self or their career ambitions. It also brings the complexities (the resentments, pleasures, reversals, silences etc) of a relation of mutual dependence into view.

Mostly though the Master-Slave reading helps us understand supervision’s inescapably institutional character. Supervision occurs within, and is a product of, a particular social order which seeks to normalise certain roles for supervisor and student – and eschew others, including that of the Master-Slave, because they seem out of step with other social trends. Local matters are relevant here: the new model of government funding for higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand (to be fully implemented by 2006) requires institutions to report on (commodify) student completion rates/times and publications in their Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) portfolios. Because funding will follow successful and timely completion of research degrees (as it already does elsewhere), an institution’s response is likely to be to put more pressure on supervisors to get students to complete on time. The response of supervisors will be diverse as always but, as the new logic sinks in, it is likely that some at least will take a more ‘masterful’ role in the supervision: requiring more frequent meetings, making more insistent demands that the student conform to work schedules, coming to prefer
docile students and safe research projects. This will undoubtedly have implications for their students and the kinds of scholarly work they produce. As well the commodification of publications embedded within the PBRF may mean that the supervisor desires some ownership of the student’s work in ways that are problematic for both (although such ownership can also be of benefit to the student as well as the supervisor). Overall it is interesting to consider whether or not the new regime will propel us towards a more explicit enactment of Master and Slave in supervision, such that supervisors become more like masters-as-slave-drivers, students more like overburdened, unrecognised, rebellious slaves, and the thesis a more dutiful, trivial thing. Moreover, in the context of a ‘democratic’ or ‘consumer-centred’ logic for higher education, the productive and pleasurable elements of such an asymmetrical relation are fragile, and an intensified Master-Slave relation may quite easily figure as unacceptably overbearing.
The strategies and discourses of governmental apparatuses tell only half the story. It is equally important to look at the unrecorded but resourceful improvisations of everyday life. Here the cultural norms are transgressed and reworked in the very moment they are instituted. (Donald, 1992, pp.2-3)

[Dialogue] is forever either too much or too little, wavering and shifting sides which tilt not only toward understanding and open play, but also away, and against, ‘agonistically guided by contrary solicitations … the tension-laden constellation of forces pulling us at once in the direction of consensuality and in the direction of dissent’. (Gurevitch, 2001, p.87, citing Coles)

In Part Three I move away from a consideration of “governmental apparatuses” (discourses, maps, codes, mediated relations) to engage with the messiness of supervision’s everyday life. I turn my attention to supervision’s core pedagogy – the dialogues that take place between supervisors and students. I begin, in Chapter 6, A Short Meditation on Dialogue, with some observations about the different meanings attached to the idea of pedagogical dialogue and how these meanings feature in the literature on supervision. Then, in Chapters 7 and 8, I return to consider the empirical texts provided by supervisors and students and give two
readings of them in the light of Zali Gurevitch’s finely nuanced analysis of dialogue (2001). Overall my thesis here is that, mediated by institutional norms and individual action, the dialogues of supervision are elementally unstable. They are made up of different, sometimes undecidable, moments between which shifts are always possible.

The first reading, *Agonistic Struggle: The Stilted Dialogues of Supervision* (Chapter 7), returns to the drama of the Hegelian Master and Slave. Some writers suggest that the binary structure of Master and Slave represents an ‘old way’ of dialogue – of monologic pedagogy (Dysthe, 2002) or of alienated listening:

> Traditional societies knew two modes of listening, both alienated: the arrogant listening of a superior, the servile listening of an inferior … today this paradigm is contested, still crudely, it is true, and perhaps inadequately … it is not possible to imagine a free society, if we agree in advance to preserve within it the old modes of listening: those of the believer, the disciple, and the patient. (Barthes, 1985, p.259)

There is an implication here that an authoritative mode in which one speaks while the other listens should be abandoned because of its assumptions about the transmissive nature of communication and the way it positions one party as always passive and only obedient. However, with Penelope Deutscher, I suggest we may usefully understand that pedagogy “begins in mimicry” (1994, p.34), even though it must also transcend it. In this chapter I explore the slavish, mimicking aspect of dialogue in supervision. At the same time, such a reading is not intended to exhaust the possibilities for theorising dialogue in supervision – there is more to supervision than the bound struggle of the Master and Slave. Thus the following chapter, *Improvising Together: The Play of Dialogue in Supervision*, functions as a supplement: here I take up Gurevitch’s third moment in dialogue, that of creative sociability, and play with the metaphor of improvisation in order to explore aspects of the dialogues of supervision repressed by the trope of Master and Slave. I argue that something more than, or other to, Master and Slave is needed in the pedagogy of supervision if it is to fulfil its objectives of producing original knowledge and an authorised academic subject.

Across these two chapters I take a both/and approach to dialogue in supervision, walking a line between thinking of dialogues as either determined or as free fall. By doing so, I want to underscore the messiness, the contingency, the unpredictability of supervision’s dialogues – whether of the Master/Slave or of the improvising kind – and the tensions arising from this condition. Zali Gurevitch (2001) argues that, both theoretically and practically, dialogue is a state of betweenness/undecidability and that “conversation exists in shifts between moments rather than as whole and self-sustained forms” (p.101). He emphasises the momentariness of
dialogue rather than the dominance of any overarching narrative or trope. This too is my emphasis.
Chapter 6
A Short Meditation on Dialogue

Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity.
Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p.206

A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee.
((Bakhtin) Volosinov, 1973, p.86)

The pedagogy of supervision is enacted through modes of dialogue. Traditionally this dialogue has occurred during meetings between supervisor and student or through the writing-feedback-rewriting loop. But what kinds of dialogue are likely within the proscribed cultural space of supervision? In this short chapter I will explore the idea of dialogue as it has featured in the literature for supervision. This sets the scene for the following chapters where I take up two contrasting tropes for the dialogues of supervision in an effort to explore some of the complexities for supervision’s pedagogy. This exploration is underpinned by a Derridean both/and logic of dialogue rather than the binary of either/or – that is to say that supervision is always likely to involve more than one form of dialogue and that these forms may be in contradiction with one another.
Dialogue is a broad term referring to discourse – usually spoken but there can be written forms – between two or more people: “speech passing between two parties who are in some way opposed, … [dialogue] is agonistic, live, dramatic” (Crapanzano, 1992, p.198). Etymologically, the ‘dia’ part of the word encompasses two broad meanings which are in tension with each other: the meaning “between” or “across” and that of “going apart” or “opposed in moment” (p.197). The tension lies in the simultaneous possibility of coming together or going apart in dialogue. Different views of dialogue tend to privilege one possibility over the other. In both of the following chapters, I return to the idea of dialogue in more depth, taking up different views of dialogue in each.

How we think about dialogue (and communication generally) is connected to how we understand the relation of language to meaning. A structuralist account of language (for example, de Saussure’s) emphasises the stability of meaning attributed to particular signs, implying that language can carry meaning directly, while a poststructuralist one (for example, Derrida’s) emphasises the instability of meaning attributed to particular signs (their ‘undecidability’), implying instead the slipperiness of language’s relation to meaning. This is relevant to dialogue because if I think structurally, understanding language as a transparent medium for representing meaning, then my emphasis will be on the speaker as the crucial meaning-maker. In contrast, if I think poststructurally, understanding language as an internally opaque and thus always flawed tool for making meaning, then the emphasis moves to the listener. “[E]very meaning overspills authorial intent” (Mark Poster in Peters, 1996, p.3, citing Bataille): in this view, the meaning made through language is not so much what is said as what is understood.

**Pedagogical Dialogues**

The tension arising from the split root of dialogue is found in the literature on critical and post-critical pedagogies in higher education. Here dialogue is a contested term, typically taken up in either hopeful (coming together) or distrustful (going apart) ways (see for example, the debate between Elizabeth Ellsworth, Patti Lather, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren in the late 1980s, a version of which is given in Lather, 1991, pp.43-49). On the one hand, the hopeful school emphasises the democratic and empowering, even redemptive, potential of dialogue in pedagogy. An example of this can be found in Nicholas Burbules’ book *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (1993) where he advocates an approach to dialogue in pedagogy that:

- challenges hierarchies and traditional conceptions of teacher authority; that is tolerant and supportive of diversity; that does not rely on teleological presumptions of right answers and final truths; that does not rest on isolated individual efforts, but on mutual

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and reciprocal communicative relations; and that keeps the conversation open, both in
the sense of open-endedness and in the sense of inviting a range of voices and styles of
communication within it. (p.7)

In this view, dialogue “is already an open and egalitarian enterprise” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.88)
that can transform teacher-student and student-student relations across social and political
difference. Such dialogue simply waits to be made possible by the (admittedly thoughtful)
social arrangements within the teaching space.

In contrast, the more distrustful conceptualisation of dialogue suggests its inherently
problematic character. In a contribution to this field, Alison Jones (1999) draws on empirical
material collected from women Pakeha and Maori university students to explore the
“limitations of the desire for dialogue” (p.299, original italics) across difference in university
classrooms. In her view:

This call for dialogue or shared talk … is, at root, a request for action by the dominant
group – for them to grant a hearing to the usually excluded and suppressed voice and
realms of meaning of the subaltern … [but] the real exclusion is not that of the
subordinate at all. It is the dominant group's exclusion from – their inability to hear – the
voice of the marginalised. (p.307, original italics)

In other words, the call for dialogue in classrooms may easily end up serving existing power
relations rather than transforming them. Proponents of this view foreground the complexities
and vicissitudes of dialogue, arguing that pedagogy must be prepared for its troublesome
effects, such as “disappointment, uncertainty, and not-knowing” (p.316).

Bill Readings suggests that we leave the term dialogue behind: “the incomplete and
interminable nature of the pedagogical relation can remind us that ‘thinking together’ is a
dissensual process; it belongs to dialogism rather than dialogue” (1996, p.192). For him,
Bakhtin’s term ‘dialogism’ better suggests linguistic interactions in which understanding and
misunderstanding are entwined (although Gurevitch (2001) points out that dialogism is just as
prone to being idealised as dialogue). Other researchers in the field (Caranfa, 2004; Li Li,
2004; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004) are now turning their attention beyond the problematic
reach of dialogue to the “sound of silence in pedagogy” (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004,
p.193) in order to explore the pedagogical merits of forms of silence.
Supervision Dialogues

Turning from this theoretically rich field of enquiry (I have given the briefest preview), I find only occasional interest in the idea of dialogue in the supervision literature and, where it does feature, it is largely untheorised. For instance, Greg Light and Roy Cox claim (as I have done in opening this chapter) that “supervision is essentially about dialogue” (2001, p.143) and go on to explain just what dialogue in supervision might look like:

[Dialogue is not simply a friendly conversation. Nor is it an interrogation or even a Socratic dialogue. ... There is a more active, searching process involved whereby you [the supervisor] become clearer about what the other is saying but also about the hidden assumptions and misconceptions. It is essentially an exploratory process, which can be enjoyable but does not benefit from the self-expression that comes from good friendships. (p.143)

Although there is an absence of theorisation here, it does seem to me the writers are grappling with the complexities of dialogue in supervision. Drawing on interviews with supervisors and students, Olga Dysthe (2002) distinguishes models of supervision that she then explores in relation to dialogue. Dysthe has a Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue as dialogism, that is a process in which “each utterance is dependent on the other and when the tension between the voices creates new meaning” (Dysthe, 1998, p.6). In her view, of the three emergent models, two – partnership and apprenticeship – are based on an epistemology of dialogism, while the third – teaching – is monologic. Interestingly, the students did connect dialogue with good supervision, but linked this to the “supervisor’s basic attitude toward the student” (2002, p.521) rather than to the particular practices associated with any of Dysthe’s models. At the same time, the students were ambivalent about their need for direction from the supervisor (which Dysthe associates with the teaching model), sometimes expressing a desire for specific answers, for more direction, for being controlled (2002, p.522). This finding points towards some of dialogue’s complexities in supervision, including that students want both the exchange of ideas and to be told. In focusing on dialogism, Dysthe usefully highlights the instability and contextuality of meaning-making in dialogue but she does not consider the difficulties that arise from either students’ ambivalence towards ‘supervision’ or supervision’s implication in credentialling (and the implication that any new meanings made must also conform to the requirements of disciplinarity). In this sense, her uptake of Bakhtin is somewhat idealistic.

Elsewhere dialogue is referred to under the guise of ‘communication’ which is usually acknowledged as being important for supervision but treated as relatively straightforward: supervisors and/or students are advised to communicate “openly”. For example, in the book
How to Get a PhD (Phillips & Pugh, 1994), we are told of one unhappy student that if he “had been better at managing his supervisor, he would have told the professor how he felt [that is, very frustrated by the supervision meetings], which would have opened up the way to a more honest and trusting relationship between them” (p.103). Here the hopeful meanings of both dialogue and language are invoked without any hint of their complexities. In a similar vein, John Hockey (1996b) claims that “effective communication” is an important supervisory skill but that “it is dependent upon clarity and … needs to be consistent” (pp.493-494). The general inattention to dialogue as such may be a function of the fact that most research studies (like those of Phillips & Pugh and Hockey above) have gathered data from supervisors and students separately rather than looking at any actual supervision interactions where dialogue is taking place. (My work is fairly distinctive in this regard.)

One study that has drawn on data collected by taping supervisory dialogues is that by Gina Wisker and her colleagues (2003). Here the authors argue for the value of supervisory dialogues between supervisors and PhD students in promoting “forms of collaboration and interaction as collegial equals in order to empower students to undertake and maintain momentum with their own research, ensuring that the responsibility and self-awareness this involves encourages them to own the process and the outcomes” (p.387, italics added). Somewhat ironically, though, the two annotated extracts of dialogue offered in the article both show the supervisor overwhelmingly dominating the conversation space and the direction of the student’s thinking. Here, reproduced in full, is one of the extracts in which supervisor and student are discussing the student’s proposal for an inquiry into children’s behaviour:

Sup: Yes, OK, because you’re trying to fix something which will be quite hard to fix. I don’t think you’re [doing] a participant observation though. (clarifying)
A: No?
Sup: No, you’re not a child – are you? (challenging)
A: No.
Sup: To be a participant observer you’re meant to be the same as your group. You’re an observer.
A: Only an observer? (informative, clarifying)
Sup: Yes. You’re participating in the group of therapists or teachers, but you’re not participating in the children’s group as a child are you? (clarifying)
A: No but I can ?? (too faint)
Sup: Yes. But that means that you’re not – I don’t know what the term is, and I don’t know what they’re doing with it, but I think to be a participant observer you’ve got to be the same as your group. (clarifying, informative)
A: (too faint) (sounds of pages turning). No I wrote ‘would be both an observer and a participant’, OK …

Sup: Yeah. But you’re not a participant observer of the group of children, because you’re not a member of the group of children. If you were a participant observer and a motorbike rider, you’d have to ride a motorbike. (clarifying, informative) (Wisker et al., 2003, p.393, their italics)

In its dynamic and substance, this dialogue may well be a helpful supervisory moment but, to this reader, it hardly seems to figure as the interaction of collegial equals. It better shows, and quite explicitly, the rule of supervisory authority in action through which a supervisor challenges and directs a student in ways that are decidedly unequal. The hopeful view of dialogue that underpins this study seems to have obscured the less egalitarian aspects of the data.

This hopeful view emerges in another sub-field of the supervision literature – that of joint supervisor-student accounts. Commonly, in these accounts, supervisor and student write a reflection on their supervision experience, sometimes in the form of a dialogue, at other times with a shared voice, often alternating between both modes. There is usually reference to tensions and difficulties that occurred between them, but the point is to model supervisor-student dialogue (or conversation) that overcomes these differences, as well as to draw some lessons for others. Examples of this genre of supervision literature include Bartlett & Mercer (2000), McAlpine & Weiss (2000) and Taylor & Dawson (1998). In contrast a similar, but distrustful, account is that by Chapman & Sork (2001). Here the views of the two parties are never really reconciled: “life isn’t neat, we can’t package ourselves and our dialogues in the traditional academic manner … we don’t have any answers or recipes for ‘good power relations’” (pp.104-105).

Finally, to explore the distrustful vein in the literature further, I turn to an unusual ‘supervision dialogue’ that emerges from two keenly theoretical articles published (in different journals) by a supervisor and his erstwhile student. The first is John Frow’s, Discipline and Discipleship (1988), the second its reprisal from Rod Giblett, The Desire for Disciples (1992). Both articles focus on dialogue directly to a limited but revealing extent. Frow, drawing heavily on Freud and Lacan, takes psychoanalysis as one metaphor for doctoral supervision in literary studies. He notes in passing that in analysis/supervision the “mere presence of the psychoanalyst [supervisor], brings … the dimension of dialogue” (1988, p.311). What this dialogue entails though is the process of transference, a messy “phenomenon in which [student] and [supervisor] are both included” (ibid, citing Lacan) by virtue of their relative positions. Because of this dependence on the mechanism of transference love, which can take the “form of resentment or hatred” (p.319), the supervision relation is erotic and entangled with unconscious processes. Moreover, the process of supervision (including the dialogues) is not simply one to one as the supervisor is “a representative of institutional and disciplinary
authority ... mediat[ing] the candidate’s relation to the absent masters of the discipline” (ibid). In Frow’s view, then, supervision dialogues will always be fraught, labouring under the weight of erotic charge, the play of the unconscious, and the clamouring voices of the masters in the shadows – at least.

In response, Giblett draws our attention to “the interminable and silent dialogue” (1992, p.137, citing Derrida) of “transference/counter transference” which made him (there is a sense of force here) into Frow’s disciple. But he wants to dispute “masculinist metaphors of mastery and submission” (pp.137-138) for supervision, and yearns instead for the missed opportunity of “entering into a productive dialogue” (p.140) with his supervisor as the “fleeting, failing or even abject subject of desire” (ibid). In dialogue with this kind of supervisor, who says to the student “I do not know, therefore you must”, the problematic transference may be resolved within the pedagogical relation, rather than being “cruelly repeated” (p.152, citing Frow). For, in that cruel repetition, the body (of the student) “becomes a corpse” (ibid). The core of Giblett’s argument is that supervisors need to be trained into alternative modes of supervision pedagogy that make other, better forms of dialogue possible.

Beyond the explicit attention to dialogue in the two contributions – where Frow’s figures as a distrustful account and Giblett’s as a hopeful one – implicitly the pair functions as a dialogue that we might understand as typical of supervision or, as Green and Lee put it, as “a particularly symptomatic text” (1995, p.44). Indeed Giblett positions his article as “the other side of the dialogue left out of Frow’s paper” (1992, p.148). In this kind of dialogue, neither party speaks to the other about ‘what really matters’, but only about him/her to third parties. As well, there are two often divergent, sometimes incommensurable, viewpoints: so, where Frow finds a fraught yet productive relation between master and disciple through which the student passionately acquires knowledge, Giblett finds a bleak “master-abject relation” (1992, p.143) in which the student’s only form of resistance is “ressentiment” or “vengefulness” (p.150).

Frow and Giblett’s views – and indeed the interplay between them – offer highly charged readings of supervision in which dialogues between supervisor and student are characterised very differently from Wisker et al’s view. For Frow and Giblett, supervision dialogues are distorted because of the radically asymmetrical positions occupied by the protagonists, the ongoing structural insecurity of the student, the kinds of experiences the student must endure (at least under the current conditions of supervision), and the feelings that will be entailed. Both point to the effects of transference in which the student may experience towards the supervisor “impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the [supervision]” (Frow, 1988, p.116, citing Freud), even though their original target was typically someone from the student’s early childhood. The student’s transference –
which can be of intense positive or negative emotion – will always be met by the supervisor’s counter-transference, perhaps the empathy of ‘I know how you feel’, or “the charity of counter-ressentiment – feeling sorry for [the student]” (Giblett, 1992, p.151). The distortions produced by these complex dynamics – a source of pleasure/love as much as pain/hate – are likely to be opaque to both student and supervisor, but maybe (Giblett’s point) particularly to the supervisor. Where Frow and Giblett differ is in their understanding of the necessity of this structure.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In the literature, effective dialogue between supervisor and student is sometimes construed as simply a matter of good intention and careful practice. For some, supervision dialogues are a site where the asymmetries of supervision can be bracketed: for Wisker et al, dialogue between supervisor and student is a series of “sensitive, staged” (2003, p.395) learning conversations that are most useful when supervisor and student “match cognitive processes and move forwards, leaving the student suggesting planned developments” (p.391). But other writers view the dialogues of supervision as always complex and susceptible to misunderstanding. This is Frow and Giblett’s view. In the chapters that follow I have taken a both/and approach to dialogue in supervision, walking a wavering line between a hopeful (towards consensuality) and a distrustful (towards dissent) view. I resist having to think of dialogues as either free fall or as determined but attempt instead to explore how they might be both.
I turn now to explore what the trope of Master and Slave might mean for an analysis of the dialogues of supervision. To elaborate an Hegelian view of dialogue, I have drawn heavily on Zali Gurevitch’s article *Dialectical dialogue: The struggle for speech, repressive silence, and the shift to multiplicity* (2001). Analytic themes derived from this work form the basis for a discourse analysis in which, in an extremely close-up fashion, I examine one short exchange from a supervision meeting alongside notes and comments from both student and supervisor, separately, about the meeting and their supervision relation more generally. I chose this extract as symptomatic of supervision as a cultural-institutional practice – my data is full of such moments. In this small study, I explore how the complementary asymmetry of Master and Slave stilts the dialogues of supervision in productive, yet problematic ways. The motif of ‘stilted dialogue’ is intended to underscore the ways in which supervision’s formal asymmetry

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61 Despite the powerful associations, this is neither a plantation nor a sexual story of Master and Slave: it is an application of the Hegelian narrative described in Chapter 5. While I realise there is something grating about applying the term Master to a female supervisor, the term Mistress also has layers of connotations unwanted for my purpose. I also want to remind the reader that this figuration of supervision is *not* set up as showing ‘bad’ supervision; indeed I argue that the Master-Slave dynamic is a crucial element of good supervision, but one that may be problematic for both supervisor and student in various ways.

62 The supervision under scrutiny in this chapter was one that was enjoyed by the student and led to the award of a First Class thesis.
haunts communication between Supervisor and Student; they are always talking and listening to (and acting towards) each other through a veil of things that cannot or will not be said because of the fundamental agonism of their condition.

**Agonistic Dialogue**

Elements of opposition, coercion, fear and struggle [are] inherent in the dialogic encounter … (Gurevitch, 2001, p.89)

Gurevitch understands the duelling dynamic of the Master-Slave dialectic as a condition for recognition and thus intrinsic to, although not the totality of, everyday dialogue – including educational dialogues. In the inaugural moment of dialogue, where “speech fights against another speech” (2001, p.89), the speakers “strive for recognition, independence and Mastery” (p.90). In by now familiar terms, the struggle leads to a submission: the winner gains the right to speak, to have the last word; the loser is silenced, their silence marking recognition of the Master. The middle term of the dialectic – the mutual and reciprocal recognition – is described by Gurevitch as “that delicate moment of imbalance at the heart of human encounter” (p.91). The consequence of establishing submission and superiority is that this moment is silenced and erased, becoming itself repressive and repressed silence. From then on, the dialogue takes place through things “which for the Master are a nuisance and for the Slave are blood, sweat and tears” (pp.91-92).

Repressive silence now functions as the middle term of dialogue. This implies that the struggle for speech has been decided through various ‘ordinary’ means like institutional norms and internalised discipline. Because one side has won the right to speak, the Master-Slave dialogue hardens into the fixed sides of repressor and repressed and is littered with prohibitions. In everyday conversation, in the practices of education, there are many ways in which repressive silence arrests speech:

In slight hints, a twitch of an eye, or a changing expression of a face, signs (so evident in intimate relations) that we tend to respond to almost with a reflex; and they may be overt, like not listening, turning to someone else, diverting a subject, not asking an expected question, or hurting with words against words, saying ‘it’ is worthless, and thus signalling speech to stop (p.92).

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63 I have capitalised the terms ‘Supervisor’ and ‘Student’ where I am referring to the categories in general in contrast to references to the specific supervisor and student who feature in the illustrative ‘case study’ or other specific instances of supervisor and student.
(Reading this we may be reminded of the student in Chapter 5 who described standing tentatively at her supervisor’s door, noting his body language, feeling her ‘subordination’ – see pp.128-129). However, repressive silence is not absolute silence in the usual sense of the word – it also involves learning to speak in repressed ways that avoid what we are too afraid to say or hear. Both repressive silence and repressive speech “are states of a distorted, broken or violently cut conversation” (p.94). This distorted dialogue functions as convoluted or subversive speech, as silenced speech:

We become in part silenced speech, unheard, euphemised, or obsessive, carrying in our speeches a chain of repressions, fear, unstruggled for words, orders, chickenings, victories, from both sides of the Master-Slave equation. (p.92)

In supervision, the right to speak – the “dictating mouth” (p.94) – is by and large the Supervisor’s. The Student’s reluctance to raise matters of concern – her silence – marks her recognition of the Supervisor. The dialogue between Supervisor and Student takes place through ‘things’: the research project and the thesis. These things are a nuisance for the Supervisor in the sense that they are often marginal to her real interests and significantly out of her control but she also desires them. For the Student, though, the things are her grinding, daily work and the outcome matters dreadfully. In the Master-Slave story of dialogue, the Student’s silenced speech is met by the Supervisor’s silenced ear: the Supervisor is (structurally) oblivious to the Student’s “nightmare” (p.93), that is the long and difficult process of bringing a thesis to fruit. This is apparent in ordinary ways – for instance in how a supervisor does not think much about the supervision, the student or the work between meetings – and other more exceptional ways such as a supervisor who makes it plain that she is not interested in (will not listen to) anything to do with the student’s personal life.

In supervision meetings, lack of preparation by a supervisor, interruptions at the office door, trivial feedback, inadequate preparation, receiving phone calls and so on may all be ways in which they signal a student’s speech to stop. The Student cannot give these repressive signals. Her moves to stop the Supervisor’s speech are more likely to be forms of repressed speech such as avoidance, appeasement, false agreement, or refusal. In supervision dialogues, there are words that both Supervisor and Student are afraid to utter and hear. Indeed, the anticipation of silence may be the biggest fear of all:

64 By chickenings Gurevitch is referring to the game of playing chicken in which one party sees how far they and another party can go before yielding – typically played in fast cars driving straight at one another!
65 Time to change away from Hegel’s ‘him’ – here I take up the female pronoun for both student and supervisor by way of preparing the reader for the analysis in which both supervisor and student are women.
I am more confident [about going to meetings] if I have something I know I need help with, I’ve got set questions about something, something on the chapters maybe. I feel more confident because I know I can go in and sustain a conversation. (Student 5, initial interview, p.22)

Seeing the dialogues of supervision through Master and Slave – and understanding that repressive silence is never fully successful – foregrounds the ways in which these dialogues are stilted by the ongoing workings of superiority and submission, authority and control, speech and silence, rebellion and subversion, prohibitions and chickenings. These problematic distortions are unavoidable elements of supervisor-student dialogues as we shall see in the analysis of data below.

Hegelian Moments in Ordinary Supervision Dialogues

I turn now to one brief moment of dialogue between a supervisor and student during a supervision meeting and read that dialogue through a thematic analysis. The interpretive themes are derived from my discussion of Gurevitch’s work above. While the four themes are not exhaustive, they do allow a reading of supervision that foregrounds its Master-Slave dimensions: (1) The Supervisor has the right to speak (the “dictating mouth”); (2) the Student’s silence marks her recognition of the Supervisor; (3) the dialogue between Supervisor and Student happens through things which are a “nuisance” for the Master-Supervisor but “blood, sweat and tears” for the Slave-Student; (4) the speech of both is repressed and repressive.

The moment of supervision recreated here is a three-minute extract from the transcript of an audio-taped supervision meeting. This moment is in no way extraordinary in relation to the rest of my data – indeed it is an example of what I have come to recognise as typical exchanges between supervisors and students (although not the only kind). (It was observing this typicality that led me to undertake framing supervision through Hegel’s Master-Slave.) I interpret the moment in two ways: on the one hand, I read the extract itself through the themes above and, on the other, I read beyond it by bringing further, related data extracts from the same supervisor and student into my discussion. These texts are notes that both wrote individually within 24 hours or so of the meeting in response to some questions I asked them, and transcriptions of interviews I held with them, again separately, within a week or so of the meeting or at other times. Each data extract is annotated so that the reader can see its source. I use these related texts to thicken and colour my interpretation of the meeting text, in particular to highlight contradictions, ambiguities, tensions and slippages between supervisor and student. Barbara Johnson (1980, p.91) talks about the “deadly space between” of language, indeed of relationships, gaps that appear empty of meaning and thus which can function as the basis for interpretation (and misinterpretation) and action. Understanding that
these gaps are at work in supervision, I have selected extracts from the related texts in order to help me tentatively interpret what some of the gaps in the dialogue might signify to student and supervisor, and how they might function to stilt the dialogue.

I am aware that in selecting this extract and presenting it to view I am making a spectacle of a particular supervision in a way that I am ambivalent about. Emphatically, I do not want to demonise this supervision – I understand it to be a representative moment of an interaction that could occur in most, if not all, supervisions. As well, the supervision explored here was successful in everyone’s terms: the supervisor’s, the student’s and the institution’s. What the presentation of this spectacle allows me to offer the reader is a vivid evocation of supervision’s necessary dangers: the contradictions, ambiguities, tensions and slippages I mention above, and the uncertainties these can pose for the supervisor at least, as well as the way they produce certain predictable forms of behaviour from both supervisor and student.

To give a more concrete context: this extract is from a meeting in a supervisor’s office in which the supervisor (Pakeha woman, around 60) is giving the student (Pakeha woman, early 20s) feedback on a draft chapter. It is August and the thesis is due to be submitted in November. The supervisor has previously given the student feedback on other draft chapters. The exchange below occurs about five minutes into the one-hour meeting and lasts three minutes. I have included the extract in full so the reader can get their own feel for the tone and rhythm of the dialogue and can more critically engage with my interpretation. In the analysis that follows I refer to fragments of the text either by re-quoting them or by reference to the code for a turn in the exchange (eg S1 or St19 and so on).

The supervisor (S) has just begun to give the student (St) feedback on the conclusion for a chapter. The tone of the meeting is quiet and somewhat conversational, laced with the intermittent sound of paper rustling as supervisor and student look through the manuscript. The student laughs often, at times (it seems to me) a bit nervously.

S1 … But otherwise I thought yes, you’ve overcome the sense that I had that you hadn’t finished.

St1 Mhmm. Yes. I think I knew it in my head, I just hadn’t (laughs)

S2 (***)\(^{66}\) Mhmm

St2 forced myself to write it down.

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\(^{66}\) Some readers have found the fragmentation and incoherence of dialogue in this extract remarkable – however it is not. Transcribed dialogues of many kinds have exactly this incomplete, second-guessing kind of quality, an attribute that underscores the everyday possibilities for misreading in dialogue.

\(^{67}\) The triple asterisk (***\(^{67}\)) indicates that the utterance overlaps with that immediately before or after it.
And it is nice, cos actually this, this is saying something quite different about the relationship of the novels from [that other chapter], because

in this one you are arguing they are quite different, and in this one you are actually arguing that, although they might seem different, they are actually quite similar.

Mhmm

Is that right?

That is how it seems to be. I sort of just realise these things as I do them. (laughs)

Mhmm, that is what, having read the whole thing, I thought that probably you needed something, again it is the same thing, I think you need an introduction of some

Yes, well this is only bits of it. I am going to write more about the death scenes, I thought

oh good

of [character x] and [character y] – I thought they are pretty major, um

Yes

Especially [character x], universal salvation, so

Oh, that would be good. Yes because I thought you could have put more emphasis on that theme of universal salvation

yeah

which is consistently through the book

Yes. So this is only about 3,000 [words]. I was going to write another

right

2,000 or so.

Yeah, right, right. I thought if you had an introduction what I’d suggest, and again you can think about that, is that um I’d have perhaps something along the lines of that the attitude to religion in the two novels is usually seen as, as – I’m not sure if it’s diametrically opposed, but [name] is the liberal or whatever she is, [name] is the religious um proselytizer

yeah

um but however a close study of the two novels reveals more similarities than have usually been acknowledged

something like that. Because that would then make this a sort of – the person reading this would know where you’re heading for.
mhmm, yep

And I think it would be nice because – does it come after this [other chapter]?

(*** Yeah, it will come after that.

Yes, because then that is sort of saying that something different is happening which is nice. So would that be okay? Something

(*** Yeah.

something along those lines, which would only have to be a short paragraph.

Yes. Should I, for the introductions to each chapter, should I keep them fairly short do you think?

It depends. I mean I think with this one it just seems that

(*** [says something inaudible]

then you’d be leading into the contrast between them, but you can make it as long as you like, but I think some sort of structure like that would um

Yep.

Yeah, yeah. Because people do usually say, don’t they, that they are very different.

Oh yeah, definitely. (*** (laughs)

So you could easily find, I mean if you wanted to, you could even give a quote or two there

(*** Mhmm

Um, or you could just leave it quite simple

(*** Mhmm

and then your close study of the two novels or perhaps put my close study of, if you wanted to there or

(*** Yeah

or just a close study reveals more similarities

(*** Yep

than, and then that makes what you are doing actually quite interesting and original, um

(*** (laughs) Hopefully

You are saying that you are doing something the critics aren’t doing. I think that’s

(*** Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to do.
S27    Mhmm, yeah. I think if we gave it some sort of position like that then, then you can just start straight in as you have done which is, which is good. Um, there’s just a few minor things at this point.

The supervisor then goes on to raise a series of micro-editing points. She pays close attention to the student’s text, at times reading sentences aloud to re-work them. Sometimes she questions the student’s reasoning, thinking through the argument aloud. The pattern of exchange visible above, where the supervisor contributes most of the dialogue, continues. Towards the end of the meeting, however, the student indirectly raises the issue of a chapter she sent the supervisor for feedback earlier in the year that has never been returned to her. The supervisor realises she has lost it and they arrange that the student will resend it.

**The “Dictating Mouth” of the Supervisor**

This exchange shows quite clearly the supervisor’s – as Master – right to speech. Her ascendant voice both leads the exchange and dominates it. In speaking, she makes a range of responses. Some are judging in that she tells the student her (the supervisor’s) view of the state of the work, for example “you’ve overcome the sense that I had that you hadn’t finished” (S1), “I thought that probably you needed something, again it is the same thing, I think you need an introduction …” (S6), and “then that makes what you are doing actually quite interesting and original” (S25). At times she tells the student what she thinks the student is saying – for example “in this one you are arguing they are quite different …” (S4) and “you are saying that you are doing something the critics aren’t doing” (S26). She also gives the student advice and direction: “I think you need an introduction …” (S6), “you can make it as long as you like …” (S19), and “you could even give a quote or two there” (S21). At times she literally dictates to the student amendments to the draft, as in turns S13 and S23-24. Two or three times she checks for agreement and understanding from the student – “Is that right?” (S5) and “So would that be okay?” (S16). At these moments it is unclear whether she is seeking the student’s permission or compliance or just ascertaining that her interpretation is correct.

While she takes up the right to speech, the supervisor seems ambivalent about it. Her suggestions are often framed tentatively, for example “I thought that probably you needed something” (S6) and “what I’d suggest, and again you can think about it” (S12). In her post-meeting notes (written the next day), she writes:

> I felt I had been successful in pointing out alterations that would make the chapter more shapely and get its message across. I’m less happy about the tone of the meeting. [The student] was too passive – or rather I was too controlling. I tell her what I think will improve her thesis. I need to think about ways of allowing her to suggest the alterations rather than telling her what to do. (Post-meeting notes)
It is interesting to observe the supervisor’s anxiety about being too controlling – it is very similar to that of the supervisor in Chapter 3 (p.71). This response may be a function of measuring herself up against the norms of ‘supervision as developing independence’ or may be a function of gendered anxieties about being bossy – or both.

In contrast, in her notes (written the day of the meeting) the student says:

I think (hope!) [my supervisor] was pleased, basically because she seemed friendly and relaxed, and interested in what I’d written and had to say. She also had plenty of feedback, which seemed to show that she thought my argument was a good one. (Post-meeting notes)

It is interesting to see that while being the Master (dictating to) is not always particularly pleasurable for the supervisor, the student may well find pleasure in the security of the ‘dictated to’ position of Slave. This is one of the problematic elements of supervision, that the ways individuals enact themselves as supervisor-Master and student-Slave have unpredictably different effects on the other, that ‘subordination’ for the student may be more pleasurable than ‘domination’ for the supervisor.

**The Student’s “Silence”**

The contrast in the student’s contribution to the exchange is marked but, as Slave, her silence marks her respect towards the supervisor. She speaks a lot less, mainly only in response to the supervisor, and most of the speech she does offer has a mimicking, or silenced, quality. For example, much of what she says is assenting – 19 responses out of 23 (not including the three I can’t hear which sound assenting in tone) – and her voice often comes in behind the supervisor’s. Her agreement mainly takes the form of either yes (13 times) or mhmm (4 times). However, sometimes she makes more elaborated agreements, for example, “That is how it seems to be. I just sort of realise these things as I do them” (St5) or by (defensively?) claiming that she was just about to do whatever the supervisor has just suggested, for example, “Yes well this is only bits of it. I am going to write more …” (St6). In mimicking the supervisor in these ways, the student submits to her.

At times there is a more explicitly appeasing quality to the student’s speech. For example she sometimes hedges her responses as if anticipating the supervisor’s disagreement: “I was going to write another … 2000 words or so” (St10-11) and “I am going to write more about the death scenes, I thought …” (St6). When she does ask a question, it is phrased very tentatively:

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68 Another reading of this response is that the student may be finding pleasure in the feeling that the supervisor ‘sees’ what she is doing. Ambiguity, multiple meanings even, is a feature of this data.
“Should I, for the introductions to each chapter, should I keep them fairly short do you think?” (St17). Also she laughs from time to time, but usually as she admits to some failing or uncertainty in herself – for example she laughs after she acknowledges that she hadn’t put her ideas onto the page (St1), and again when she says “I sort of just realise these things as I do them” (St5). Like some of her comments, the laughter seems to be expressing a certain amount of rueful discomfort and self-effacement.

Soon after the meeting, in response to my questions, both supervisor and student describe their perceptions of the dialogue in the meeting. The student:

_She spoke a lot more than I did, but this was because she was giving me feedback on my ideas. I expected her to say more than myself, and so it didn’t bother me._ (Post-meeting notes)

In a sense the student is pointing to the fact that she had already ‘spoken’ to the supervisor via the draft chapter and that now it is the supervisor’s turn to speak. Crapanzano, citing Veltrusky, reminds us that every moment in a dialogue is situated “in a specific ‘here and now’” with which the dialogue has an intense and reciprocal relationship (1992, p.209). This moment follows on the supervisor’s reading of the draft and precedes the student’s subsequent response via the process of editing. In this sequence of events, the pattern of the dialogue felt ‘expected’ to the student.

The supervisor:

_We were both in the same two-hour class immediately afterwards. She is usually quiet in class but a couple of times I worried that my comments had been too negative as she looked depressed. I agonised several times later in the day over having forgotten to return the chapter and over not having discussed possible grades with her. … [During the meeting] I realised that she was feeling a little upset/overwhelmed by the number of alterations I was suggesting, so I stopped and praised the passages that worked and the overall argument. I mentioned the fact that her writing was getting more fluent. … She smiles a lot, but I get an underlying feeling of distress. Is it at my criticisms?_ (Post-meeting notes)

The supervisor worries, mostly over the tenor of her comments rather than the quantity. She worries about how the student appears, and whether or not her critical feedback is causing the student distress. But once again, the student’s point of view is quite different:

_I felt pleased that she liked my argument – it’s been a difficult chapter and her praise is encouraging. … I think the meeting went well – I found it productive and helpful, and thought it had an easy, relaxed tone._ (Post-meeting notes)
I felt pleased about [the meeting]. I thought it was—yes what she had to say was constructive and I was—yes I was quite motivated. I went to the library afterwards and got out some books and went home and I thought about it. I have been thinking about historical context all week. I am going to conquer the world. (Post-meeting interview)

There is a contrast here between the worrying supervisor who feels as if her critical feedback is too painful for the student and the pleased, energised student. It suggests that they may be coming to the supervision with very different expectations, reading and misreading each other’s responses. I think this kind of difference is a common aspect of supervision that can sometimes (although it doesn’t here) lead to disastrous outcomes—for example the student who believes they are writing a very good thesis only to learn later that it was not. As well, the gap produced by the student’s silence is one which is interpreted by the supervisor and then acted on—in deciding that the student is upset by critical feedback the supervisor holds back some of her feedback (as we see below). This illustrates how the structural gap between supervisor and student, that both produces and is exacerbated by the stilted dialogue between them, will be ‘misinterpreted’ in ways which subsequently bear on how the supervision proceeds.

**A Dialogue “through Things”**

In Gurevitch’s view, when the dialogue settles into the superiority/submission pattern of the Master and Slave, it “becomes merely a conversation through things” (2001, p.91). The central “thing” in supervision is the thesis. What is not immediately obvious from the text above is that the dynamic of this supervision meeting is triangular in structure: present in the exchange are the supervisor, the student and the ‘body’ of the draft chapter. On the tape I can hear the rustling of paper as pages are turned, and pauses in speech while the supervisor finds the part of the text she wants to comment on. Seconds earlier there had been a brief exchange over the way the student’s formatting of the draft had been lost in the supervisor’s print-out. The student seemed dismayed to find the supervisor’s version did not look like what she had sent in for feedback. This reminds us of how the physical ‘body’ of the draft can affect supervision.

Yet the ‘thing’ of the thesis is present in other, more abstract, senses as well—as an argument that needs to be made as well as possible for examination, and as an object of fantasy and desire for both supervisor and student. On the surface it seems as if the point of the exchange (indeed the meeting generally) is simply for the supervisor to assist the student improve her draft argument. Yet there are ambiguities which make this simplicity more apparent than real. For instance in the opening exchange (S1-St1-S2-St2-S3), is the supervisor reflecting back to the student something the student already knows (and is arguing), or is she
giving the student something to know? (These kinds of exchanges with their blurry boundaries about whose knowledge is being foregrounded are very characteristic of supervision.) And later, in the closing exchange (St26-S27), the student asserts “that’s what I’m trying to do” while the supervisor responds “Mhmm, yeah. I think if we gave it some sort of position like that …”. The student’s rare (in this extract) assertion of her authorship of the thesis is met by the supervisor’s “we”, seemingly asserting joint authorship.

What we can glimpse functioning here is some of the paradoxical aspects of the Master-Slave relation – specifically, how the supervisor’s relation to the student is mediated by the thesis. Everything the supervisor says to the student is about the thesis – she talks through the body of the draft, and the emergent shape of the argument, to the student. Her praise is usually quite impersonal: “and it is nice, cos actually this, this is saying something quite different …” (S3) and “Oh, that would be good …” (S9). We can also glimpse how the supervisor’s relation to the thesis is mediated by the student. The supervisor does have plans for the chapter that she tries to draw the student into by weaving them around both the student’s draft and the student’s responses to her feedback. While she checks to make sure the student understands and consents, she also at one point (“the person reading this” S14) invokes the examiner (another Master), or any reader of the text, to lend weight to her suggestion for an alteration to the draft. Later, the supervisor says that throughout the supervision she feels in alliance with the student against the examiner, and that she sometimes invokes the examiner as a deliberate strategy to buttress her own authority:

_Because I find that quite an interesting effect on the whole thesis, on the whole supervision – the fact that it is not me who is actually marking it. It is someone out there who is marking it and so there is a kind of sense of alliance of us against this mythical person out there. So I think that’s something else. I think I often use them, the fact that you are going to have this person, as a kind of back-up for my own, well if I think they need to do something I might say I think the external examiner would be, or we must remember the external examiner, or if you haven’t read this they might well have read it you’d better make sure you have. So, to some extent, I use this mythical person as a sort of authority figure._

(Final interview)

In her notes, the supervisor writes about her feelings towards the thesis and how her relationship with the student is bound up with these:

_I feel a little bit worried about [the thesis] being so uncreative on her part where some of the students have been – they have created something of their own so that at the end I am quite surprised at what they have done, and those are the students who often resist your suggestions – whereas she doesn’t, she does exactly what she’s told. If I say perhaps you should go and have a look at [so and so] which might be useful, she’ll go away and she will look at [them] and then she took [some] and put them in there._
... But I feel I haven’t quite sparked her off. And I am not sure if that is her or whether [it is me].

(Post-meeting interview)

There is a sense here of the supervisor’s disappointment in the student because of the obedient way she goes about the thesis. But there is also some anxiety that the student’s approach may be a function of how the supervisor is working with her. These are problematic aspects of supervision – first, the supervisor wanting the student to take inspiration rather than direction from her but the two (inspiration and direction) being entangled in actual dialogues and, second, that what the supervisor does can make a difference (but unpredictably so) to what the student does. Later in the interview the supervisor says she thinks the student is unhappy with the thesis, but the student’s story is one of keenly enjoyed independence and originality, so we can ponder whose unhappiness the supervisor is reporting. In these examples we see more evidence of the problematic complexities of the dialogues of supervision – the things the supervisor worries about but cannot say, or can say but does not know what effect they will have (for instance, will they foster obedience or open up a new path for the student’s thinking that the supervisor has not imagined).

The student-as-Slave faces similar dilemmas in terms of how to behave towards the supervisor:

I don’t feel adult to adult because I am aware all the time that she is the lecturer, the supervisor, and I am the student ... I am very conscious of what I do say, I try to say intelligent things, ... And sometimes I go out and think, oh that was a stupid thing to say. ... Because well, you know, you want to say intelligent things and have her to think good things about me. Because I feel as though she is interested in what I have to say, she thinks they are good ideas, and she likes what I write so it is not just like you know, “just a stupid student, and I’m going to go home and go oh I had this student in my room today and” – I don’t feel like she is feeling like that. (Post-meeting interview)

And, in the same interview, the student had talked about another supervisor and student she knew of who had coffee together and then went on to say:

No, I don’t think – well I wouldn’t – I can’t imagine her asking me to coffee or something, it would just be weird. [We’re] not into that buddy level. ... I wouldn’t ask her because well she is busy, she has got things to do, because she is always busy when I go in there – she is always in the middle of something and I don’t want to interrupt her or anything like that – but I can’t imagine her asking me because she is busy and I’m just a pitiful student. (Post-meeting interview)

The student shows a strong sense of her subordinate status (even though her use of the term “pitiful” was ironic) and of the relation being impersonal enough to make having a coffee
together “weird”. Yet she also says on several occasions that she enjoys the supervisor’s friendliness and ability to put her at ease.\(^69\)

Another issue that arises for the supervisor is the process of examination and how she is implicated in the final grade awarded to the thesis. She has relations with other Masters to negotiate at the same time as that with the student, relations in which she too is judged and could be found wanting:

\[
\text{I still get anxious when [the thesis] is going off to an external examiner ... I sort of feel [the examiners] are grading me as much as the student in that the way it is organised and its presentation ... is really my responsibility. (Initial interview)}
\]

Here we see the supervisor as temporarily Slave-like, caught up in fear of other Masters in a way that destabilises the fixity of the Master-Slave metaphor for supervision. This fear must always stay in the background in the supervision – the supervisor cannot talk about it to the student except indirectly through discussion of choice of examiners:

\[
\text{[My supervisor] said often at other universities they sort of try and prove a point by marking very hard and I think she said she had one last year, she sent it to a [topic] enthusiast hoping that he’d be more lenient with it and apparently they ripped it to shreds so she doesn’t really know who she is going to send it to at this stage. (Student, post-meeting interview)}
\]

While some discussion of who the external examiner might be did occur in this supervision, it doesn’t always.

The supervisor’s fear is accompanied – as it is for the student – by the pleasures of being recognised:

\[
\text{There was one bit [in the examiner’s report] where he said be really liked [a particular] argument and I thought ooh that was my argument. I actually felt quite pleased about it. (Supervisor, final interview)}
\]

\(^69\) In discussing this chapter with the supervisor concerned, she made two relevant points about this aspect of the supervision dynamic. First, the age difference between her and the student was such that she could have been the student’s grandmother; as well, being an out lesbian, the supervisor has a practice of setting up a friendly distance between herself and young women students in particular. Both elements are likely to have worked to maintain a gap that is different from that in other supervisions in which she does have coffee with her students, or meet them in her home, or even on occasion in theirs. She never discusses her lesbian identity with students though and I did not raise this matter with the supervisor during the research as I had decided only to discuss identity categories that individuals raised as relevant from their own perspective. I “fished” for such categories through my questioning but I had to fish quite hard at times even to get a discussion of gender. Therefore, the supervisor’s lesbian status was silent within the research until our meeting to discuss the chapter where I learned that it was a formative factor in how she established supervision relations with her students.
This moment underscores the pleasures that flow between Slave and Master – pleasures in *being* a Slave which we might not have predicted, pleasures that are a complex aspect of this mutually dependent and productive relation. This dimension of supervision complicates the original triangular structure of supervision by referring it outwards – connecting with other Master-Slave relationships, for example between the supervisor and other colleagues where the supervisor may become the Slave.

**Repressed and Repressive Speech**

Lastly, I want to focus on ways in which the exchange between supervisor and student is haunted not only by silence but also by repressed and repressive speech: in the master-Slave relation, both speech and silence are “states of a distorted, broken or violently cut conversation” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.94). What prohibitions and signals are at work in the supervision dialogue above? This is a difficult question to answer because, in the absence of data about body language, it seems to require some attention to what was *not* said. Again, my analysis will be helped here by reference to other data than just the meeting text.

Most saliently, the form of the supervisor’s questions works to prohibit the student’s speech – her questions are mainly closed and the student responds minimally: “yeah”, “yep” etc. Less directly, in the flow of making judgments, of recapping what she thinks the student is saying, of giving advice, and of dictating the words the student might use, the supervisor’s speech pre-empts the student’s speech. The supervisor’s speech suggests that at this moment she is carrying the responsibility for thinking about the thesis, and the student’s submissive assenting speech – which signals to the supervisor to keep on speaking – suggests she has given over this responsibility to the supervisor. The supervisor may be leading in this way mostly to support the student. Vincent Crapanzano talks about the phatic function in speech “which can be described in psychological terms as ‘supportive’” (1992, p.21) and which, he goes on to say, “may also account for the banality of most discussions, wherein the conventional preserves the phatic function, the coming together of the exchange”(p.209). I think we can see one of the inherent contradictions for many supervisors, between supporting the student and challenging her to think, playing out here. It is very difficult to do both things at once and, in this moment of dialogue, the supervisor appears to be largely supportive, especially via empathetic mimicry, perhaps at the expense of challenging the student to give an account of her thinking. The supportive responses the supervisor makes effectively silence the student, just as the student’s responses keep the supervisor talking. This complementary dynamic reinforces the polarities of a Master-Slave dialogue. While it is likely that this dynamic may arise from the supervisor’s sense of the student’s vulnerability, it may also (or otherwise) be about the supervisor’s thwarted desire for the thesis: she cannot enact her desire directly because the student works on the thesis. So, in order to feel some control, the supervisor keeps checking to see if the student understands and agrees with her feedback.
An effect of these stilted dynamics may be that the student’s creative relation to (conversation with) the thesis is broken by the supervisor’s interventions. This does not necessarily make the student unhappy – indeed there is a sense here that she prefers safe obedience to risky independence, although at times there appears to be a hint of rebellion in her defensiveness (St6, St10). Likewise the student’s relation to the supervisor may be broken by what she is not invited to, or cannot, say to the supervisor about her own ambitions and desires for the thesis – there is a sense of “chickening” in the very tentative, hedging way she puts forward any ideas for the thesis (St5, St6, St26). The supervisor’s broken relations to the student and the thesis – in which the student is somehow too obedient and the thesis unimaginative – may also be born out of this dynamic.

In the exchange, we can see the radical imbalance of the broken conversation of the Master and Slave – where one person is in a position of giving judgment and guidance and the other must attend. This inherent imbalance in supervision produces systematic distortions in what each can say to the other. We can see that only the supervisor says certain kinds of things, that the student tends to say other kinds of things, and that at times they talk past each other. For instance, in the matter of the originality of the work, we can see from the quotes above that the supervisor feels that the student’s work is not original, that it lacks creative spark. However, the student thinks differently:

*I do [feel passionate about my topic] because it is something almost original. People haven’t really done this before, at least not in the depth that I am doing, so I am hoping to sort of interest a few people, well the [examiners] anyway …* (Post-meeting interview)

She is pleased with the originality and independence of her work. This distorting element of the dialogue of supervision in which supervisor and student talk past each other about a central aspect of the process is partly a function of the supervisor’s concern about giving critical feedback to the student:

*But I can’t really make her more creative. I mean I can say “go and look at this” and “do a bit more of that”, but I can’t say to her “you are not thinking hard enough. … I think it would destroy her.* (Supervisor, Post-meeting interview)

In contrast, the student is clear that this is what she expects of supervision:

*[Giving critical feedback] is what I want her to do …. If she didn’t say as much as what she did, then I’d be wondering why not really. Because I know I’m not a perfect student. … I mean it depends on how the feedback is given too I think … you know she just says it in a nicer way and when it is coming across like that I don’t mind and I mean that is her job and it is my job to listen and improve and to
learn off her, so I would be silly not to listen to her if she is trying to improve [the thesis] for me.
(Student, Post-meeting interview)

And later she says:

Yes. I felt that she didn’t have a problem with criticising my work because she knew that I’d take it on board and not be upset about it and I think she said to me once that I took suggestions really readily and she appreciated that … (Final interview)

The student asserts that she does want critical feedback – indeed that giving it is the supervisor’s job. What’s more she believes that this is an aspect of the supervision that works well. There seems to be a disjuncture here between how the supervisor sees her in relation to feedback and how she sees herself. The student does though remark that how the feedback is given is important – so maybe the supervisor’s intuition that the student would be “destroyed” by challenging feedback has some truth. Yet if the supervisor could give it in the way she usually does (that the student says she finds helpful), maybe not. Whatever, it means that there are silences inside this supervision dialogue, for example over the issue of originality, arising from the supervisor’s desire not to overly hurt or discourage the student. Again, such silences seem inevitable given the complexity of supervision as a process in which the relations between the people are always mediated by the thing. But, again, they seem potentially problematic silences in the way they allow misconceptions about the quality of the work – or the student’s ability to go on to PhD for instance – to grow.

Indeed, the issue of continuing on to do a PhD was interesting in this case. On the basis of the student’s work on the thesis, the supervisor had expressed doubts as to whether she would be a good candidate for doctoral-level study:

If [the student] said something about a PhD, we would talk about it. But I don’t think in her case I’d sort of say “are you prepared to do a PhD” because … she is not sort of doing work that I would think would be, I don’t think she would be happy, perhaps that’s more it, with doing a PhD because I think you’ve got to really enjoy what you are doing and feel that you have really done something exciting because you are going to have to spend – an English one is often five, six to eight years on it, and unless you are happy doing it then – and I don’t feel she is particularly happy doing this. (Post-meeting interview)

But later, after the thesis is completed, the supervisor had a somewhat different view based more on another piece of (unsupervised) coursework the student completed at about the same time:
I mean if she went on and did a PhD, it might turn out to be a very fine piece of work and she might have got through that [struggle to find a voice], but she hasn’t quite got through it yet, I don’t think. Well, she couldn’t do it with [the thesis]. But that essay suggested that she might have been able to go on and do something. In fact when I read that I almost felt like saying to her “do think about coming back and doing a PhD”. (Post-meeting 2 interview)

The limitations that the supervisor found in the thesis, that she felt the student could not overcome, did not figure in the same way in the other piece of work. The academic persona the student projects in that work seems capable of doing a PhD in a way that the persona projected in the thesis – or more accurately perhaps through the supervision process – does not. This suggests the ways in which, within a particular supervision, a student and their work might get ‘trapped’ into a certain way of being – and that under different circumstances, both student and the work might be quite different.

In what ways does the student repress her speech? She gives us a couple of glimpses:

I think one of my very first meetings I actually wrote down – I had quite a few just sort of general points, I think about four questions, so I wrote them down. But I felt like a bit of a geek sitting there with my book, going now – it felt too formal and I didn’t want that sort of relationship really, I wanted it just to be more easygoing and relaxed. (Post-meeting interview)

Oh I didn’t mind [about raising the missing chapter] because I knew she wouldn’t get narky because it is not my fault. I mean I needed feedback on it so – and I had to say something. (Post-meeting interview)

There is an implication that the student feels the need to protect herself from the supervisor: that she will be silent rather than risk striking the wrong kind of note in the supervision, and that she will be silent about things that might put her at fault (she mentions this more than once). Moreover the student’s position as Slave allows her to be silent, more so than the supervisor. While there are traces of the distorting effects of fear on this dialogue, there is also comfort and safety – and control – in silence.

Concluding Thoughts

This figuration of supervision foregrounds the barely disguised lineaments of the Master-Slave relation playing out in an ordinary dialogue between supervisor and student. We can see, from the fragmented resistance of both, that these lineaments are structural at least as much as they are personal. Within the feedback dynamic, the supervisor is positioned as the speaking authority, the judge, but her ambivalence about this is evident in her struggle with herself over
how she was in the meeting. We can understand that this positioning arises from her concern (and sense of responsibility) for the quality of the thesis, and that these are core supervisory responsibilities – indeed, in some important but problematic sense, the supervisor's first responsibility may be to the thesis. We can see the student's desire that the supervisor tell her how to make the work better, and her silence operating to keep the supervisor talking. We can also see how the student is afraid of speaking in certain ways. She worries about how she might be seen and how certain actions might affect the nature of the relationship. She wants to please (the supervisor, the examiners) but is uncertain about just what is required. Again some of this is personal but some of it is structural – obedience features in the institution’s fantasy of its students, as I have discussed in Chapter 4. We can also see how the supervision dialogue is triangular, how it is indeed a dialogue through the thing of the thesis, and how for the student this places her as “pitiful” while the supervisor feels a degree of frustration with the student for the ‘lack’ in the thesis. We can see the student and supervisor talk past each other on important matters such as the kind of feedback which can be given and what constitutes an A+ thesis. But we can also see elements of pleasure in this relation: for example, the pleasure for the student in the discussion about what to do to make the thesis good and how that fuelled her desire and her willingness to go on with the work, her pleasure in the supervisor’s “constructive” feedback, her pleasure in experiencing herself as capable of original work. There are also elements of pleasure for the supervisor here: for example, in the examiner’s recognition of a good thesis arising from her supervision, embodying some of her ideas.

In general, these stilted, although at times pleasurable, Master-Slave elements often produce an opacity in the dialogues of supervision, such that Supervisor and Student are in some ways shrouded from each other. Perhaps, in particular, the Slave-Student is hidden from the Master-Supervisor who is structurally “oblivious” to her – one of the supervisors in my study suggested that who the Supervisor was mattered more to the student than vice versa. From my research, I have become more aware of the asymmetry in this aspect of supervision – while students often report noticing their supervisors, their offices, their body language, in quite intense detail, supervisors rarely do to such an extent. This is the burden of the Slave. The Supervisor’s ‘burden’, in contrast, is that because she is the Master, she cannot contain the effects of what she says and does to the Student: this is one of the risky elements of supervision. The polarised positions of Master and Slave produce a gap between Supervisor and Student, a gap “which, within cognition, functions as an act” (Johnson, 1980 p.108), (the supervisor’s (mis?)perception of the student as fragile shapes her feedback) and “which, within action, prevents us from ever knowing whether what we hit coincides with what we understand” (ibid) (the student’s (mis?)perception of how to produce an A+ thesis). This gap also leads to significantly different views, for instance about the nature of the feedback

70 The student was awarded an A for her thesis.
To return to Wisker et al’s reading of extracts of supervision dialogues as representing those between “collegial equals” (discussed in the previous chapter): maybe the reason they cannot read the startling asymmetry in the dialogue extracts they present is because they cannot afford to. Thinking about supervision as a dominant/subordinate relation has become distinctly unfashionable, even apparently unethical, especially perhaps within professional doctorate programmes where the students enter as working professionals – in some disturbing way, they are somehow the same as their supervisors. Yet wanting to ‘forget’ the difference between Supervisor and Student is not a way forward – indeed Bill Readings cautions against the pitfall of demagoguery in pedagogy, whereby the student is seen to be no different to the teacher, arguing that it is one version of a misplaced commitment to knowledge as autonomy, where to have knowledge is to “gain a self-sufficient monologic voice” (1996, p.157), to no longer have to listen. It is as if the intensely normalising pedagogies of higher education which already work through relatively covert didactic modes (compared to the secondary school system for instance) are being driven further underground, inviting us to deny the implications, the fruitfulness, of the Master-Slave ethic for Western education.

For all that, I want to acknowledge the potential deadliness of this reading of supervision dialogue. Seeing Supervisor and Student as fully accounted for by Master and Slave would suggest a fixity to the relation and betray the complexity of what we find in supervision. Indeed, there is always a supplement to any interpretation – something left out, excluded. Recognising this in his analysis of dialogue, Gurevitch (2001) refuses to be bound only to the Master-Slave dialectic. He wants to add to dialogue’s possibility, in a both/and logic, other moments, other kinds of responses that can be made to the struggle for recognition that is at the heart of the Master-Slave dynamic. Jessica Benjamin too suggests that we look towards less polarised accounts of human relations and explore the ways in which the tension between asserting the self and recognising the other plays out without becoming hardened into relations of domination (1988, p.223). This may involve accepting “the inevitable inconstancy and imperfection of our efforts, without relinquishing the project” (1988, p.224). Gurevitch’s and Benjamin’s impulse towards a both/and understanding of social relations is mine too and I follow this impulse in the next chapter. There I turn from figuring supervision dialogues as caught within a structurally asymmetrical power relation with relatively fixed points to figuring them as a more mobile and unpredictable field of power play via the metaphor of improvisation. There I will read dialogue in supervision against the structuralist metaphor of Master and Slave, fraying any sense of it as supervision’s truth.
Chapter 8
Improvising Together: The Play of Dialogue in Supervision

Dialogue thrives on ‘non-identity’ … as much as it strives for identity. (Gurevitch, 2001, p.100)

Supervision dialogues have moments with a very different character to those illuminated by Hegel’s figures of Master and Slave. These moments – in their reciprocity of exchange, sometimes even playfulness, between supervisor, student and thesis – seem to transgress the fixity of the identities of Master and Slave and show a thriving state of relative “non-identity”. Such moments are repressed by the Hegelian trope and invite different metaphorical expression. In this sense, this chapter can be read as a supplement to the last, showing how in supervision dialogues the apparently stable binary of the Master and Slave is undermined by a more flexible and creative multiplicity, that I call here ‘improvisation’. Although vital to supervision, this aspect is not amenable to regulation (unlike the Master-Slave aspect). In these moments, the necessary but safe ‘deadliness’ of Master and Slave is interrupted by the

equally necessary but risky ‘creativity’ of improvisation. Both play a role in the pedagogy of supervision which seeks to initiate the student into forms of disciplinarity that are at once both reproductive and productive in their nature. Both are made more or less likely by the institutional requirements that the thesis be completed in a particular timeframe.

At this point it may seem to the reader that the moment displayed in this chapter – dialogue that is “more flexible and creative” is being cast as ‘better’ than the mode of exchange shown in the previous chapter. This is not my intention. In my understanding both are necessary to producing the disciplined and creative thing that is the thesis and so the exclusion of one mode to the dominance of the other would be potentially problematic whichever way it goes. Indeed Gurevitch argues it may be that dialectics is “a necessary step toward dialogue” (2001, p.97) because in dialectical monologism (Master-Slave) we acquire the “voice or personality” (ibid) that pluralistic dialogue requires. Certainly in supervision there is a sense in which supervisor and student must recognise each other as (authorised) Master and (willing) Slave for the dynamic to get underway. In practice, both moments (Master-Slave and improvisation) are problematic.72 Both may be a source of tension and anxiety for supervisor and student: the former because it enacts a fixed and troubling complementarity that offends our sense of what a ‘proper’ pedagogical relationship between two adults should be, especially where the development of independence in thinking is a prime goal; the latter because its risky intimacy muddies both the boundaries of the personal and the academic in unsettling ways and issues of ownership and originality with respect to the thinking. As well, both may further or hinder the goals of supervision. Crucially, however, neither nor both exhaust supervision’s possibilities – there is always more to supervision than the fullest account of these moments might suggest. For the time being, I propose we understand both as necessary to supervision, depending on each other in some ways to support the mixture of emergent conformity and creativity that disciplinarity requires. In such a view, supervision as dialogue “exists in shifts between moments rather than as whole and self-sustained forms” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.101).

In this chapter, I open by exploring the interpretive shift to improvisation via a return to Foucault and a further engagement with Zali Gurevitch’s work. I take Gurevitch’s analysis of the poetics of dialogue as my basic theoretical framework, foregrounding the aspect of improvisation. As well, I draw in the thinking of some education theorists, in particular Bill Readings’ (1996) treatise on university teaching, *The Scene of Teaching*, to give this section a more pedagogical cast. From my discussion I will again distil four analytic categories through which I read a supervision meeting extract, much as I did in the previous chapter. This time,

72 Gurevitch (2001) also suggests that identifying any moment as one or the other is theoretically problematic in that moments of dialogue are inherently undecidable in the Derridean sense of irreducible to the logic of either/or. I think this was somewhat evident in the previous chapter, but becomes more so in the analysis below.
however, we will see a somewhat different scene of supervision, one which is also a field of play and creativity in which supervisor and student think together, riffing off each other – as musicians do when improvising – toward the thesis.

**From Dialectic to Multiplicity: Improvisation in Supervision Dialogues**

Earlier (in Chapter 5), I defended my appropriation of Hegel’s Master-Slave as a metaphor for supervision by saying that Michel Foucault’s idea of power relations tended to (unhelpfully) obscure relatively fixed and unequal power structures. My argument then (and still) is that we need a corrective against discourses of supervision that want to elide the structural difference, the element of “confrontation”, between supervisor and student – and all the problematic and unpredictable effects entailed. In re-reading his essay *The Subject and Power* after writing the Master-Slave chapters, I have detected in a way I hadn’t earlier Foucault’s ambivalence about disarticulating structural from relational power:

> Every strategy of confrontation dreams of becoming a relationship of power, and every relationship of power leans toward the idea that, if it follows its own line of development and comes up against direct confrontation, it may become the winning strategy. In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal. (Foucault, 1986, p.432)

Here Foucault seems to be suggesting a shifting and unstable relation between two forms of power: the paralysing face-to-face confrontation of two antagonists (Master and Slave) and an active relation of permanent provocation premised on the freedom of both parties to act. “Each constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal” (1986, p.431): in this view, relations between subjects may include both forms of power at different times and each sets frontiers for the other. So the return to Foucault in this chapter is to take up a both/and understanding of the structured power relation of the Master and Slave and the more indeterminate relations of acting, improvising subjects.

With the return to conceiving of power in the more Foucauldian sense as a dynamic relation between supervisor and student, the issue of freedom comes into focus:

> When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others … one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized. (Foucault, 1986, p.428)
The freedom Foucault refers to here is not so much an essential freedom as the freedom at a particular time to choose from a field of possibilities. This is the kind of circumscribed freedom that dialogical improvisation, as I will explain it here, offers. As we shall see, it is circumscribed by the topic and the reciprocal obligations that it requires to be sustained. Moreover, while in supervision there is the ever-present exercise of disciplinary power seeking to guide the possibility of conduct and to put in order the possible outcome (p.427), there is also the hope (of both supervisor and student) that the student will return a difference, a surprise, and in so doing will exceed what either can imagine in terms of the “possible outcome”. Thus in supervision dialogues the ‘freedom’ of improvisation, while in contrast to the bondage of the Master and Slave, is not its other or opposite. It exists alongside it, offering the possibility of interrupting the deadliness of Master and Slave, even as it is made possible by it. This entanglement is quite visible in the dialogue extract and analysis that follows.

Following his discussion of the Master-Slave moment in dialogue, Gurevitch (2001) takes up two further moments: the politics of recognition and the poetics of conversation. They comprise, with the first, what he calls a dissonant view of dialogue as “forever either too much or too little, wavering and shifting sides which tilt not only toward understanding and open play but also away, and against … the ‘tension-laden constellation of forces pulling us at once in the direction of consensuality and in the direction of dissent’” (2001, p.87, citing Coles). Agreeing with Gurevitch that the politics of recognition remains “within the dialectical framework of agonistic relations” (ibid), I have taken up his third moment, the poetics of conversation/dialogue, as a fruitful one through which to read another meeting extract. This dialogical moment is one of multiplicity and passage, of “improvisation and open play” (p.100):

The given topic created by the conversants, at the same time moves from one to the other, unowned by any individual voice, already given yet poetically open at any step.

(p.98)

Improvisation is intrinsic to the moment of poetic dialogue and has become for me a metaphor through which to think about certain moments in supervision dialogues. In relation to music, the term refers to a skilled and creative process wherein musical thinking and performing occur simultaneously (Bailey, 1992, p.66). But musical improvisation is not just a serendipitous performance. When improvising, the performer draws on previous musical experience and improvisation efforts, intensive practice, academic understanding of music, the work of others, as well as flashes of inspiration to create a new musical passage which is an

73 Although Gurevitch uses the term ‘conversation’ in this section of his argument, I will continue to use ‘dialogue’ because conversation implies a more casual exchange than that of supervision meetings.
unpredictable mix of technique and ideas. What’s more, the passage performed is the product of a multi-layered “musical conversation” (Berliner, 1994, p.497) between the performer and fellow performers, self, instrument, musical mentors, teachers, and models, between the present and the past, and sometimes across cultural and musical forms. Its dialogical expression may be reflected in forms of quotation (of self and others), commentary and imitation (Berliner, 1994, p.193), but good improvisation is also understood to be somehow original. Improvisation, then, requires certain capacities including an empathic ability to engage in intense listening (Bailey, 1992), an ability to be fully caught up in the moment, a tolerance for ambiguity, and courage in the face of risk (Berliner, 1994). It also requires a kind of flexible, in situ resourcefulness through which the players take chances, provoke each other to play beyond their current vision (Barrett, 1998, p.617), and rework ‘messes’ to make “musical saves” (p.210). Musical saves are somewhat analogous to what can happen inside supervision when a supervisor and student work to extract a thesis from a research project that has not gone well. What comes out of a ‘save’ may then become part of the knowledge base. The process of improvisation can be accompanied by intense joy and a feeling of surrendering to the flow of the music, of “achieving a groove” (p.613). Much of the way musical improvisation (in particular jazz) is described in the literature evokes the kinds of moments in supervision dialogue I am exploring in this chapter. What is more, improvisation gives a metaphor for these moments that escape the fixity of a binary: it is less about the identities of ‘supervisor’ and ‘student’ than about the process that is happening between two thinkers who, in the act of improvising together, are fleetingly somehow the same. In the open and creative moment of dialogical improvisation, neither is in control of the meaning being made, and the hierarchy of Master and Slave seems to be momentarily forgotten.

Drawing on both Gurevitch and the literature on musical improvisation, I turn now to elaborate several distinctive aspects of the moment of improvisation in dialogue: the shift to betweenness and passage, the emergence of polyphony within a topicalised middle, the obligations and pleasures of a poetics of participation, and the productive fragility of its breaking and breakable state.

**Betweenness and Passage**

The improvisation moment in dialogue is characterised by a kind of betweenness, in which “speech is beside speech, not necessarily ‘against’ it, or ‘for’ it” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.98). In a

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74 In reading for this chapter I came across an article suggesting improvisation as a metaphor for teaching (in critical response to technicist discourses) (Humphreys & Hyland, 2002) and another taking improvisation as a metaphor for qualitative research in education (Oldfather & West, 1994). Both take up the metaphor to illuminate the responsive and spontaneous dimensions of ‘professional performance’ and to mark the necessary tension between structure and freedom.
state of betweenness, dialogue shifts off-centre, neither self nor other centred, and individuality dissolves into a more “associative state of sociality” (p.99). It is a moment of passage: the participants are pulled into a semiotic chain in which meaning is divergent and deferred. The chain “belongs to neither one nor the other but is dialogically owned” (p.98) although both must actively sustain it. The between moment belongs to, exists in, the passage of and through a topic or topics. As in musical improvisation, this moment takes the participants out of themselves and into a middle participatory space, where the thinking (the music) is the thing.

Betweenness is suggestive of Readings’ rethinking of pedagogy as a space/time that is neither teacher-centred nor student-centred but thought-centred, a passage through which we “think beside each other and beside ourselves” (1996, p.165). Here dialogue is figured differently to the Saussurean chain of exchanges that much of university pedagogy seems to be predicated upon, in which “a message is passed from a sender (full vessel emptied) to a receiver (empty vessel filled)” (p.155). It figures more like Bakhtin’s dialogism. In dialogism, the meaning made through communication is not only that which is offered, but also that which is taken: “A word is a territory shared by both …” (Volosinov, 1973, p.86). Because the territory of the word is shared, understanding and misunderstanding are always entwined (Readings, 1996, p.156). In the moment of betweenness and passage, the pedagogy of supervision attends to the dialogical rather than the didactic, to the “co-construction of knowledge” (Dysthe, 2002, p.500). This may indeed be, as Olga Dysthe suggests, a crucial element of supervision if the student is to “appropriate” the topic, that is make the topic her/his own, rather than only ever see it as belonging to someone else – either to the supervisor/s or to those other authorities who have written about it already.

**Polyphony in a Topicalised Middle**

As in musical performance, improvisation in poetic dialogue is not a free-for-all. There is always a topic, “a word that is at least guessed as a becoming topic, a locus that defines I and Thou, signifies what we are doing here, what this is about” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.99). The topic functions as a “‘third’ common subject/object” (Gurevitch, 1998, p.31, italics in original) that creates and holds the boundaries of the shared middle, ensuring that the dialogic play of encounter does not collapse into closure. (This is akin to the argument I made in Chapter 3.

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75 For Mikhail Bakhtin (also called Volosinov), dialogism is “the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance.” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.426).

76 Similarly Lee and Green have framed supervision as the “co-production” of the thesis (and of the subjectivities of supervisor and student) (2004, p.10).
where the thesis as the third point of the triangle, in tension with the other two points, holds open a field of power relations.) The topic does not belong to the participants because it is always/already embedded in “a fabric of tradition and language” (1998, p.32) and thus participates in a multi-layered dialogue. A kind of polyphony may emerge in which the voices of the participants are intermingled with the voices of others. Sometimes (as in supervision) the topic is also embedded in an institution that further mediates the dialogue, determining its value and that of the participants. In a sense the topic, in pre-existing us and belonging to a much wider world, dictates us even as we speak – as in musical improvisation, when players talk about the music sometimes playing them (Berliner, 1994, p.219).

In supervision the “becoming topic” that provides the rationale for the supervisor and student being in dialogue is the thesis topic. This topic belongs to its discipline (or disciplines) more than it belongs to any individual supervisor or student, although through the research and supervision processes it may come to belong to them – ideally, the student – more and more. The thesis topic is (and must be) talked about incessantly, even though it is in the nature of research supervision that often neither supervisor nor student know what it means in its particulars until very late in the process or even after the thesis has been handed in. Of the process of thinking aloud together that is being suggested here, Readings says that what is drawn out there is the “necessity and impossibility that [Thought] should be discussed, despite the absence of a univocal or common language in which that discussion could occur” (1996, p.161). Readings, like Gurevitch, underscores the inherently dissensual nature of dialogue – a problematic dissensuality that face-to-face supervision confronts intimately.

In the topicalised middle, a multiplicity of related topics, contexts and voices can be engaged, as well as the plurality of social selves that supervision always holds within its ambit (as I have described in Chapter 3). A polyphony, like that referred to above, may emerge in which there are layers of conversation going on at once as supervisor and student bring in authors they have read, ideas from other contexts, new concepts, different selves, and so on. Dysthe describes this multi-layeredness as the “laminated’ interactions of students, professors, artefacts and institutional history” (2002, p.502, citing Prior). Thus a ‘personal’, disciplinary, institutional, social and historical milieu surrounds any supervision dialogue, providing the resources for its improvised exchanges, and so emerging in its textual performance. Acknowledgement of this milieu – of the betweenness of Thought functioning always within an historical context – “undoes the presumption to autonomy” of both student and supervisor, indeed of a body of knowledge (Readings, 1996, p.161).

77 There is another “becoming topic” – or inaugural word – in supervision dialogues and this is the word ‘supervision’ itself. By and large, though, this word is repressed. Gurevitch remarks that “even in repressed situations, the power of silencing has a topic … one is silent in the sense of not saying something rather than saying nothing” (2001, p.99) and that the thing that is not talked about can still enter the dialogue through its multiple levels of play.
The topicalised middle poses an ever-present danger for improvising dialogues because sooner or later the thesis topic is likely to become an overbearing one which “locks the middle into a compulsive round that instead of play of encounter produces distraction and alienation” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.100). When this happens, as is likely in supervision because of the necessary focus on the thesis and the stringencies of time, the shifting, reciprocal relations of improvisation may well return to the complementary fixity of the Master and Slave. Institutional pressures for timely completion and the imposition of certain disciplinary norms inevitably means closing down the more sociable and exploratory possibilities within supervision’s dialogues. This is probably a reason why improvising moments may be hard to sustain in supervision dialogues – although there are other possible reasons for this too that I will come to below.

**Poetics of Participation**

In the improvisations of dialogue, as in musical improvisation, participation is sustained by three reciprocal obligations (Gurevitch, 1990; Readings, 1996): to speak (in music, to play), to listen, and to respond. The first obligation, to speak, initiates the dialogue by opening the space. No less difficult than listening and responding, in speaking we risk falling apart in language, whereas silence can keep us in “unified identity” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.102). As well, only some kinds of speaking will open the space for improvisation, others will maintain the dialectic. Listening, the second obligation, “should not be mistakenly considered the passive part of dialogue” (Gurevitch, 1990, p.188) because it creates the dialogic connection. ‘Good’ listening is a skilled “psychological act” (Barthes, 1985, p.245), requiring both detachment and openness, and a willingness to take the time (Beatty, 1999). The third obligation, responding, binds the dialogic connection through a return that is both repetition and a move forward: the repetition functions to acknowledge the speech that has gone on before, while the creative (or poetic) move forward expands the dialogue in ways that are ‘free’ (of the previous speech) and unpredictable even to the responder. Similarly in musical improvisation, players may respond to each other through imitation and repetition as well as through innovative moves. While it is possible to enact these obligations in a ritualistic fashion, this is not the character of the moment of improvisation – rather, as in musical improvisation, it is characterised by both participants being “very alive, absolutely caught up in the moment” (Berliner, 1994, p.220) of dialogue.

Alongside these three reciprocal obligations is another that is distinctive of the moment of improvisation: the effort of hearing the conversation itself (Gurevitch, 2001). This requires a state of being attentive or, as Jessica Benjamin describes it, “attunement” to “a structure or pattern that both [participants] simultaneously create and surrender to … a co-operative
endeavour” that “resembles musical improvisation” (2004, p.18). The effort of attuning is the gift that both participants must give to sustain the moment that gives them in return “the conversation as sociality itself” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.100). The moment of improvising dialogue is therefore marked by a kind of intrinsically rewarding, creative effort through which the participants strive together to bring something new and unpredictable into existence. This non-didactic, dialogic mode – the momentary passage of losing oneself in the talk – requires a kind of surrender to the rhythm of the dialogue and its to-ing and fro-ing of simultaneous thinking and talking. A form of conversational trance may emerge, one that “follows a beat” (Gurevitch, 1995, p.98). This is akin to ‘getting into the groove’ as described in musical improvisation – one of my research participants referred to the delight of getting into “the zone” of intense thinking and talking with his supervisor (Student 3, initial interview).

Such a state of creative sociality gives rise to eros, defined here not so much as sexual desire (although that is one of its forms) but as bodily sensations of pleasure, excitement and joy, often accompanied by expressions of humour and fun. In musical improvisation “the intense joy that accompanies successful musical journeys causes some soloists to ‘break up laughing’ in mid-performance” (Berliner, 1994, p.218). So it can be in supervision dialogues. Although pedagogical dialogue is initially mandated by a topic and anchored to the task of thinking, “the extraordinary potency of pedagogy is its capacity to animate at once the teacher’s body, the body of the text, and the student” (Deutscher, 1994, p.36). If pedagogy generally can be considered a zone of powerfully embodied experience (Jones, 1996; McWilliam & Jones, 1996), then supervision – as a site where student and supervisor work together over time in conditions of considerable intimacy (Phillips, 1979) – may be “exorbitant” in this regard (Gallop, 2001, p.153). George Steiner has this to say of eroticism in the Western tradition of teaching via the more rarified realm of master-disciple relations that supervision resembles and echoes:

Eroticism, covert or declared, fantasized or enacted is inwoven in teaching, in the phenomenology of mastery and discipleship. This elemental fact has been trivialized by a fixation on sexual harassment. But it remains central. How could it be otherwise? The pulse of teaching is persuasion. The teacher solicits attention, agreement, and, optimally, collaborative dissent. … In persuasion, in solicitation, be it of the most abstract, theoretical kind – the demonstration of a mathematical theorem, instruction in musical counterpoint – a process of seduction, willed or accidental, is inescapable. The Master, the pedagogue, addresses the intellect, the imagination, the nervous system, the very inward of his listener. … The dangers and privileges are unbounded. Every ‘break-

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78 Benjamin is interested in the problems that attend both therapeutic and heterosexual relationships. She suggests that attunement is a way out of the complementarity of Master and Slave, of “doer and done to” (2004, p.11) into reciprocity.
in’ into the other, via persuasion or menace (fear is a great teacher) borders on, releases the erotic. Trust, offer and acceptance, have roots which are sexual. (2003, pp.27-28)

Likewise Roger Simon (1995) argues that the conditions of supervision inevitably eroticise the relation between supervisor and student although, as I do here, he takes a broader understanding of eros as a “cathexis which produces the teacher as a source of possible pleasure” (p.99). Even as there is pleasure then, in the improvising moment, uncertainties about the “right distance” (Taubman, 1990, p.121), the degree of contact or detachment, between supervisor and student may emerge at this moment. And contextual issues, such as the emergence of a discourse of sexual harassment, will bear on how the supervisor and student negotiate these uncertainties.

There is something about this participative state that is suggestive of the idea of teaching as primarily the giving of “a style” or “the way [one] learns” (Felman, 1997, p.34). Indeed, in these moments, both supervisor and student give their style and both can learn from the other. This too may produce pleasure. For the supervisor, there is a vital, and revitalising, connection between the excitement found in this mode of supervision dialogue and the pleasures of research work and scholarly debate. In my research interviews, supervisors talked about the enjoyment found in supervision because of the way it afforded opportunities to engage in activities they greatly valued – discussion, thinking, and problem solving. The supervisor’s enjoyment of the academic act – the act of thinking together with another/others – may be compelling for the student, for whom there are also the pleasures of being taken seriously as a thinker and being invited into the subject position of ‘academic’. Here there is an opportunity to see themselves as “a person who might be recognised as a legitimate occupant of academic space, entitled to sit face to face, however nervously and with whatever obscure eroticism, in the same small room as an academic authority” (Sofoulis, 1997, p.12).

Another pleasure in supervision, for the supervisor at least, is the unpredictable return of difference such that what comes back to him/her from dialogues with the student exceeds the supervisor’s thinking and understanding. This may not happen during the dialogue but later in the student’s writing.

Lastly, if to become skilled at musical improvisation, a player must commit to it as a way of life (Berliner, 1994, p.486), maybe the same can be said for intellectual improvisation. Indeed the supervisor can be understood to have already made such a commitment by virtue of their position (although the idea of being an academic as a ‘way of life’ has a somewhat old-

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79 The role of eros in pedagogy is controversial. Some, like Rosemarie Tong (1999), argue for the legitimacy of philia (friendship) in contrast to the dangers of eros but Tong’s argument does rest on the narrow definition of eros as sexual desire, requiring that “the flesh merge” (p.132).

80 In my research I asked both supervisors and students about bodily touch during supervision meetings. Some found this question disturbing.
fashioned ring to it nowadays). In being supervised through graduate research work, perhaps the student is being made an offer to make that commitment as well. However, it is the case that for all sorts of reasons (the changing social and economic significance of research higher degrees being one, indeed of higher education generally, as well as the changing social profile of such students) students experience and respond to that offer very differently and this can become an issue between student and supervisor – for instance if the student is seen by the supervisor to lack the necessary commitment.

**Breakable and Breaking**

In spite of the ritual obligations described above, the creative tensions inside improvisation mean it is always on “the edge of chaos and incoherence” (Barrett, 1998, p.615) and thus at risk of breaking up. Dialogical, like musical, improvisation, is intrinsically fragile, like “walking on eggshells” (Berliner, 1994, p.500, citing player Lee Konitz). It is shadowed by the possibility of collapsing into closure (for example through the emergence of disagreement or an overbearing topic) or into an “unbearable confusion and anxiety” (Sofoulis, 1997, p.14) for one of the participants. In either event, the re-emergence of dialectical dialogue is likely. One of the grounds of fragility in pedagogical dialogues is the “shock” aroused by an otherness which is the “minimal condition of pedagogy”, an otherness that “undoes the pretension to self-presence” (Readings, 1996, p.162) for both teacher and student. The turn to speech, in revealing the flimsiness of our self-presence, may well undo us and the dialogue. However, the fragility of improvisation has positive possibilities as well: poetic dialogue “is forever breakable and breaking, both in the negative sense of falling apart, estranging and deteriorating to a critical gap of silence … and in the positive sense of communicative breakthrough” (Gurevitch, 1998, p.25). It seems the conditions of danger in improvisation may also be the conditions of its creativity.

We can see from this that moments of improvisation involve taking chances (Berliner, 1994, p.210). Indeed risk-taking is central to creative academic work (Dysthe, 2002). Coming to understand this – and that it always involves uncertainty and thus requires courage – may be one of the difficult achievements of graduate study. Opportunities for the student to experience a passage through this frightening (although also sometimes exciting) state of uncertainty – in which they must engage with the “incompleteness of the relations” (Curzon-Hobson, 2002, p.267) between self, other and the world – and out the other side are a fruitful aspect of the pedagogy of supervision. Dialogic moments of the sort I am trying to describe here have the potential for assisting the student in learning how to be with the risk of thinking, how to step into the place of the academic (as I have described above). The very fragility of such moments makes them risky, and this experience may serve as an induction into one of the exciting but always uncertain aspects of academic life. We can ponder whether or not it is less risky for the supervisor because they are ‘merely’ riffing with a student (a ‘slave’
who may not know any better), or more so because they have a responsibility to ensure that the student resolves the topic. (My data shows that supervisors worry about their role in this regard.) Whatever the supervisor’s state, however, it is likely that the student is in a more fragile identity state, and experiencing “heightened emotional intensity” (Todd, 2001, p.444), because of their liminal identity and the significance of the topic as their thesis. While “finding ways of encouraging [risk taking] seems to be a crucial and underestimated element in research supervision” (Dysthe, 2002, p.533), stories from the field of supervisors who prioritise this kind of exploratory, improvising conversation with students are often accompanied by reflections on the cost to the supervisor’s own publication profile (Macquarie Human Geography Group, 2001). But not always – Phillida Salmon’s (1992) description of her approach to supervision is outstanding in this regard.

Some Reflections on this Viewing

Dialogue as it appears in the moment of improvisation is very much a matter of performing in the moment. It is a dynamic space of creative effort, of experimentation and play, of reciprocal (rather than complementary) responsiveness, of intimacy, fun, and enjoyment, of judgment and risk. It is by definition unscripted and unrepeatable so it cannot easily (if at all) be controlled via regulation or code. While this way of thinking about pedagogy generally has been argued before (Ellsworth, 1997; Felman, 1997; Todd, 2001), it may particularly apply to the informal (often unprepared for) one-to-one dialogues of supervision.

Whose responsibility is it to incite improvisation moments in supervision? It might seem to be the responsibility of both supervisor and student because of its reciprocity. But, here the relations of Master-Slave intersect with those of improvisation – the risks of improvisation are arguably greater for the student who, after all, probably feels s/he has more to lose by ‘losing it’ in the chaos of the moment (s/he will expose her/himself as not capable of being a thinker which is the very thing s/he cannot afford to do). The supervisor’s position gives her/him the advantage when it comes to setting the tone and allocating the time for supervision and, as well, s/he will probably have more experience with this kind of thinking aloud process. Benjamin (2004) suggests strongly that it is the responsibility of the more powerful of the pair – for her the analyst, for us the supervisor – to do the work to make the space at least to get the dynamic going. Once it is created, however, it must be taken up by the student and then sustained reciprocally, otherwise it will collapse back, from betweenness to twoness, into the dialectic.

Improvisation then, inside the asymmetry of supervision, is a delicate state. What factors might be implicated in making it more likely? The supervisor’s interest in and engagement with the student’s topic is one, as are the student’s. The student’s willingness to talk aloud
about her/his ideas is another. Connected to this is the quality of the relationship between supervisor and student that will have elements with both conscious and unconscious origins. The presence of trust or mutual liking, for instance, is likely to make a difference. Yet another factor is the supervisor’s ‘skills’ at setting improvisatory dialogue in motion (being able to ask fertile questions, being a good listener etc). Time is also a crucial factor – the time of improvisation is unpredictable, and too much pressure on time is likely to foreclose its possibilities. This is a complex field of factors – academic/professional and personal – which are not all under the control of any one person. For example, a supervisor may invite their student into the space of improvisation only to have the student refuse to take it up. Or a student may enter the space only to feel as if their ideas were badly expressed or poorly received and so promptly shut up (and stay shut).

There are limits to the improvisation metaphor for supervision dialogue. Unlike musical improvisation, the dialogue is not performed for others except in an indirect kind of way insofar as the dialogue may re-emerge in the student’s thesis for the examiners. In that sense the dialogue functions more like a rehearsal. As well, unlike musical improvisation where the members of the combo are theoretically participating as equals, supervision struggles with the burden of its participants’ unequal institutional positions which may often work against improvisation.

Improvisation Moments in Ordinary Supervision Dialogues

I turn now to explore the ways in which improvising moments surface in supervisor-student dialogues. I have taken the aspects of improvisation identified above – (1) betweenness and passage, (2) polyphony in a topicalised middle, (3) the obligations and pleasures in a poetics of participation, and (4) productive fragility – as analytic themes through which to read an extract from a supervision meeting. The moment of dialogical improvisation is not extraordinary in terms of my data but neither was it frequent. This could have been a function of the timing of data collection: most of the audio-taped meetings took place during the second half of the supervision trajectories, partly because of when I was able to collect data, and partly because I did not want to insert the research project into any supervision relation in its early stages. Probably because of the timing, the substance of most of the audio-taped meetings focused on feedback on draft chapters. Putting aside methodological limitations though, achieving such moments in supervision may be difficult because there is much about the institutional structure of supervision that inhibits it – for instance, the ever-present pulse of the Master-Slave relation demanding subordination and mimicry from the student as it does, or the way in which the research or thesis topic is likely to become overbearing because of both the

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81 Sally Knowles’ PhD-in-progress on feedback in supervision takes up performance as a metaphor for feedback in supervision.
supervisor’s and the student’s anxiety about resolving it, or simply the pressure of limited time which may exacerbate the didactic tendencies in supervision.

In undertaking the analysis that follows I am aware that, in spite of my earlier declaration that this moment is not being read as ‘better’ supervision than the last, I feel much less reluctant about making a spectacle of the exchange below than I continue to be about the extract selected for the Master-Slave interpretation. I am still struggling to understand the significance of this reluctance: my sense is that it is because I think the supervisor and student involved will probably like this interpretation, that it seems to cast them in a better light than the Master-Slave one does for its unlucky, and undeserving, protagonists. Here I am still caught up within a humanist framework that insists on attributing intention to all that we say and do. While I reject this framework theoretically, I understand that it is likely that my research subjects may make this kind of reading, even though I do not intend them to. A lingering effect of this ambivalence is my questioning now about the ethical limits of my methodology – what I can and cannot do with this richly textured data in which supervisor and student speak about themselves and each other to a third person, what indeed should be left unsaid about the intimacy of supervision.

To begin, some context for the extract that follows: the exchange occurred in a supervision meeting that took place in the supervisor’s office. The supervisor is an overseas-born Pakeha woman in her mid-to-late thirties, the student a locally-born Pakeha man in his early thirties. The student is in the second year of a two-year fulltime Masters programme. It is early August and the thesis is due to be submitted in November. The meeting lasted approximately an hour and a quarter (although only the first hour was tape-recorded). The supervisor’s goals for the meeting were to hear the student’s thoughts about the feedback she had given him on a draft chapter and the student’s were to hear how she thought he handled the argument put forward in that work and to figure out his next step (paraphrased post-meeting notes from supervisor and student). The exchange reproduced here took place midway through the meeting and lasted about six minutes. In its general style and tone, this ‘moment’ is representative of the overall dialogue throughout the meeting. As in the previous chapter, I have included the full transcript and, in the following analysis, I refer to fragments of the text either by re-quoting them or by reference to the turn in the exchange (eg S1 or St19 and so on). Again I bring further, related data from supervisor and student into my discussion – the notes that both wrote individually within 24 hours or so of the meeting, and transcriptions of interviews I held with them separately within a week or so of the meeting or

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82 Strictly speaking, in the terminology of the site university, this student will submit a “dissertation” which is usually, but not always, shorter than a thesis. He is undertaking a dissertation and two research essays, rather than the more usual one thesis, in his second year of Masters study. However, for the sake of consistency, I will use the term “thesis” throughout except in direct quotes.
at other times. I go on to read these texts in the light of the four themes described above that comprise the trope of dialogue as improvisation.

The meeting opens with the supervisor inviting the student to respond to the comments she has made on his draft. This leads into a fairly evenly sustained dialogue around the substance of the draft – both comment on and expand ideas with reference to other thinkers (showing that both have done background reading and thinking on the topic). The focus of the dialogue is very much on how the student can strengthen his argument in terms of both content and style. The style of the dialogue is a mixture of sustained contributions from each and fast, fragmented, reciprocal exchanges, much as we find in the extract that follows:

St1 And I never got it down on paper but this thought occurred, that to, what it, if you are going to go for [that] story/83, you have got to tell some sort of story about justifying [x] before even say, the fact that there are needy compatriots at all, but they are spending gazillions of dollars on [x] – why are you spending that if you've got social trust going

S1 Exactly

St2 in some form or other, you know./ So you have got to tell the story about why you are not spending it on [z] if you really are concerned about social trust/ and you are spending it on [x] and

S2 (***) That’s true, okay that’s, write that/ one down/ quickly before you forget it. Yes, so it actually looks like [that whole line of argument] is a bit hollow when you look at the actual, what spending is done at a national level. Um, so yeah, furiously writing down – that’s good.

[Both laugh – for the tape?]

[Pause] Um, but so, okay, so on this [other issue] which I am worried about myself and why I think there’s an obvious remedy to [that] objection is, well, switch to the institutional level and then you can see/ – and then also again you can appeal to some of the stuff in [P’s book]. If you look at the richest two percent of the world’s population, they could alleviate all world poverty or something. I mean the figures are staggering when you actually look at how few people, or what small percentage of the budget it would require

St3 Just of the budget of military spending in the West/ it is like one percent

S3 Exactly, that is in [P’s book]

St4 (***) It is so sick/ oh [both laughing]

S4 (***) So yes, a one percent reduction in military spending/ for industrialised countries – and developing countries it is more like ten percent – but I mean these are very small percentages. It is not huge, I mean this

83 The symbol / marks where the other person makes an agreement sound in the background (eg mhm, yeah, okay, right) and (*** ) marks overlaps in speech.
St5  (***) It is not like you are giving up your armed forces, you know, oh
S5  Exactly. So [that] objection doesn’t get a foothold if you switch to the institutional level.
St6  (***) To the institutional, yeah …[writing]
S6  So we have got that one sorted out. What else should we [starts laughing, student joins in]
St7  [Supervisor’s name], you and me for Prime Minister mate.
S7  [laughs] “Other potential resistances”, it says here, hmmm, what does that mean?
S8  [pause] What does what mean?
St8  I’m just looking through your – we’ve ticked off all the other objections. This “other potential resistances”
St9  Oh, oh, about the moral story, resisting the attachment and/ resisting or diminishing the moral force of the obligation/ that does attach to you.
S9  (***) Okay. [pause, reading?] I remember you were going to do something about [U, theorist] and I can’t remember what that was.
St10  Oh yeah.
St11  (***) Have you read that?
S10  (***) I read it a while ago and I kind of didn’t
S11  (***) You were quite taken with it at the time, that’s why I’m sure there was something there.
St12  Yeah, it was about um
St12  The [S, theorist] stuff.
St13  Yeah, getting, I suppose the whole drama was about ah – now let me think – it was about, we have these/ intuitions about – it was all about intuitions really and how you walk on by when you have the envelope, you know/, the “send $100 to Oxfam”/, but you don’t walk on by when you have the child drowning. And we tell the story about unique saviours and all this sort of stuff/ and as opposed to multiple potential saviours and, if none of us did it, well we are all a little bit to blame maybe, but none of us are really as bad as someone who would let the child drown and/ all this sort of story. And [U] said well that’s all a load of bollocks because of these reasons. What the problem is, as I understand it, is you – remember you said to me “there are a bunch of well known objections to S’s argument”, and I went
S13  (***) “Oh yeah, like what” [starts laughing]
S14  (***) Oh, like what, yeah, being well known doesn’t mean that I know them
[both laughing]
(***) Okay, distance, the geography makes all the difference, the intention makes all the difference.

“Tension”?

Intention. (St: Intention) You are not planning to, well, you’re the agent of last resort.

Yep.

Okay, it is the level of sacrifice/ that is involved – just put your hand out/ as opposed to any kind of financial obligation whatsoever. The agent, you are the only one who can help/, that’s a huge difference. The geography, that does make a difference. Also, the intention can make a difference, in that you don’t, in S’s, one version of the argument is, is there any difference between actually going over to Ethiopia and shooting these people/ versus just,

Mm, killing and letting die

Versus letting, just not thinking about it. And people often say well the intention is crucial, you are not aiming to kill anybody, you are not intending to kill anybody

(***) Mhm, sounds like a good point

(***) you are not intending,/ you are just not paying attention which is what most people do, they just don’t pay attention to it.

Yeah. U talks about, well one of the key differences he thinks is the salience of it, the obviousness to you of it, you know, where the kid’s screaming and gurgling/ and you are like, “gee I wonder what’s up”, you know. You’re not like that,/ you get the envelope, you just see an envelope, you don’t see

(***) The child screaming

(***) The flies and bloated kids, you know,/ fucking,/ so um

(***) It doesn’t have the same kind of urgency and doesn’t have the same kind of impact.

(***) Apparent urgency./ In fact the urgency is

(***) greater

A thousand-fold, We just don’t see that/ and

The power of the visual comes in here.

Yeah, yeah. And are they morally significant features. Well no,/ they are just how you, your perception of it rather than, you know, what is in fact the case/ in terms of urgency and need and desperate plight./ So he raises those kinds of issues and he, one of the objections that I sort of deduced from U talking about S,/ was that people object to a generalisation from a sort of general conclusion rather than a specific conclusion about, so like if you have this [S] argument and you will respond to anybody who is drowning in a pond without much cost to yourself rather than you will respond to people in need who you are able to [word?]./ The general claim – I can’t quite remember how it goes, but people will – you know – S wants to make the
specific case to the general claim, or U wants to make the specific case to the general claim, and people say well you can make the specific case to the specific conclusion,/you know, well you should save the kid, but that doesn’t mean you should go out and save everybody you can […]

S23 Okay

St24 At no great cost to yourself, or whatever, so yeah um

S24 Do you still, are you still wanting to use some of U’s material?

St25 Maybe,/ I’m not so sure of that./

The taped dialogue continues for another 20 minutes. The supervisor persists with the issue of U for a few more turns and then drops it although, towards the end of the meeting when they discuss what the student will do next, she returns to it by making writing about U one of two possible ways forward. The student elects to take the other way.

**Betweenness and Passage**

The betweenness and passage aspect of improvisation in dialogue refers to the way in which the dialogue can shift off-centre, away from the fixed identities of the ‘dictating supervisor’ and the ‘listening student’, into a middle, participatory space where both think beside each other and beside themselves. In the extract, there is a strong sense of the two – supervisor and student – thinking together in a reciprocal way around a topic that both are fully engaged by. Both contribute a similar level of input to the dialogue and make similar kinds of contributions – ranging from quite sustained episodes of thinking aloud (S2, St13, S16 & 17, St23), to asking each other questions for clarification (S7, St8, St15), to co-operating in fast, fragmented exchanges where they build on each other’s words in a process of agreeing with one another (S2-S6, St19-St23). At times we can see the binary identities of ‘supervisor’ and ‘student’ dissolving in the betweenness of the exchange. There are only a few moments when the supervisor speaks qua ‘Master’: in S2 when she closes the student off and gives him an instruction (“That’s true, okay that’s, write that one down quickly before you forget it.”) (dictating), S9 and S11 when she follows up on something he had said previously he was going to do (overseeing), S23 when she sounds as if she is closing him down to move onto something else (re-directing), and S24 when she comes right back to resolve the issue opened up earlier (in S9) by asking a direct question (overseeing again): “Do you still want to use some of U’s material?”. She often uses the word ‘you’, but it is almost always the inclusive ‘you’ that stands in for ‘anyone’ including herself eg “[that whole line of argument] is a bit hollow when you look at …” (S2). There is only one moment when the student speaks qua ‘Slave’: St14 when he uses humour to acknowledge his limited knowledge of the topic. If the transcription wasn’t marked up, it would often be difficult to tell who was who.
The jointly thinking ‘we’ of the co-constructers of knowledge shows up in S6 and S8 and also, later, towards the end of the meeting when the supervisor says “it might be good to see how far we have come and where we still need to go” (meeting transcript, p.27). Also, in the post-meeting interview, the supervisor says she sees supervision as being a time in which “we are talking about the work” suggesting that she sees the work as an interplay between her thinking and the student’s. In an earlier interview she had talked about the entanglement of her research with the student’s:

*I mean it is his research but it is an area that I am interested in, you know, I did a seminar on it last year and in a sense it is like me talking about my research. I mean, I am very aware of that distinction. It is his project and we are going where he wants to go with it. But it is certainly in the area that I am interested in. So it is nice to talk about my research.* (Initial interview)

After the thesis was handed in, I asked the student how much he thought the supervisor had influenced his work. He replied that she had in three senses: enormously, not very much, and somewhere in between (“ambiguously”). In his description of how she contributed, we can see the to-ing and fro-ing of thinking together, agreeing and disagreeing, that is apparent in the meeting extract:

*[T]he ambiguousness … I would write something and we would disagree about it or we would agree about it, we would find ourselves agreeing enormously about things you know. We’d say yeah, yeah, egging each other one. It would end up changing because of that discussion when we’d sort of lock horns and try and work it out and argue back and forth … Yes [she did] because, if I hadn’t had those arguments, it would have stayed the same, but no [she didn’t] in the sense that she didn’t like say “write this”. Because I didn’t want to write that you know. We’d have to find a way where I’d have to say what I want to say and get to where I want to get to, but taking these arguments on board or dealing with these objections or you know explaining why that’s important at all or whatever. So that’s the sort of yes and no answer where this work would be a result of, you know, what I wanted to say and why she thinks I shouldn’t have said that and then something else would pop out.* (Final interview)

This text suggests the complex interplay that can occur between the thinking of a supervisor and that of a student which results in the student’s work changing in unexpected ways. It is analogous to discussion between academic colleagues which then leads to revisions in an individual’s thinking.

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84 This ‘we’ is a good example of the undecidability of moments of dialogue because I talked about a similar ‘we’ in relation to Master and Slave. In my mind, what marks the improvising ‘we’ is its visibility in the way meaning is made collaboratively through the exchange, whereas the Master’s ‘we’ imposes on the Slave.
In Gurevitch, “passage” refers to time spent in dialogue and the passing of the topic through a semiotic chain “that belongs to neither one nor the other but is dialogically owned” (2001, p.98). In terms of the first reference, the kind of improvising dialogue we see in the exchange takes time and is subject to ‘interruptions’, for example of humour or asides, and uncertain outcomes. Yet time is usually under pressure in supervision meetings. There is often a lot that must be covered (including ensuring the student has a plan for what to do next), other commitments await, and the deadline for thesis completion is always on the horizon (and, indeed, never far away for Masters theses). After the meeting, the supervisor reflected on the lack of time for ‘improvisation’ (in her words, to “follow every thought”) in supervision:

I wish I had more time for [this student] and students like him. I feel I have to wrap things up, more things along more than should be the case, since you almost never have the time to just ‘dawdle’ and follow every thought that gets expressed. So I guess occasionally I feel guilty that I have not made enough time for him and the other students I am supervising. (Post-meeting notes)

She came back to this in the interview:

I am aware of the fact that I want to cover or have an agreement about what he is doing next and so I feel, kind of, it is okay to just let him do what he wants for the first half hour or more maybe, but after a while I think we need to reach some agreement about that. And again, in an ideal world we could just ramble and see where this thought leads us. But, and that is maybe where the guilt comes in, when I feel like “I have to start controlling things now”. It is not controlling. It is just, maybe it is. (Post-meeting interview)

The supervisor valued time spent in “dawdling” or “rambling” with ideas but felt she could never give enough time for this. As well, giving time to improvisation sat uneasily alongside the responsibility she felt to bring the student back to other aspects of the task. The topic of the completed thesis haunts the time of improvisation, requiring the supervisor to bring it to an end. Yet she feels regret and ambivalence about having to do so, in particular about “controlling” the student (or taking up the role of Master). The supervisor in the previous chapter also expressed ambivalence and regret about taking too much control. This is a central tension in supervision for supervisors at least, one that colours the interactions between supervisor and student. Resolution of this tension is only ever likely to be temporary, and often unsatisfying.

In terms of passage through a semiotic chain, one of the features of the exchanges above is how some of them function as fast chains of incomplete meaning where supervisor and student show their shared background by picking up each other’s unfinished sentences and completing them (S2-S6, St19-St23). In these chains, meaning emerges through the sequence
of exchange between the two. There is a sense here of language and meaning overtaking both
speakers and using them, dictating them even as they speak. There is also a sense of
converging points of view, although that may be as much about sociability as actual,
thoughtful agreement on the topic at hand. (I come back to the issue of agreement and
disagreement below.)

**Polyphony in a Topicalised Middle**

In the improvisation moment, there is always a “becoming topic” (Gurevitch, 2001, p.99) that,
exacting full attention from both participants, holds the boundaries of the dialogue open
around the middle. In this extract we see the topic is of acute interest to both. The tone of
the student’s comments in the meeting (see especially St4, St20, St21, St22) and, at other
times, shows a strong personal engagement with the topic:

> I feel like I have some knowledge of the territory and I’m making some of the connections between the
different things and how everything interacts with everything else. Beginning to, and I feel like there is
something I really want to say here. (Post-meeting interview)

> And the topic is important, like I really, totally believe this is the, or one of the, most important topics
you could possibly think about, at all, ever. (Initial interview)

As well, in the exchange, the supervisor declares the issue under discussion is something she is
“worried about” herself and for which she thinks “there’s an obvious remedy” (S2). Later she
writes:

> The opportunity to talk about current research that is the ‘cutting edge’ of [my discipline] (such as it is!)
is very gratifying. The problems he is working on intersect with many problems I am currently
researching too. (Post-meeting notes)

As we have already seen in the student’s description of the supervisor’s contribution to the
thesis, he recognises her interest and background in the topic as a strength of the supervision,
one that allowed her to contribute to his thinking in a range of ways.
The nature of the topic may well bear on the scope for improvisation in supervision dialogues. The student compares the topic of this particular thesis to another he is writing:

[For the other paper], I’ve done a lot of reading but I haven’t formulated my ideas enough to say this is how we can nut it out. I also feel that the story is a lot more settled in many ways in the details I have to learn. This story is a lot less settled and the details, you are making it up. You know what I mean? There is room to be creative here, where there isn’t there. (Post-meeting interview)

Elsewhere he acknowledges that the topic itself contributed to the supervision dynamics because, where he loved the topic, he sought out more supervision dialogue:

I know that on that third piece of work [where I had unsatisfactory supervision] I was in a neglecting state as well. I was sort of involved in the other two, I loved the topics. The third one, the topic wasn’t so exciting … (Final interview)

In the meeting exchange above we can also see the multi-layeredness – or “laminations” – of academic dialogue and the ways in which the topic does not belong exclusively to the speakers. Both supervisor and student refer to other thinkers/commentators on the topic by name (S3, S9, S12, St13, St19, St23); both engage in some explanation of, or interaction with, their ideas in their more sustained and student contributions to the dialogue. They make reference to “objections” (S2, S5, St13) and “lines” (S2) of argument that need to be attended to and, in that way, to the wider community of academic colleagues or potential readers. They also refer to the general public (S17 “people often say”) as contributors to the wider discussion. There is reference to the voice of the student’s draft text (S7, St7) and, at one point, the supervisor seeks to engage another ‘earlier’ self of the student when she asks him what came of his previously expressed interest in U’s viewpoint (S9, S10, S11 “you were quite taken with it at the time”). Moreover, she holds him to account for the intentions of this self (S24). During the exchange, the student’s voice shifts register from academic to colloquial (St7, St13 “it’s all a load of bollocks”), and the supervisor’s shifts from engaged and thinking aloud (improvising), as in most of her turns, to more cautious and measured (prompting) as in turns S9 and S11, to quite blunt (challenging) in S7 and S24. This is a rich, multi-layered exchange in which different personal, disciplinary and socio-cultural significances of the topic are brought to bear in the dialogue.

Within this exchange supervisor and student share their style: the supervisor models her way of dealing with the topic, for example in S2, where she explains how she would respond to a

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85 There is a hint of this in the previous chapter where the supervisor struggles to connect with the student’s topic. In an interview she described other, very different experiences of supervision where she did share a strong interest and excitement in the topic with the student/s.
particular objection from the literature. The student reflects back his version of this, for example in St13 where he repeats back to her a comment from a previous interaction “remember you said to me there are a bunch of well known objections to S’s argument”. He also brings in the style of others he has encountered in his reading (St19 “U talks about …” and St23). Again the style does not belong to them as individuals but is part of the disciplinary context in which they operate, where there are more and less valued and recognised ways of thinking and arguing. The student understands that he has this to learn from the supervisor:

I was interested in her response to how I handled M’s argument. (Post-meeting notes)

She is fully supportive of me doing this [arguing against her] but she wants me to do it in the right way and so she says “look, these are the troubles you are going to have if you want to say that”. And I go, “oh, okay”. (Post-meeting interview)

Likewise, the supervisor is interested to hear what he learns from her feedback:

I wanted to hear what he thought about some of the suggestions I had made about how to go forward on some of the areas he seemed to be getting stuck on, especially given the visiting speaker’s thoughts expressed at a recent masters class. (Post-meeting notes)

And in what she can learn from him:

[It] would be nice to have time, you know, [so that he] could just drop by and we could just have a chat about the article he had just read – I do learn a lot from him because he can read things that I don’t have time to read … (Initial interview)

In bringing the student back to account for his earlier interest in a particular writer, “you were quite taken with it at the time, that is why I am sure there was something there” (S11), the supervisor is modelling an aspect of academic style – persistence and discipline when examining possible material rather than flitting from one thing to another. She talks about this later:

“Who’s U?” “Okay, the guy you were raving about, remember?” So at the time [the student] seemed very enthusiastic and maybe, obviously, I will have a sense of this when I have worked with him longer, but maybe he gets entusiasms about things he is doing and then two months later he can’t really remember the names. Maybe. On the other hand, I didn’t want him to forget. Because at the time he was saying things like, this has really got these great answers to these problems he had been referring to
In the exchange over U, it seems to me as if the supervisor is both disciplining the student (in a Master-Slave kind of way) and also seeking to engage in thinking together about the ideas the student had raised earlier. So she has something to teach him at this moment but also she is looking to learn.

Another aspect of academic style that she wants to teach him (and that she reminds him about in the meeting, at S2) is the technique of testing your ideas in writing before you go public with them:

*I think the writing is crucial. You learn about your own ideas when you write, never mind testing them. And so you have to learn to write them down.* *(Post-meeting interview)*

In teaching her style, how she operates as a member of the disciplinary community, the supervisor is teaching the student what he needs to know, in terms of dispositions and techniques, if he wants to join that community. *(The student expresses interest in doing a PhD during this meeting.)*

**The Obligations and Pleasures in a Poetics of Participation**

In contrast to the complementary, yet stilted ritual of the Master-Slave dialogue in the last chapter, here the supervisor and student are more reciprocally engaged in and alive to the shared obligations to speak, listen and respond. I have already mentioned that both contribute to the dialogue at a similar level. While the supervisor seems to take the responsibility of speaking in the sense of opening new space to move the dialogue along (most changes in direction are initiated by her – see for instance S6, S7, S9, S24), the student is responsive. Sometimes he is playful (St7, St14) but mostly he joins in with and extends the thinking. The dialogue is knitted together by a rhythm of reciprocal listening and responding, by repetition followed by expansion: “Exactly, that is in P’s book” (S3), “Exactly. So [that] objection doesn’t get a foothold” (S5), “Apparent urgency. In fact the urgency is a thousand fold” (St21), “Yeah. And they are morally significant features. Well, no…” (St23).

The dialogue is also knitted together by the fast, collaborative exchanges. In these exchanges I think we can see the “attunement” described earlier, a space of co-operative endeavour which each “simultaneously create and surrender to” *(Benjamin, 1988, p.18)*. The to and fro rhythm of the dialogue temporarily intensifies in pace. The first example (S2-S6) culminates in the supervisor calling a halt by summarising the main point, “Exactly. So that objection …”
The second and more extended ‘crescendo’ (St19-St23) culminates in the student making a sustained contribution to the dialogue (St23) in which he to’s and fro’s between different views, now ‘dialoguing’ with different theorists (“I sort of deduced from U”, “S wants to make the specific case”) and the wider community (“people say…”). Again the supervisor calls a halt (“Okay”, S23). These moments have a kind of ‘going out of control’ flavour which may be why the supervisor brings them to a close each time. But also, they feel like spaces in which both are outside themselves as supervisor and student, where both can influence the dialogue and the thinking going on there.

The vigorous quality of the poetics of participation is described here by the student who associates it with fun and freedom:

[She] and I blast away at ideas. [One of my other supervisors] tightens ideas up and says well you have got to be aware of this consequence and … But, I must say, the most fun I have is with [this supervisor]. I really do enjoy it. … I like [her] a lot, and I feel free to, I mean I don’t feel free to talk nonsense in there, just crack jokes all the time and be a funny guy, but I do feel free to pursue my thoughts and to defend them with some vigour. (Post-meeting interview)

This student’s comment brings us to the eros, excitement and pleasure inhering in dialogical improvisation. Evidence of the play of pleasure lies in the friendly, playful tone of the exchange (playful sometimes on both parts as in St13-S13-St14, sometimes just the student’s as in St7), where laughter erupts from one or both on more than one occasion (this also happens at several other times during the meeting). Both comment on the pleasures of this particular meeting in their post-meeting notes:

[He] is so enthusiastic about the topic he is working on (and [the discipline] generally); it is a pleasure to deal with him (compared to [many] interactions with people in academia – bitter, cynical colleagues, students who often don’t have much passion about what they are doing etc.) … [He] is very grateful for time you spend with him and always thanks me at the end of the session. (How often do people thank you for ‘interacting with them’ in academia??) [He] is an extremely pleasant person. (Supervisor, post-meeting notes)

Yes, many [pleasures arose during the meeting]. We laughed about some things, just good humour. Also, I had some very positive feedback about the possibility of doing a doctorate (scholarships, conferences etc). Also, positive feedback about the work that I am doing. … [I felt] interest, laughter. I like [my supervisor], I think she is an expert in her field and I have an enormous respect for her. I feel welcome and grateful and enjoy the company of her person as well as discussions we have. (Student, post-meeting notes)
There are many pleasures mixed up here: their shared interest in the topic and their mutual enjoyment in pursuing thinking about it together. There is also their enjoyment in each other – so we have an inseparable intersection here between ‘intellectual’ pleasures and more ‘embodied’ pleasures. The student also talked about watching the supervisor think aloud in class:

I’ve sat in her classes and just gone ‘wow’, as she followed this thought in detail and taken my mind there and just blown me away. I love doing this stuff. (Post-meeting interview)

Watching her think aloud excites him and contributes to his “love” of “doing this stuff” that is, engaging in the discipline. We have already seen that he thinks the particular topic of his thesis is “one of the most important topics you could possibly think about, at all, ever” (initial interview) and, partly at least, he ‘comes to’ the topic through the supervisor’s teaching (in class and through the supervision). In turn, the supervisor finds the student’s response to the topic and his general demeanour to be “infectious” and these aspects of the supervision to be rewarding:

He is very positive and has a very nice attitude to life. Incredibly cheerful and grateful and … just so, “yay, life is good” … he has just got this great attitude and it is very infectious. So there is all this academic stuff about why it is rewarding but then there is his personality about why it was rewarding. He is a joy to be around … (Final interview)

Over the time of being supervised and writing the thesis, new pleasures opened up for the student, as if he is becoming a different kind of subject from the one who started the thesis:

It’s a wonderful thing to discover [that I work well in the mornings] because it is like you haven’t got anything else to think about. You haven’t got any social things to deal with. You’ve just got these ideas, these words to read and understand, and the first hour and a half or so in the morning would sometimes be my most productive time of the day in terms of getting it you know. … And I just did nothing else. And that was just this immersion in this world of writing. … Being an academic. It was great fun. I loved it. (Final interview)

Here, the student reports a moment of ‘self-discovery’: we can also understand this moment as one in which he is more thoroughly constituted as an academic subject, such that his desires are further shaped towards that end.
**Productive Fragility**

Improvising dialogues occur on the edge of chaos and incoherence and a collapse from betweenness back to the dialectic is always possible. In the exchange above there are three moments when the possibility of collapse looms. The first is when the supervisor asks the student to explain something in his text (S7-St9): her question “what does that mean?” is quite blunt and could have pushed the dialogue into dialectical closure. The second is when she picks up the lapsed line of the student’s thought in S9. Although she is less blunt here, she persistently pursues his response (S10, S11, S12, S24). In these two moments she holds the student to account for his thinking in a way that is slightly at odds with the more generally reciprocal tone of the meeting. In the third moment, the student interrupts the supervisor to ask her to repeat something she hears wrongly (St15). As it turns out, none of these moments does push the dialogue into closure; they are all ‘well judged’ (intentionally or not I cannot say) in terms of maintaining the reciprocal exchange. Overarching such moments, the overall fragmented nature of the dialogue holds the seeds of misunderstanding (and a lapse into confusion and anxiety):

> [I found reading the transcripts] very, very helpful. Helpful in a sense of, first of all, having a word account of what you said, just about. And being able to see how your sentences are mostly not completed and incoherent caused me to not be so lazy. I know dialogue is different and you interrupt each other but [more awareness] forces you to be as clear as possible. Because sometimes you look at a transcript and think that’s not very clear is it. And, I know body language is doing a lot of the work when you are face to face, but relying on that rather than using words is very lazy. (Supervisor, Final interview)

In certain conditions, for instance in cross-cultural supervision where body language is not a reliable guide, the fragmentation of dialogue may represent a more serious obstacle to understanding.

There are three other potentially breaking aspects in the background of this exchange: an element of disagreement, an element of disappointment, and an element of tension between giving time to improvisation and using time to ensure the student’s progress. I want to look at these one at a time.

Disagreement haunts the dialogue. The supervisor’s position on the topic is not one the student wants to take up at this point in his thinking. He has a different thesis in mind:

> We do have different ideas about things and see different avenues from which to deal with content issues in my work but, all in all, we manage to find our way to some sort of agreement about what to do, even
However, as we can see, what may stop the disagreement from causing closure in the dialogue is that the student understands disagreement as fruitful for his thinking. Not all students understand disagreement with a supervisor in this way—some are much more threatened by it for instance. This student’s stance may be explained by his attitude towards academic debate more generally. Here he describes how he tries to explain it to the students in his first-year tutorial:

[Y]ou’ve got to defend a position, almost to the death. Let it take the hits and, if it is still standing, let it rock on. … It is a real, complete head-spin. Yes for sure. I try to explain that in Stage 1 tutorials as, when you put an idea out there, imagine it floating above the class and you are talking about it. You are not saying “well you’re wrong” …so when I get stuck into my thinking and I’m away, I think all these things, and [my supervisor] starts blasting away at it. I’m like oh yeah, I need this, this is precisely what I need. (Post-meeting interview)

Not only does he understand disagreement as valuable, he seems to take pleasure in the process of disagreeing: “I’m like, oh yeah, I need this…”.

Disappointment is also a possibility: the student appears to have lost interest in U and, at the end of the exchange in spite of the supervisor’s persistence, he is still uncommitted about using this source in his thesis (St25). The supervisor is disappointed. This does not surface explicitly in the meeting, although it probably infuses (without being the whole reason for) her persistence in following the student up on the matter. She talks about it later:

I guess part of it was him saying so many positive things about U. It is a book that I hadn’t read and certainly would benefit—you know, he was working on something that I hadn’t read, that I would learn about. … I am a little bit disappointed that he is not going to [follow up U’s line of thinking] but that is his choice …Well, I’ll read the book myself. The long way. (Post-meeting interview)

Her disappointment is both ‘personal’ in that she was intrigued by the ideas the student had reported to her, but she hadn’t read the source so she was looking forward to more explanation from the student (by implication enjoying the ‘short way’ into some new ideas). It is also ‘professional’ in that, as we have seen, she wants the student to have a more rigorous style in his approach to following through on things that interest him. But in the end she makes sense of this as “his choice” and she lets the matter drop.
The third potentially ‘breaking’ aspect of this exchange is an element of tension, for the supervisor at least, between giving time to dialogical improvisation and keeping some free for making plans. Her desire is to engage in the former (in her words, the “content”) – this is one way she measures herself as a supervisor. But there is also the desire to move the student along towards a resolved thesis:

I was thinking about afterwards, about writing the [notes], what was on the tape, thinking “gosh there is not that much content”. I was aware of how much process there was going on – like who will do what or strategies, but I wasn’t aware of as much [topic] content going on, like really hashing out. Maybe because we have already had a lot of discussions before this meeting so he kind of knows where I stand on the various issues and we have had other conversations. (Post-meeting interview)

It seems the supervisor feels quite uneasy about the ‘lack’ of thinking together that took place in the meeting, even as she understands there are other kinds of work to be done. This tension plays out in her mixed responses in the dialogue: we see a blend of comments that push the dialogue along in quite a purposive way and those that engage in the topic conversation, occasionally (as in S2) in the same response. Moreover, as we have already seen, she is uneasy about taking steps to direct the meeting dialogue away from the ‘freedom’ of thinking together into making plans for what to do next – at such times she feels inappropriately “controlling”.

This tension does not seem to be problematic to the student. Indeed he acknowledged that his supervisor engaged both in the thinking together and keeping him to the task:

[She’s] encouraging, she’s involved. She participates is the key to it I suppose. More than anything else is the participation. She was, there was a constant involvement with my thinking and you know the pieces of work I’d read and she’d read and we’d talk about. Regular meetings and regular deadlines and working over bits of my work where you know we already had something up and running and were trying to link it up or sort it out or, you know, we’d spend half a session debating a sentence and it just had so many ramifications that we had to – and in the end I just deleted the thing. (Final interview)

It seems to be the supervisor’s overall participation in both dimensions of the process that he valued. This suggests that as well as desiring to engage with the supervisor as a thinker and an equal (“there was a constant involvement in my thinking”), the student also wants to engage with her as the Slave to her Master (“regular meetings and regular deadlines”) – to be told what to do in order to get the thesis done.

Understanding the risks in the moment of dialogical improvisation is important because they point towards the risks of mature (rather than student-like) academic work. Such work is a
creative process of trial and error, of unpredictable remembering and forgetting, of unreasonable inspiration and aridity, of clarity and confusion, or articulateness and fumbling speech, of arguments that come to fruition and those that just do not, and (more summatively) of showing oneself to be a good thinker (via speech or writing) or a dull one. The last risk is one that haunts graduate students in their supervision exchanges (meetings and presenting writing for feedback) – the fear of being seen as not up to it. While this fear may seem ‘natural’ given students’ liminal state, it continues to animate academics and their writing (Brett, 1991; Grant & Knowles, 2000), for better or worse, long after they have joined the academy.

A risky moment occurs in the dialogue when the student tries to answer the supervisor’s question (S10) about U. He seems to have forgotten about his earlier interest in U and is vague about the ideas (St11). At this moment he risks being caught out with nothing to say. Instead, with the help of her prompts (S11, S12) and elaborations (S14, S15, S16, S17), he gradually remembers his earlier reading and thinking (St13, St19, St23). The risk of losing face (being seen as a dull thinker) is mitigated for the student by the way the supervisor steps him through the process of recall. Another example of the riskiness of academic work emerges in the supervisor’s post-meeting notes where she comments on how, immediately before the exchange above, the student lost his train of thought. She ponders how she may have contributed to it:

*Occasionally, he forgets what he was going to say next – not sure why he does this. Do I put him off somehow? Do I interrupt? Hmmm.* (Post-meeting notes)

In contrast, the student describes his memory of the event which seemed to be about temporarily falling into the chaos and incoherence of creative thought:

*I can recall that there was some thought that was going – just ringing this little bell and I would just about grab it but it would be gone again because there is other stuff going on – because things kind of slowly merge and link up and then fall away again, and when they are linking up there is the bell going but then they sort of start breaking up again.* (Post-meeting interview)

Such a fall is another ever-present risk of academic work – we become overwhelmed by ideas and connections and lose our sights on the line of argument.
Teaching the student ways to deal with the risks of creative academic work may underpin the supervisor’s insistence (as we have already seen) that he commit his ideas to writing as a way of testing them out. Regular writing from the student is the core of her supervision practice: 

*I have said my rule will be that … I expect something from you once a month and if I haven’t [got it] I will write you a note and say, where is it, and pester you. So they know that I will pester them if I haven’t got anything. And I have said it can be short, it can be “I looked at [such and such], one was vaguely interesting and the rest weren’t and here is what was interesting”. It can be that. It can be, “here is 20 pages of what I think is going to go in my thesis”. It is giving them a lot of scope [but] I want to see regular things.* (Initial interview)

Initially at least, the supervisor finds the student resists the injunction to write:

*Earlier on in the year I saw him in the corridor and he said, “oh I’ve got this great idea about how all theories of [topic] must be required to meet [such and such]”, and I said “write it down”, and I never saw that.* (Supervisor, Post-meeting interview)

In contrast, and not uncommonly for capable university students who learn to produce just the right amount of words required for assessment tasks, he seemed to understand the testing out of ideas as largely a function of conversation rather than writing:

*I think [thinking in this discipline] happens over a coffee table with good strong coffee, packets of cigarettes, four or five spare hours.* (Student, Post-meeting interview)

Later, and again this is common among graduate research students, he describes finding the writing frightening, although he acknowledges the benefits of the supervisor requiring him to do it:

*[She would say] “I want 5,000 words on my desk in three weeks on this topic or whatever you are writing on and then we will go through it”. So, “yeah okay”. … And you get into it, you know it’s terrifying but it’s good, you’ve got the work done.* (Final interview)

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86 Getting students to write is often difficult in supervision even when the supervisor is convinced of its benefits. Finding ways of making writing productively “integral” (Kamler & Thomson, 2004, p.207) to the research process (rather than either superfluous or threatening) is one area of supervision practice that is ripe for further research and discussion. The supervisor in this chapter had previously attended one of my supervision workshops and been taken with the idea of ‘low stakes writing’. She had subsequently applied the practice with some success for a blocked thesis student.
By the time of this meeting the student has begun to write and is producing draft chapters in such a timely way that the supervisor is hopeful that he will complete on time. In the event, this is not the case. The student requests an extension which means that he has still not completed his thesis by the time the supervisor goes on study leave. The extension is a cause of considerable frustration to the supervisor for several reasons: for one she is going on study leave and the thought of her research time being impinged on provokes a sense of chaos for her:

[B]ecause there is so much of a sense of chaos in this, I need to be able to have some sense of what the goals are. I mean half the time you are creating them for yourself and so being able to set your own agenda for your own research, set your time for your research projects, is linked strongly with when your next student is going to be finished and when you are going to be sitting marking their work and when you are going to be able to get on with yours and when you can promise to have things in. (Final interview)

For another, she wants to be able to give the external examiner a timeframe for marking the thesis. And then there is her role as departmental Graduate Co-ordinator in which she has been exhorting other supervisors to ensure their students finish on time. Lastly, and perhaps most frustratingly, there is the fact that the student could easily finish on time:

This part has been, as far as I am concerned, ready and he could make the changes here and hand it in. And add the bits that are – you know conclusion and stuff like that, but I would say with another ten hours of work this is ready to hand in. Whereas today he is saying he has got 20 more hours of work on it which is fine, okay maybe 20 hours, but it is the sort of thing where you sit down for four or five days and you do it. I don’t understand why it is dragging on. It is out of proportion. Everybody else has handed it in and I would say he was much better prepared to hand it in on time. In July it was looking on time, I don’t understand why it is suddenly taking so much longer. (Post-meeting 2 interview)

Later the student talks about the dynamics of why he took so long to finish the thesis:

So yeah, [this thesis] was the easiest in the sense that – actually it was ridiculous, I could have finished it three months before I actually did finish it because I looked at it and I thought there’s one thing to do and I thought it would take me a month to do it – it took me two days at eight hours a day and the

87 Historical note: At the time of the research project the deadline for completion of Masters theses had recently been tightened considerably by the Faculty in which this department was located. The main disruptive effect was that extensions across the summer were now harder to get rather than (more or less) de rigueur as previously. Students (especially those who had been tutoring in their departments) and sometimes staff resisted this, and in many departments it was the (difficult) job of Graduate Co-ordinators to get compliance.
whole thing was finished. Ridiculous eh. Just didn’t do it. … In fact I was furious with myself— it only took me bloody two days. And I had been sort of fretting about it you know. Dumb eh. (Student, final interview)

The student’s response here suggests something of the opaque irrationality of academic work, the way in which its production often does not go neatly to plan. The supervisor understands the intellectual and emotional messiness of the process— “if he stops doing this, then he has to think about what he is doing next … [and also] you’ve put so much effort into it, so it is like your baby and you want it to be as good as possible” (Post-meeting 2 interview) – even as she responds with frustration to the student’s request for an extension. This is an example however of how that messiness – intrinsic to the risks of academic work – can have real and difficult effects for those implicated.

Finally, as I have suggested earlier, academic work is always risky in terms of reputation. Those risks are not over once an individual is no longer a student. Presenting work-in-progress at conferences and sending articles out for peer review are often times of anxiety for academics. The supervisor acknowledges this when she describes how she always tests her ideas in writing before putting them out for others to read:

I don’t usually enthuse about [a new idea] until I have written it down maybe. Sometimes you have an idea of course, and then you come to write it down and [then I] really talk myself out of it. So I am my own worst critic. I certainly put a critical lens on something I am enthusiastic about before I show it to anybody else. (Post-meeting interview)

The student too cares about his reputation – he takes pleasure in knowing he was the top student in the supervisor’s class in the previous year and he knows that if he wants to pursue a PhD he must perform well in his thesis. He relishes the idea of being “clever”:

I care about doing a good job on [the thesis] and I care about being a clever bastard about it and I care about [my supervisor] thinking that I am a clever bastard about these things and … that I am informed and that I know what I am talking about (Post-meeting interview)

In the opening of this chapter I alerted the reader to the tensions and anxieties that shadow the improvising moment, suggesting that one is the way in which its intimacy might muddy the boundaries between supervisor and student. In coming to the end of my discussion, I want to return to this issue. The supervisor in this ‘case’ spoke often of her commitment to supervision as thinking aloud together, as a process of engaging in disciplinary conversations with her student/s. At the same time she also talked often about the issue of negotiating the
boundary between the academic and the personal. On the one hand she reported some quite clear boundaries operating inside her supervision practice:

I want to make sure that we have got a time, we meet in a formal space where it is clear that what is on the agenda is not eating dinner or getting lost in other things but talking about the work. (Post-meeting interview)

In her attention to boundaries she focused on making the most of supervision as a pedagogical interchange and containing the ‘personal’ dimension. From her own experience as a graduate student she learned that blurry boundaries can be unhelpful in creating an impression of more time being spent in supervision than actually takes place. But on the other hand, this very boundary between the academic and the personal that she carefully guards caused her anxiety:

I know [about some recent events in the student’s personal life]. I forgot to ask him how he was doing, or indeed anything personal about his life. (I do tend to focus on the work and not ask students questions about their personal life.) I guess it is because I am so aware of having limited time available to talk about their work, so that is all I do tend to talk about. (Another thing to feel guilty about — uncaring bitch supervisor has no time to “just chat”!) (Post-meeting notes)

There is a sense here that, in not being more personally interested or connected to the student, she is somehow failing. For her, the “ideal thing” would be to have time to have both the intellectual “hammering out the thesis stuff” and “some kind of cordial” moments (post-meeting interview), although she is vague about what those moments would look like.

Elsewhere she comments on her dissatisfaction with being part of a large impersonal system that is just “processing” students and in which there is not enough time to attend to the intellectual development of individual students – as a graduate student in a different system she had quite a different experience of teaching small classes and enjoying a lot of personal interaction with students. The time for improvisation as the process of thinking together is squeezed by the conditions in which she finds herself teaching and supervising:

I probably expected when I went in to this profession that it would be much more about, you know, helping young minds or any minds to think more carefully and reflectively about the lives they lead … you know, thinking more carefully and to have time to process and to think and reflect and that sort of thing. So maybe I have this unrealistic model of what I was going to be doing. (Post-meeting interview)
**Concluding Thoughts**

Dialogue-as-improvisation directs our attention towards a vibrant moment in supervision, one in which reciprocity between participants is a critical feature. This moment is fruitfully linked to the kinds of activities that form the creative heart of academic life — thinking aloud, exploring ideas, bouncing them off another (as well as the self), following a train of thought, being infected by another’s enthusiasms, experiencing the sociality of thinking together. Being off-centre and hovering on the edge of chaos and incoherence, however, means the conversation-as-improvisation moment is intrinsically unstable, prone to regrouping from reciprocal plurality into forms of polarised complementarity, of which Master-Slave is a likely version. So, while we might desire to reconfigure the dialogues of supervision “as a co-created transitional place” (Sofoulis, 1997, p.10), it seems unlikely that they could have this character in an ongoing and unbroken way. The improvisation moment co-exists with Master and Slave — as we saw in the meeting exchange analysed here — in a mutually limiting way. As the improvisation moment falls towards chaos and incoherence, the Master-Slave stabilises it, pulls it back to structure (the discipline required to get the thesis done). As the Master-Slave threatens the process with the deadness of mimicry, the moment of improvisation pulls it back into creativity and surprise.

Even if it was possible to install improvisation moments as the dominant mode of interaction in supervision, the accompanying feelings of excitement, creativity and enjoyment do not guarantee anything about its pedagogical ‘effectiveness’. This seems an important point to make in an era where teachers/supervisors are routinely judged by surveys of student satisfaction. Indeed, the pleasures of pedagogy in this moment may well produce blindspots:

> What do I feel as a teacher, but some gratified feeling that a successful practice of pedagogy has occurred where students are animated — engaged, interested, alive with some pleasure and investment in the text and their work? Yet where I feel this, what am I really feeling if not some gratified sense that the student has become myself — incorporated my own investment in the teaching body? (Deutscher, 1994, p.36)

If they produce blindspots for supervisors, they will do so for students. One of us feeling as if I/we have just had an exciting intellectual exchange is not the same as both of us feeling it. Or, treacherously, one participant (most likely the student perhaps) may reconsider later and think that her/his ideas were being swamped or negated by the strength of the other’s engagement with them. But even if we both felt excited and alive as a result of the exchange, the connection between these moments and a deeper understanding of the thesis topic, or progress towards the thesis goals, is not guaranteed. There is an intrinsically ‘wasteful’ (in the dominant logic of accounting (Readings, 1996)), quality to such moments, even though...
academic work thrives on them. Against this, though, it is worth considering that such pleasures may have the value of supporting both student and supervisor to hold to the difficult tasks of supervising and being supervised and of thinking through to the thesis.

It is also worth considering the institution’s role with respect to supervision and the time of improvisation. It may well be that the institutional framing of supervision gives it its problematic Master and Slave character – in more Foucauldian terms, the institution establishes a system of differentiations which permit one to act on the actions of others (Foucault, 1986, p.429). If this is so, then it may be this very differentiation that gives both supervisor and student a speaking voice in the dynamic power relations of creative academic work (improvisation) – Gurevitch suggests as much (2001). In a sense, then, in the slippery and chaotic intimacy of supervision, the institution and its fantasies (as discussed in Chapter 4) figure as the stabilising third term: the institution determines the value of the dialogue and its participants (Gurevitch, 2001). By ‘rudely’ inserting itself into the intimacy of supervision, the institution reminds us that supervision does not exist primarily for the benefit of the persons of the supervisor or the student, nor has it ever been an inherently democratic relationship (Phillips, 1979, p.343). For the institution, supervision’s purpose is primarily the reproduction and production of disciplinarity, through critical and creative engagement with particular bodies of knowledges and the often painful constitution of researcher/scholar bodies (even though nowadays many such bodies are likely to be seeking employment outside the academy). Finally, we should not underestimate the historical fragility of the way the institution continues to make supervision possible in spite of the difficulties of accounting for it (in the modern, cash-strapped, massified higher education system, supervision is in some sense wasteful) and monitoring it (because it mostly happens in private).

To date, perhaps in recognition of the unpredictability of the work of thinking, the institution has left the space of supervision relatively open via ‘under-regulation’ and a view that supervision is a private matter. (This explicit idea was expressed to me recently by the head of a teaching development centre in a leading Canadian research university. When I asked him about what professional development for supervision was being offered by his centre, he said that supervision is considered – by him and his colleagues – to be a private matter and so the centre did not offer anything.) Again in Foucauldian terms, we can understand this as a low degree of rationalisation (1986), one which may be associated with more degrees of freedom in the sense of a broader field of possibilities and less certain results. But this effect of supervision (manifesting itself in long completion times and overall poor completion rates, particularly for doctoral students) has been roundly criticised in the international literature and by governments. The hands-off approach towards supervision practices of the past is changing in Aotearoa New Zealand as it has already in other countries. With an ongoing withdrawal of the public funding of higher education, and a transformation of the purposes of
higher education, new forces of accountability and training are at work and supervision is one of their targets.
Chapter 9
Returning to the ‘And’:
The Impossibility of Closure, the Obligation to Think

My first thesis topic … received the approval of Jean Hyppolite who was to direct this thesis, which he did, which he did without doing so, that is as he knew how to do so, as in my opinion he was one of the very few to know how to do so, in a free and liberal spirit, always open, always attentive to what was not, or not yet, intelligible, always careful to exert no pressure, if not no influence, by generously letting me go wherever my path led me. (Derrida, 1983, p.36)

This thesis offers several different figurations of supervision. Each tries to capture something of the ambiguity and uncertainty that Jacques Derrida points to above in describing his experience of being supervised. None of these figurations, nor all of them read together, can be taken to settle questions about what supervision is and how we should do it. Instead, each metaphor explores the relations between supervisor and student in a different way; more pertinently, each obscures some aspects of those relations while making others conspicuous. But every one is intended to provoke thinking and talking about supervision and, in particular,

88 The time of Derrida’s thesis was 25 years (1957-1980), during which he changed topics at least twice and Hyppolite died (1968). It was undoubtedly a different time but his description of supervision continues to have resonance.
about how supervisors and students might act in relation to one another and the thesis. In this closing chapter, I indicate the significance of my work, raising some final matters of interest along the way.

**Returning to the ‘And’: Institutionally Mediated and More**

[H]ow difficult it is to determine what in fact is driving a pedagogical relationship, what in fact is being given or gotten, sought or offered, accomplished or avoided, in its playings-out. (Kameen, 1995, p.449)

Enquiring into supervision, I have come to understand that the ‘and’ signalling the relatedness of supervisor and student is indeterminate. It is susceptible to many readings – for supervisors and students, as well as for researchers. One reading I have offered here is that diverse discourses constitute supervision as their object, and in so doing figure supervisor and student as particular sorts of ‘proper’ subjects. These orders of social meaning set the boundaries of supervision’s intelligibility and thus the terms of the ‘and’. However, with a proliferation of discourses, those boundaries have become quite elastic, even ambiguous, and so the terms of the ‘and’ are now contested.

In another reading, I have argued that within the intimacy of supervision the relations between supervisor and student are both triangular and layered. The triangularity of supervision is problematic for both. Paraphrasing René Girard:

The straight line of desire [between supervisor and student] is present … [but] the mediator [thesis] is there, above that line, radiating towards [them] both … The effects of triangular desire are … [that] from the moment the mediator's influence is felt, the sense of reality is lost and judgment paralyzed. (Girard, 1998, p.225-226)

The thesis exerts an effect over the relations between supervisor and student, mediating between them, even as it has its own relation with each. In some ways the thesis is more fundamental to supervision than either of the people involved because it is the raison d'etre for the supervisor and student relation and, through the thesis, supervisor and student are accountable to others (examiners, colleagues in the discipline). This makes the relations of supervision complex and unstable: just who is relating to whom or what at any given moment? This confusion is expressed in the question commonly asked over what is being supervised, student or research. In particular, in this reading, I have suggested that the relations between supervisor and *thesis* are a source of considerable tension that in turn plays out in the relation between supervisor and student. This matter has not been much discussed in the literature – nor is it in practice.
Just as the triangularity of supervision produces complexities and tensions, so too does its laminatedness: institutional, disciplinary, and personal agendas make their presence felt through the unpredictable interplays of the academic and the personal, the rational and the emotional, the conscious and the unconscious. The texts I have gathered from supervisions in process show the ongoing negotiations between the regulated predictability of structure (cultural norms) and the unruliness of the ‘radical particularity’ of individuals. Supervisor and student are simultaneously supervision’s creatures and its actors. In this precarious position, they make plans or not, they bring intentions to supervision that may be realised or not, they find themselves acting in ways they themselves do not understand or like. It seems that the only things they can be sure of are that supervision-as-pedagogy’s effects will always exceed their intentions and that their obligations to each other can never be fully calculated in advance.

For all of supervision’s bubbling complexity, the likelihood of relatively stable and complementary relations structuring the ethical space between supervisor and student remains. Figured here via Hegel’s trope of Master and Slave, these relations are likely because of the presence of several forces. One of those is the impossibility of overestimating the long tradition and “the disciplinary power of the figuration of teaching as subordination” (Aoki, 2002, p.37). This context points to the inadequacy of simply renaming supervision as teaching (Deem & Brehony, 2002) as a remedy to supervision’s ills – doing so does allow us to consider the relations between supervisor and student in the light of what we know about good teaching but it will not address some of the tensions that are so much more difficult for teacher and student to negotiate in the intimacy and high-stakes milieu of supervision. Another force that supports the architecture of Master and Slave is the hierarchical structure of higher education institutions. This structure may become even more fine-grained as an effect of the Performance Based Research Fund which offers the possibility of an intensification of the hierarchies within the community of staff as well as within the student body (as some will be ‘recognised’ as more desirable candidates for supervision under its new stringencies). Added to this are the decisions of funding bodies that prefer to figure supervision ‘simply’ as training. Sandra Acker and her colleagues (1994) note some Master-Slave tendencies (without naming them as such) in their study of supervisors and students in UK universities where the supervision-as-training culture is well established within funding body rhetoric: “Students had in common the tendency to come to terms with whatever the situation offered” (1994, p.496), supervisors “found themselves becoming increasingly directive as they struggled to get students to complete their work more quickly according to the norms set by the ESRC89” (ibid).

89 The UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) provides the bulk of funds for graduate students in the social sciences.
Having said that, the Master-Slave relation is not figured here as unethical or illegitimate, nor as something to be cast out wherever we may find it. One of the significant contributions this thesis makes is that it shows how the institutionally mediated asymmetry between supervisor and student is productive even as it is problematic. For while it creates tensions, it also provides a stable structure that makes other things possible. As I have said earlier, following Hegel, relations of domination and subordination may well be necessarily and productively implicated in the process of coming to know. Such relations also have their attendant pleasures: those pleasures, alongside the fears, may make them a crucial technology for getting the work – the supervisor’s and the student’s – done. But at the same time, if this is the only form of relating, the Master-Slave mode poses contradictions for supervision’s goals of producing/becoming an authorised academic subject who is capable of independent, creative work. And it poses problems for academic subjects – again either supervisor or student – who, finding the terms distasteful, resist or repress them, as many modern subjects do. Resisted or repressed, their effects are likely to bubble up at unexpected and unsettling moments. Yet, despite the dominance of the Master-Slave figures and because of all the messiness described above, within the play of lived relations between student and supervisor there is always a delicate moment of imbalance when the relations may fall into different modes (Gurevitch, 2001).

Paul Kameen (1995) suggests that there are “two primary discursive relationships available to teacher and student when they interact: one speaks, the other listens, resulting in a series of ‘long speeches’; or one asks, the other responds, initiating a discussion” (1995, p.457). The first mode corresponds with the patterns of interaction between Master and Slave, but the second offers something different. For something else is required if supervision is to achieve the goals I describe above. Thus, in yet a further figuration of supervision, I have shown how alongside the rigidities of Master and Slave, there can and do exist other more chaotic, creative and improvising, even equal relations:

A pedagogy premised on the fixity of authorized bodies of knowledge will differ in much more than technique from one premised on the communal activity of coming to know … [in which] both parties are equally engaged, equally at risk, equally authorized. (Kameen, 1995, p.458)

Kameen’s point returns us to Lusted’s argument (see Chapter 1) that inside pedagogy a kind of equality may occur between supervisor and student in the moment of interacting over the knowledge (“coming to know”) because, at that moment, neither ‘owns’ the knowledge that is being made there. Talking of the Oxford tutorial, the historical forebear of supervision, David Palfreyman remarks:
Here I think we touch the nerve of power of the tutorial as a tool for learning. Each side is free to refuse what is offered by the other. This may (and does) mean [a] waste of time and effort, boredom and sense of frustration, on both sides. (Palfreyman, 2001, p.5, citing Moore)

The equality of reciprocity found in the moment of sharing the process of coming to know must almost always be a transient mode of relating in supervision because its purpose is to open up meaning – in contrast, the production of the thesis inevitably needs a long stage of closing meaning down so that it can be expressed clearly and argued for. The ‘freedom’ found there is only ever momentary because there are others (in particular the examiners) to account to. But such ‘equal’ relations do seem to point more directly towards the possibility of producing the creative academic subject, even while they may also point away from the disciplined, linear mode required to ‘get the work done’.

Diana Leonard (2000) says that professional research knowledge includes political, social and aesthetic elements not usually formally taught and including:

- a feel, a knack, a gift for working in the laboratory or field or for finding sources, which comes from ‘doing’ and experience, and a powerful disciplinary habitus concerning aesthetic criteria – that which constitutes ‘elegance’ and ‘excellence’ in a piece of work … it is these distinctions and discriminations – the artistry of problem framing, of implementation, of improvisation, and of writing an argument – which furnish the framework for knowledge production. And these are learned by coaching; they are ‘caught’ rather than taught. … Neophytes [research students] need neither to reinvent the wheel nor to be given didactic teaching, but rather to have a practicum in a virtual world, with supervisors who can demonstrate, advise, observe performance, detect errors of application, and point out correct responses (2000, p.187).

It seems to me that the relations of improvisation are a more fertile ground for this kind of pedagogy than those of Master and Slave. In the moment of thinking aloud together, in abandoning or forgetting the relations of domination and subordination, the student is invited into the place of authorised academic subject, as is the supervisor. The burden of ‘supervising’ and ‘being supervised’ is temporarily laid down in the face of some other demand – for Bill Readings (1996), that demand is the obligation, shared by both, to think.

The effects of Master-Slave and/or improvisation relations may well be different for both supervisor and student – but you need both in order to be an academic subject, as my own recent experience has reminded me. There are the moments of creativity and coming to know things in a new and unexpected way, moments which are both exciting and fearsome. But
there are many more moments of slavish slogging as those insights and understandings are translated into a piece of acceptable and disciplined (in both senses of the word) academic work. Being able to stay with the process undertaken is one of the difficult learnings offered by research supervision: it is hard to see how this learning – which is embodied as well as intellectual – will not always involve struggle and strife as well as joy and excitement.

Much current discourse around supervision wants to posit supervision as mentoring or as sponsorship or as co-production, that is as something more mutual and collegial than what I have described here. While I understand the democratic, or ‘client-centred’, rationale for such an impulse, ultimately I find it to be flawed. It overlooks difficult elements in the day-to-day interactions between supervisor and student as, from irremediably different positions, they cajole, incite, confront, appease (etc) each other to perform more and better the roles they believe are appropriate, as they try to cover for their fears and insecurities, as they negotiate the flux of excitement and disappointment, as they try to show their best selves, and as they try to bring forth from the muddle of the student’s (often first piece of) research an independent yet disciplined thesis that satisfies them both as well as the looming examiners.

The Limits of the Sayable: An Uneasy Encounter

A contribution this thesis makes to the supervision literature is its fine-grained study of interactions between supervisors and students, its opening up of the ‘private lives’ of some supervisions. This contribution, however, has its own complexities. Over the time of researching and writing this thesis, I have noted commentators (see for example Dysthe, 2002, p.535) remarking on the need for research that enters the dynamics of supervision to “establish … ‘a sense of the daily struggle and muddle of education’ and to avoid a too-neat analysis of power” (Lee, 1994, p.27, citing Donald). But where before I saw only an invitation, now in retrospect I see a caution. In a recent keynote address, Bill Green (2004) asked what it means to do empirical research in areas such as supervision that cross boundaries between the public and the private (the academic and the personal): “what are the limits of the sayable? And is it possible or desirable to seek to go beyond, into the realms of the unspoken and the unsayable?” (2004, p.12). I feel as if, in writing this thesis, I have pushed the limits of the sayable, maybe even veering close to the unsayable (in the sense of what shouldn’t be said). This is particularly the case in the chapters where I put supervisor and student texts alongside each other – to do this, I could not protect the anonymity of supervisor to student or vice versa.90

90 This research was approved by my institution’s human subjects ethics committee and all subjects consented to participate. The three supervisors and two of the students whose material is used in Chapters 3, 7 and 8 approved the inclusion of their data in this thesis. (I was unable to contact the student whose data features in Chapter 3.)
While it does seem valuable to reveal something of the riven and chaotic character of supervision from the thick of lived experience, it is difficult to do this without implicating (‘dobbing in’) real people – and I remain ambivalent about this. Moreover, coming out of the closet (as supervision does here in some ways) isn’t always a good idea, because what is made public can be judged and can also become an object of increased surveillance and control. I am leery about doing this both in terms of how the individual supervisors and students involved might experience it, but also more broadly in terms of contributing towards the proliferation of institutional practices targeting supervision and seeking to control it (as I remarked in Chapter 1). Here I am again in agreement with Green who goes on to say: “I can’t help wondering how much value there really is in seeking to rationalise supervision, at least beyond a certain point, and about the risks of rationalisation more generally” (2004, p.13). I don’t want this thesis to contribute to rationalising supervision but I know, uncomfortably, that it could be used in this way.

**Worthy of Conversation: Supervising/Being Supervised in Uncertainty**

In the abstract sense, we should be pretty suspicious of anyone who tells us what teaching should be. Judith Butler says “that there can be no final or complete inclusivity is thus a function of the complexity and historicity of a social field that can never be summarized by any description, and that, for democratic reasons, ought never be”. Any thoughtful teacher, I hope, will recognize that teaching is just such a tremendously fraught social field … (Aoki, 2002, pp.36-37)

[Edifying conversations, rather than truth-generating epistemological efforts, must be the staple of a post-structural social science. (Ball, 1995, p.268, citing Rorty)]

This thesis in no way resolves the question implicit in the ‘and’ between supervisor and student, the question of what the ‘unstated ethics’ (jagodzinski, 2002, p.81) between supervisor and student should be. What I have described here is an order of pedagogy that is messy and tension-ridden, fundamentally personal as much as it is academic. Moreover, it is significantly different to undergraduate or graduate course teaching in that it is not fully “secondary” in the sense of re-using “knowledge that research has already generated” (Aoki, 2002, p. 32) because neither supervisor nor student knows beforehand what the answer to the thesis question will be. Such an unpredictable pedagogy is not especially amenable to rules and regulations, nor to training. For instance, when John Hockey writes of doctoral supervision that supervisors “need to be guided in how to empathise with their charges’ intellectual and emotional problems, whilst simultaneously achieving enough social and emotional distance so as to be able to effect the intellectual tasks of guide and critic”(Hockey, 1995, p.208), my mind boggles. This kind of training is given at great cost to those for whom
counselling is a core professional activity of healing and remediation. Supervision is neither a central function of being an academic nor does it share counselling’s goals. It is unlikely that either institutions or individuals would understand this form of intensive training as needed or appropriate. What kind of training does fit supervision’s bill is still a question that occupies my mind, and those of my colleagues in academic development (see, for example, Manathunga, 2004).

In closing, I return to a point made at the end of Chapter 4: that the most valuable stance we can take towards supervision is to find it worthy of an ongoing conversation: “There is more to be said, more to think, regarding the subject of supervision … we still have an obligation to think about [it], to work on and with it, as a concept, a problem” (Green, 2004, p.1, italics as in original). Such a stance implies resisting accounts of supervision that aim to foreclose our understanding of it (so that we can ‘forget’ it), or to rigidify (‘standardise’) our practices (so that we might avoid all risk). It implies instead an enquiring mindfulness, a willingness to ponder our (institution’s, supervisor’s and student’s) practices, their incoherences and contradictions, and an openness to exploring new ways of relating to one another and the thesis. In doing so, we might enhance our capacities to reap supervision’s rewards.


Beasley, N. (1999). Staff development to support research supervision. In G. Wisker & N. Sutcliffe (Eds.), *Good Practice in Postgraduate Supervision* (pp. 129-138). Birmingham: SEDA.


