

Thresholds as Spaces of Potentiality: Negotiating the supervision relationship in a non-traditional Art and Design PhD candidature

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ABSTRACT

Tolerance of uncertainty is crucial in creative practice-led PhD projects. This paper draws on our combined experiences as an Iranian born candidate and a German born supervisor negotiating their supervisory relationship in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We argue for the vital role of negotiated territories, threshold spaces of potentiality, in PhD supervision. While we take this to be crucial in all PhD projects exploring a research topic creatively, it is even more important for candidates who are not what Taylor & Beasley (2005) call “traditional candidates”. They and their supervisors often have to confront tensions resulting from different world views. The field of difference and differential power between them can be imagined as a threshold, limiting and divisive at times, but also providing possibilities for change, dialogue and discovery.

Thresholds and the regulation of flows

The PhD candidature is often called an “initiation”, or “rite of passage”, into research culture. Both terms suggest a crossing of thresholds to privileged and controlled spaces, or through one-directional gateways that admit some and exclude others. Homi Bhabha’s dynamic *third space* is, by comparison, an interstitial realm like the threshold, which accommodates ambivalence, conflict, confusion, movement, change and, notably, potentiality. It is held open by the tension between different spaces and temporalities and generates relationships in which both sides are changed through the negotiation of incommensurable strategies, rules and identities in cultural processes and practices (Bhabha, 1994: 218). Anxieties associated with such negotiations are often more pronounced in the experiences of non-traditional PhD candidates researching in non-traditional areas. By this, we mean candidates who do not fit the profile of the typical student population in most Western universities prior to the 1970-80s (male, white, middle-class and fit),¹ and whose research fields and practices do not have a long tradition in the academy. These candidates are likely to experience their difference as a limitation when they do not share the world-views, epistemologies and *habitus* of their supervisors (see McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000).² For them, initiation into the academy is not simply a transition from one state to another, on the same grounds; it is often a matter of shifting their very grounds: place, language, culture.

This paper draws on our experiences of developing a supervisory relationship at PhD level. Between us, we work in at least three languages and cultures (English, Farsi and German), and the research project, “*Par dar hava – Feet in Air*”, spans between Occidental and Oriental world-views, theories and creative practices. Azadeh, the candidate, immigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand from

Iran in 2003 and Tina, the supervisor, from Germany in the early 1990s. We both switched languages and cultural context, although the latter applies more significantly in Azadeh's case, who migrated from Teheran in the 'Orient' to Auckland in the 'Occident'. This history influences our ways of conceptualizing and coming-to-know in this research project, which is based in Auckland but extends to Iran, Canada and Germany.³ It investigates ancient Persian/Islamic philosophies and art in relation to, and through the making of, contemporary transnational moving image work. In Azadeh's thesis, Persian notions of thresholds, which belong to a broader Islamic world view, helped frame her subject matter. We found that they also provide culturally specific ways of considering the dynamics of our supervisory relationship. In Western theory, too, several writers have emphasised extension and dynamic change as characteristic of thresholds, whether they call this zone *threshold* (Benjamin), *boundary state* (Jasper), or *potential space* (Winnicott). Bringing these concepts into play together helps us redistribute the visible and thinkable (Rancière) in an expanded space with room for ambivalence and potentiality.

This paper falls into three parts: the first describes the terrain of our supervision relationship; the second introduces some relevant concepts and theories with which to productively make sense of the situation; and the last brings them to bear on those conditions of the PhD project that motivate us to call it non-traditional.

Thresholds as border regions

According to Walter Benjamin, the principal difference between a border and a threshold is that the first is a separating line, whereas a "*Schwelle* [threshold] is a zone", with its cognate verb *schwellen* (to swell), suggesting "[t]ransformation, passage, wave action" (Benjamin, 2002: O2a,1 494). Thresholds hold two sides apart; they open towards the unknown and invite passage. Yet, they connect and help us relate to the world, reaching beyond ourselves in an "intersubjective cosmos", imagining "an elsewhere and an other" (Thiboutot, Martinez & Jager, 1999: npn).

In our collaboration, the tensions holding the two sides apart are related to our different backgrounds (in terms of culture, language, age, status, experience and degree of integration into the New Zealand systems). What perhaps connects us most powerfully is the shared experience of immigrating, as women, to a culture with (more or less) different values and practices. We also share our affiliation to the School of Art and Design at AUT University (credentialised as a university in 2000, the youngest of New Zealand's eight universities), in the Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies (established 2005). This short history means we cannot rely on a mature research culture. In addition, creative practice-led research is still an emerging research field, with the typical disagreement among scholars about new dimensions and procedures:

There is no generally accepted set of standards by which to judge the quality of creative research work (see Barone, 2008: 29, 31). This applies generally, but it also applies in each particular case, which can create anxiety on the part of candidates and supervisors. In our School, the differences between postgraduate students' orbits are considerable, and supervisors are involved in sometimes hugely diverse projects, often causing concern regarding expertise in light of the speed of change in what counts as knowledge.

However, there is a general condition of creative practice-led research that makes it difficult for a supervisor to 'pass on knowledge' to his or her candidates: many important aspects are only partially amenable to discursive explication. Therefore, many supervisors share an enduring sense that creative practice-led research cannot properly develop within the framework of "old conceptions".⁴

One thing I kept asking myself for a long time was “am I really qualified to supervise this project?” Azadeh’s project lies without the recognised fields of practice at our school, partially perhaps even outside the ‘disciplines’ of art and design. It also lies largely outside my own area of expertise and research. On the other hand, my own PhD supervisor knew little about my topic and that never seemed a problem. But perhaps that was an exception and the received wisdom that a supervisor should be an expert in the candidate’s field holds, after all? It doesn’t help that our university is new and that creative practice research, a substantial part of Azadeh’s project, is still finding its feet. And then the language issue – how can I be sure that I understand her thoughts and that I don’t put words in her mouth or recommend processes or approaches that are not relevant to her inquiry? But she seems to tell me when I am wrong. I just wished I had more experience and there were more people to discuss supervision with. But I’m interested in what she does and believe in her energy and commitment, and her ability to network and find the resources she needs to make up for my shortcomings. Things already got so much easier since we have been a little team and I’m no longer the only one responsible! (Tina)

Figure 1. One thing I kept asking myself

What, then about the expectation that supervisors are ‘supposed to know’ the candidate’s field or research?⁵ What will happen when this turns out not to be the case?⁶

Within this shifting field, anxiety and insecurity can lead to disciplinary entrenchment, and an insistence on what is perceived to be a discipline’s objects or methods. The danger here is that the supervisor becomes, willingly or not, a master of her field, who ‘gives’ instructions, defines goals and deficiencies, and explicates knowledge to always lacking students (Rancière, 1991: 6).⁷ How much, though, can a supervisor know of what the candidate needs to learn? How can she help candidates to develop new conceptions and articulate processes of coming-to-know, in ways that will make their explorations stack up as research in the academy? It can be tempting to impose seemingly solid frameworks and methods on inherently shifting and uncertain grounds. Ordering gestures of inclusion and exclusion, however, can halt the project at critical stages and suppress potential development.

Sitting in front of me, less than a meter away, his voice is audible but what I notice most is his facial expression. The same words repeated over and over again, while my look rests on his lip movements and changes of expression; his words do not sink in. Each part of him tries to convince me: you don't know enough, this is not what it should be, there is nothing there yet. A voice echoes in my head: how can I not know my own experience, when I am it, when I am giving evidence? That's not what it is all about? Is he listening to me? We are too close to see beyond this, yet very distanced. His face appears the only thing I can see, and his voice the only voice in the whole universe, which is nothing more than this small room. How can we see or hear things beyond these walls? (Azadeh)

Figure 2. Sitting in front of me

This is where the Iranian threshold metaphors *bab* and *hashty* became helpful for us.⁸ In traditional Iranian architecture, doorways as threshold constellations regulate the intersubjective connections of cosmos, humans and a “first cause” (Groff & Leaman, 2007). Constricting and opening, thresholds filter the flow of light, air and bodies.⁹ In a mosque, the initial threshold (*bab*: opening or beginning) marks a difference between inside and outside. Beyond the *bab*, one enters the *hashty*, a vestibule which opens up to alternative possibilities to which one passes through further thresholds. The experience of movement here is distributed rather than linear, and inside and outside are relative and reversible.¹⁰ While giving and receiving in PhD supervision is usually imagined as one-directional, for us it is a mutual enactment of giving and receiving. Neither of us fully knows the field, or the implications of each movement. As in a mosque, each passage through a *bab* will lead to more openings and thresholds facilitating change and flux. The *hashty-bab* configuration is a *liminal space* (Bhabha, 1994), a space of potentiality for an understanding of differences, rather than a space of stricture, enclosure or separation.

Borders as epistemological frames

Whether a transitional zone is seen as a border or threshold partially depends on one's position. Victor Turner (1979), whose concepts of *limen* (threshold) and *liminality* (the dangerous but creative middle phase of a rite of passage) have been widely used, did not conceive of culture as a politically contested notion (Weber, 1995: 532). In Turner's work, liminality is temporary and ultimately reintegrates the initiand into society.¹¹ In these accounts, the sense of a singular interior, strengthened and protected by its borders, prevails. Once borders are seen as porous, though, one has to think of them as expanded, belonging to plural interiors and other borders. A sense of neighbourhood can now emerge to replace that of strangers haunting the borderlands. Borders begin to mediate, and the “neverending exchange of worlds and gifts between neighbours” (Thiboutot et al., 1999: npn) creates nodes of contact between different worlds. Referring to Jacques Rancière's (2001) *Theses on Politics*, Beatrice von Bismarck holds that the border, as it expands and becomes space, turns political “to the extent to which it converts the ‘superimposition of previously separate(d) elements into a process of negotiation’” (Bismarck, 2006: 278). Equality can then be established and confirmed; the roles of knower and learner shift over time, in a mediation of

language, art and imagination. The threshold is now no longer the differential between inside and outside, but an active, dynamic and multidimensional zone. Like Bhabha's third space, this zone enables "other positions to emerge" and, displacing its constituting histories, sets up "new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford & Bhabha, 1990: 211).

In such conditions, experience in Dewey's sense becomes possible: experimental, oriented towards change, projecting and reaching "forward into the unknown" (Dewey, 1917: 7). The changes these experiences encourage are not likely to produce the positive, certain knowledge that is still predominantly thought of as 'the truth'. Advances in knowledge are normally "organized about old conceptions, while these are expanded, elaborated and refined, but not seriously revised, much less abandoned" (3). At times, however, they demand "qualitative rather than quantitative change; alteration, not addition" (3). In its recognition of the possibility of "interpenetration between subject and object" (Picart, 1997: 68), Dewey's ontology resonates with Donald Winnicott's notions of *potential space*.

For Winnicott, potential space is an intermediate or "third area" (initially between mother and child, later more widely between the individual and the environment), neither the individual's inner world nor "actual, or external, reality (which has its own dimensions, and which can be studied objectively) ..." (1968: 592).¹² In potential space, creativity develops in the "discovery, creation, and development of a self" (Palombo, Bendicson & Koch, 2009: 154). Trust and confidence favour this creativity (Winnicott, 1967: 372),¹³ which is accompanied by an "openness inwards and outwards", facilitating "meaningful interaction" between self and world (Jemstedt, 2000: 124-5). In potential space, play "expands into creative living and into the whole cultural life of man" (Winnicott, 1967: 372). Inside and outside are kept suspended: the "inner and outer touch each other" in a dance-like movement in which "resides the possibility of discovering something new and to let oneself be surprised, also by oneself" (Jemstedt, 2000: 125). Characteristic of potential space is a "negative capability" to endure in "a psychically open process" (128) yet remain coherent in changing circumstances (Bonz & Struve, 2006: 152).¹⁴

Rancière speaks about equality, rather than trust, in his political account of the distribution of the thinkable and visible in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). The book is a meditation on the eccentric methods of Jacob Jacotot, a French professor exiled in Belgium at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Jacotot "unsettled the academic world", reversing the roles between 'master explicator' and students. He proclaimed "the equality of intelligences" and asserted that "an ignorant person could teach another ignorant person what he did not know himself" (Rancière, 2007: 271). By a "method of the riddle", learners become emancipated through their own acts of observing, retaining, repeating, verifying, doing, reflecting, taking apart and re-combining.¹⁵ A teacher teaches best not by knowing the subject matter but, instead, providing positive constraints to help keep students on their own path, acknowledging that "no two orbits are alike" (Rancière, 1991: 59). An insistence on conventional theoretical frameworks or disciplinary standards, or even that "there is one population that *cannot* do what the other population does" (Rancière, 2007: 277), narrows the space of negotiation and renounces productive challenges. After all, a discipline, for instance, is "always much more than an ensemble of procedures which permit the thought of a given territory of objects"—it is, first of all, "the constitution of this territory itself, and therefore the establishment of a certain distribution of the thinkable" (Rancière, 2006: 8). When words, images and objects circulate freely outside of the control of a master or a discipline, disciplinary thought "must ceaselessly hinder this haemorrhage in order to establish stable relations ... and the modes of perception and signification which correspond to them" (9).¹⁶ On the other hand, when artists do research, they inherently "build the stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious" ... "they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom [and] the effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated" (Rancière, 2007: 278).

This inherently uncertain situation, writes Rancière, can be stabilised through a *thing-in-common*, which establishes links “between two minds”, in lieu of explication and instruction. This (material) thing is a bridge of communication, which is “a passage, but it is also distance maintained. The materiality of the book [or, sculpture, spectacle, design ...] keeps two minds at an equal distance, whereas explication is the annihilation of one mind by another” (1991: 32). The thing-in-common opens space for negotiation and mediation; both parties can refer to it as a “source of material verification” (32). It is “crucial in the process of intellectual emancipation” (2007: 278). The thing-in-common, we suggest, keeps the threshold open as a space of potentiality, or third space.

In the *hashty*

This space is urgently required in the projects of non-traditional candidates in creative practice-led research, since it is likely that their epistemologies and approaches differ from those of their supervisors. In this *boundary situation* (see Ward, 2005: 198-9), language may not function in the same way it does with ‘traditional’ or mainstream candidates.¹⁷ The candidate’s knowledge and procedures may be ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’, even conflictual, to those of the supervisor, who sometimes “does not even recognize the knowledge as foreign” (Perkins, quoted in Meyer & Land, 2003: 7). If the alien knowledge, troubled by the (in this case double) foreignness of language, combines with tacit knowledge (mainly personal and implicit) that derives from a particular practice, both candidate and supervisor need high levels of tolerance towards insecurity and difference.

The PhD candidature, with its long term engagement, considerable uncertainty and dependency on the supervisor, sets up relationships reminiscent of those between children and parents. The German title for a PhD supervisor, *Doktorvater* (doctor- father), expresses this aptly: in a close and personal relationship, the supervisor holds disproportional power.¹⁸ In emerging research fields, this general pattern is augmented: a great deal of knowledge in art, architecture and design, for example, is tacit and difficult to articulate. While explication and instruction may seem feasible supervisory strategies in the sciences and social sciences, they are of limited value in art and design projects. However, the difference is anything but absolute: Ernesto Grassi (1976) argues that positive knowledge is necessarily preceded by rhetorical and poetic operations, which in the first place provide the grounds for reason. Sayyed Hoeseyn Nasr recognises “the ultimate reality” as the unknown, “beyond form” and materiality, but revealed in forms. Although the human subject appears bounded and limited by substance, the invisible world of infinity resides within. The reach for this infinity inside, the inward journey “toward the boundless” (Nasr in Critchlow, 1983: 6) is facilitated by the material world. In contrast to frameworks based on a Cartesian division between subject and object, there is here a folding, a mutual implication, of materiality and immateriality, of subject, object and infinity.

If we think of our supervision relationship as an open (but not formless) threshold configuration, we can see how we both, supervisor and candidate, shape and reshape it in order to reach the next stage. Certainly, a supervisor is initially more active in giving, but as time went by, we found that the relationship became more mutual: we both have knowledge the other does not have.¹⁹ We find Rancière’s idea useful that, in any learning, there is always the same intelligence at work, “an intelligence which makes figures and comparisons in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and to understand what another intelligence tries to communicate to it in turn” (Rancière, 2007: 277). In a field whose central concern is to create new idioms whose effects cannot be predicted, we are both compelled to “venture forth in the forest” of things and signs to tell what we see and what we think about it; to compare what we see and think (275). Rancière does not suggest that ignorance is required of Tina, as the supervisor; what is necessary is to dissociate knowledge from mastery. In practice-led research, Rancière’s dictum that there is no dichotomy between looking and acting, learning and teaching, is particularly pertinent: “the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection” and looking and learning are

intelligent actions confirming or modifying that distribution. “[I]nterpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it” (277).

When change is implicit in what we do, and when what counts as knowledge is still being determined, there is little that can be passed on directly from *Doktormutter* (doctor-mother) to candidate. The key to knowledge here, still following Rancière, is “the consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself” (Rancière, 1991: 39). In a “community of equals”, a “society of artists”, the division between who knows and who does not know is repudiated (71).²⁰ In this community of “minds in action”, “who speak about what they are doing” (71), it is the supervisor’s task to claim the equality of each intelligent being; to compel students to seek harder and to use their own intelligence; to discourage false modesty and to encourage discoveries through experiment and experience; and, finally, to supply the necessary resources.

Accordingly, an acknowledgement of the limitation of any expertise made us think extensively about the composition of the supervisory team. In our university, the default configuration envisages a primary and a secondary supervisor. However, for nearly all non-traditional candidates whose research falls outside mainstream Western paradigms, this configuration is insufficient (for Māori and Pacific candidates, for example, additional requirements are acknowledged and funded in our School). In our case, since no additional funding is available for cases such as Azadeh’s, we have distributed the normal time allocation between three supervisors, each taking care of different areas of Azadeh’s project.²¹

The meeting with her second supervisor, after an initial period of online contact only, confirmed the appropriateness of this decision. What gives our different contributions coherence is the thing we have in common: it increasingly includes not only Azadeh’s project, but also parts of her supervisors’ research, producing new questions and critique. This paper, for instance, has become part of the thing-in-common linking and separating us; an evolving sketch for a comparison of our figures of thought and lineages of practice. It binds us together “to the very extent that it keeps [us] apart from each other; it is”, as Rancière put it, “the power each of us possesses in equal measure to make our own way in the world” (278).

The sofa I am sitting on is comfortable and the sun shines through the window. More than a meter away from me, she sits on her own comfortable sofa and listens to me eagerly, trying hard to recognise new ideas in-between my not very perfect sentences. I am outside of my comfort zone in this new city and strangely comfortable to be there; secure in feeling that I can make mistakes and even allowed not to know all. She is there to help and find out what I need to know, to be able to do what I want to do. Time passes and it feels as if we are moving forward, one step at a time. Looking around me, I see things I did not notice before; doors, not one, but many! Each could lead to new possibilities and potentials. (Azadeh)

Figure 3. The sofa I am sitting on

In thinking about favourable conditions for a PhD candidature, and particularly a non-traditional one, it is also worth considering a (loosely conceived) parallel with Winnicott's potential space. There, the infant's development depends, *inter alia*, on the appropriate timing of the mother's responses. Following a total dependency on the mother's immediate and reliable attention and provision, the stage of the infant's separation is just as crucial for the development of a mature self and creative capacity. While the mother still needs to be available, she has to step back and refrain from projecting onto the child.²² Winnicott's *transitional objects* are also thought provoking in our context: they are "both conceived of by the infant and presented to it from without", "both the mother and not the mother", as well as "both a part of the infant and not a part of the infant" (Jemstedt, 2000: 128). A paradox, but paradoxes are typical of potential space and need to be "protected and tolerated": potential space is both union and separateness (128). Over time, transitional objects are gradually abandoned, but the type of experience is preserved and ultimately expands "into the intense experiencing that appertains to culture, art, religion and creative activity". This is where "the artist's creative impulse and his medium" meet, "be it the painter's colours and canvas or the architect's space and material. In this interplay between the artist and the integrity of his medium, the artist's creativity both transforms his medium and is transformed by it" (Jemstedt, 2000: 129).

In doctoral research, candidates have already acquired fluency regarding the content and media of their disciplines. How can supervisors' specific knowledge be made useful for a candidate's project? Undoubtedly, the accessibility and value of such contributions increase if the supervisor-expert respects the candidate's "lived knowledge and ... practical survival skills" (Woodill, 1993: 53). If these different types and modes of knowledge can be drawn on in parallel, supervisor and candidate become teachers and learners simultaneously. For Tina, as a supervisor, this means that she can let go of anxious responsibility and for Azadeh, as a candidate, that she takes more control of her project—in a creative exploration which involves everyone's knowledge *and* ignorance (51). Crisis situations can then be experienced as both 'danger' *and* 'opportunity' (the two characters that make up the Chinese word *weiji* (crisis) (see Chow, 1993: 25).

Producing new knowledge means in our setting the translation from one episteme into another, one world-view into another, and also a translation from creative practice paradigms into the politics of academic knowledge production. This can be utterly challenging given the inherent power imbalance under current systems. It is often implied that PhD candidates will be transformed by their candidature, give up habituated thought patterns, sacrifice huge amounts of their time, and change their professional habits.²³ Their supervisors, by comparison, are imagined as already initiated, fully equipped to pass on their knowledge to their candidates. As Rancière reminds us, though, assuming superiority over a candidate and rendering her knowledge irrelevant, or even inferior, divides intelligence into two (1991: 7). Not only are candidates stultified in such pedagogical relationships, so are supervisors, who deprive themselves of equals who could understand them (39).²⁴

If, we suggest, the relationship is imagined instead as dynamic, as a threshold in which candidate and supervisor jointly discover the diverse options and possibilities implicit in a candidate's project, a space of potentiality opens up. Moments of separation (difference) then create the possibility of provisional unity (identity). In the threshold territory, belonging is performed "within and in-between sets of social relations. It precisely emphasizes and moves with that experience" (Probyn, 1996: 13). Once candidates and supervisors expose themselves to the challenges and insecurities inherent in threshold concepts and conditions, they are changed.

Of course, being in the threshold as a space of potentiality is not always just fertile, creative and enriching. To reduce third spaces to such euphoric expectation would actually mean to abandon their potential for change. For us, the writing of this paper was a threshold situation and sometimes riddled with anxieties on both sides. Sometimes, the defaulting to routine behaviour was tempting. Resisting, we experienced moments of conflict between our world-views and opinions, particularly

when we assumed that what one knows the other must already know, too. The challenge was not to withdraw and find alternatives and common ground—to keep productivity moving. Constant shifts between the roles of receiver and giver helped us grapple with the other’s position, allowing her some space to readjust. There were intense and tense moments but, increasingly, we no longer assumed in our negotiations that we could understand the other through our own categories, in advance as it were. Rather, we might have started to take the other (with her own categories) into ourselves by “effectively assuming [her] mental position” (Bhabha, 1994: 24). Bhabha holds that this transforms people into new subjects as a new, “politized ‘portion of truth’ is produced. This is a different dynamic from the ethic of tolerance in liberal ideology which has to imagine opposition in order to contain it and demonstrate its enlightened relativism or humanism”.²⁵

In Bachelard’s poetics of material imagination, the poet is a figure speaking “on the threshold of being” (Bachelard, 1969: 16), the realm of imagination, the zone of becoming, or the process of making. Imagination allows us to open up to the world by creating a distance from the perception of reality as naturally caused and certain (Thiboutot et al., 1999). The resulting loss of certainty, while threatening, can be liberating if candidates develop not only tolerance, but positive expectation towards uncertainty. A negative capability of tolerating uncertainty can then pair with an intuitive, aesthetic capacity so that “conscious and unconscious experiencing concur and fertilise each other” (Jemstedt, 2000: 128).²⁶ But how can this be achieved? Our combined experiences suggest that a multidimensional and multidirectional conception of knowledge exchange in the threshold zone of PhD supervision, as in the *hashty*, allows for shifts between passive and active parts. It opens onto further spaces to explore, for potential entry or small openings.

Notes

We gratefully acknowledge the support we received: Ross Jenner and Moata McNamara commented on draft versions and the referees’ critical and partially very detailed suggestions no doubt improved our paper significantly.

1. ‘Non-traditional’ candidates constituted a minority in Western universities until the 1970s, when candidates were “disproportionally male, from high-status social-economic backgrounds, members of majority ethnic and/or racial groups, and without disability” (Taylor & Beasley, 2005: 141).
2. Regarding Indigenous students in Australia, McLoughlin and Oliver argue that the design of learning environments is not culturally neutral but based “on the particular epistemologies, learning theories and goal orientations of the designers themselves” (2000: 58). The “deficit model”, which they claim underpins pedagogical approaches to Indigenous students, also confronts NESB students: it is assumed that they “enter universities without the requisite skills and have to be remediated into mainstream tertiary settings”, a view that denies “learner input” (65) – in the current case cultural and academic knowledge based in Persian/Islamic epistemologies.
3. The project involves the production of moving image work in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Iran as her home country, Germany where she has previously researched and made work, and Canada, where her secondary supervisor is based.
4. See Dewey below.
5. The “one who is supposed to know” is a phrase from Lacanian (1977) discourse theory, see Fromm (1995: 235).
6. A retrenchment into the known, and an assertion that the supervisor knows what the candidate doesn’t can come “dangerously close” to Schön’s (1987) “mystery–mastery” syndrome (Goldschmidt, Hochman & Dafni, 2010: 300). Mystery in the supervisor’s messages “increases the student’s lack of self-confidence and awe of the teacher, but it certainly does not assist in learning” (300).
7. The master’s directions and relaxed authority over his subject surprise the student, says Rancière. Surprise “turns into admiration and that admiration stultifies him. The student feels that, alone and abandoned to himself, he would not have followed that route” (1991: 59). To the master, what the student has learned before through his own intellect and interest is “only the knowledge of the

ignorant”, and the master’s continued instruction is the “endless verification of its starting point: inequality” (2007: 275). However, Rancière suggests, it is the explicator who needs the student, not the other way round. He therefore creates a constant, structural gap between the student’s incapacity to understand and the established knowledge of the discipline: “To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself” (Woodill, 1993: 6). In “The Emancipated Spectator” (2007), Rancière investigates a similar gap between playwright and audience (the former assuming greater knowledge of the subject matter than the latter). As in the educational situation, the master “is not only he who knows precisely what remains unknown to the ignorant; he also knows how to make it knowable, at what time and what place, according to what protocol” (275). In this relationship of inequality, he alone knows “the exact distance between ignorance and knowledge” (275).

8. Bab (doorway, beginning) facilitates and frames movement. Hashty (Vestibule) is a transitional space, which connects the entrance door to other parts of a building. Joining several doorways (babha) it shares to an extent the qualities of adjoining spaces.
9. This phenomenal view of the threshold goes along with an understanding of humans’ embeddedness in the unity of an integrative system “within which all creation is situated” and which underlies all traditional sciences (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973: 22). Each individual ‘being’ is linked to the centre of unity and to other beings. Thus, all selves partake in a multiple unity, despite the physical separation of their bodies. Perhaps the notions of transition and transformation, in which we are interested here, find their Western equivalent as much in Deleuze’s concept of the fold as in threshold concepts.
10. Such reversal can also be found in the mutual implication of container (Jism: body, active) and contained (Ruḥ: spirit, passive), which together make up the concept of ‘place’ (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973: 15). This latter conceptual pair allows for subtle shifts in the co-dependency of passive and active aspects and can also be metaphorically applied to our supervisory relationship.
11. Arnold van Gennep “distinguished the three stages [of rites of passage] as (1) separation (from ordinary social life); (2) margin or limen (meaning threshold), when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; and (3) re-aggregation, when they are ritually returned to secular or mundane life - either at a higher status level or in an altered state of consciousness or social being” (Turner, 1979: 466-7).
12. Both Freud’s (topographical) preconscious and Winnicott’s potential space are processual third terms related to creative processes, which break out of subjective-objective dichotomies (Civin & Lombardi, 1990: 574).
13. Like Rancière, Winnicott emphasises “building up of confidence”, which he calls trust through experience. High initial dependence is followed by an “enjoyment and employment of separation and of independence” (Winnicott, 1967: 371).
14. “Negative capability” is a term used by John Keats to mean the ability “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (quoted in Bion, 1970: 125).
15. Rancière’s notion of emancipation is a sustained critique of Enlightenment versions, as well as those of scientific Marxism (Althusser) and Bourdieu’s sociology (see Biesta, 2010; Pelletier, 2009).
16. In Meyer and Land’s terms, this control concerns threshold concepts, “conceptual gateways” where a learner’s view of a subject matter or even world view is transformed. They open up “new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (2003: 1). These concepts are often troublesome for students: “the insights gained when the learner crosses the threshold might ... be unsettling” and involve a sense of loss (10). Threshold concepts can thus become central to the power relations between educators and learners, “serving to ... exert a ‘normalizing’ function ... Whose threshold concepts then becomes a salient question” (10) – particularly, we argue, when the subject matter itself activates different and possibly conflicting world-views and epistemes.
17. Translation, as the mutually complimentary relationship between languages, is not only a necessary condition in research collaborations between candidates and supervisors from different cultures – it is also capable of releasing what remains repressed in the original (Benjamin, 1969: 80). Given creative practice research’s concern with materialities and technologies of the senses to come (McQuillan,

2007), for which a theoretical vocabulary has yet to be found, this will have to go beyond translating 'just' between cultures and languages operating in the supervisory team.

The contradictory aspects that can surface particularly in PhD projects of non-traditional candidates open up a territory, and keep it open for exploration and negotiation. Non-traditional candidates often come to the PhD project with earlier experiences of boundary states. For instance, the material legacy of colonialism is "inscribed in the return of post-colonial peoples to the metropolis. Their very presence there changes the politics of the metropolis, its cultural ideologies and its intellectual traditions, because they ... displace some of the great metropolitan narratives of progress and law and order ..." (Rutherford & Bhabha, 1990: 211). This can be a new experience for their supervisors and lead to a political experience in Rancière's sense of "the political": the space of the encounter between processes of governing and struggles for equality. There is always something governing will exclude, and the political is the field where such wrongs are handled in the politics of emancipation of the self as an other (Rancière, 1992: 58-9). The political community is "a community of worlds in community that are intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places. Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds" (Rancière, 1999: 137).

18. This is the case even for exemplary supervisors, it becomes an overwhelming problem when supervisors abuse this power.
19. For many non-traditional PhD candidates, the potential conflict over threshold concepts is difficult to resolve unless both the candidate's and the supervisor's prior experiences and knowledge are articulated and brought into dialogue.
20. They would know "that the superiority that someone might manifest is only the fruit of as tenacious an application to working with words as another might show to working with tools; that the inferiority of someone else is the consequence of circumstances that didn't compel him to seek harder" (71).
21. Professor Laura Marks (Simon Fraser University, Vancouver) and Dr Geraldene Peters (from AUT University's School of Communication) joined the supervisory team after a few months.
22. Of course, PhD candidates are not infants nor are supervisors mothers, but the model suggests the crucial importance of a "good-enough" (Winnicott) timing for moving from initial (relative) being held/holding to successive leaving/letting go in the supervision relationship. A juxtaposition and more detailed exploration of the counter-movements of dependency-independency in Winnicott and Rancière would be interesting but is beyond the scope of this paper.
23. Whenever candidates are at an epistemological, experiential disadvantage, Strategy set 1 of "The Teaching Challenge" resulting from threshold concepts applies: "Start from where the students are". (ProDAIT (Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching), 2006)
24. Threshold concepts also trouble PhD supervisors (particularly new ones). If this does not produce collegial discussion, the latter doubly deprive themselves of sharing with their intellectual equals.
25. See also Bonz & Struve (2006: 149). The 'third space' of hybridity is not only a new, celebrated cultural logic, it is also an increasingly commodified phenomenon. If it is used without critical questioning, there is a danger that research will measure and open up these cultural interstices for further commodification which exploits hybrid modes of existence as seminal resources for creativity and other forms of cultural enrichment (Ha, 2005: 14). Applied to PhD projects, this means that both candidate and supervisor need an understating of boundary states (belonging neither to the internal nor external world but provide freedom to move and shift in and out) to understand the potentiality of the invisible or unfamiliar.
26. Then, relinquishing a view of reality as stable and given fosters collaborative relationships which thrive on difference and exchange. Paul Carter's notion of "material thinking" leads into a gap or opening, "a realm ripe for transformation" (Carter, 2004: 183).

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