In their no doubt still well-selling *How to Get a PhD*, Estelle Phillips and D.S. Pugh detailed how to have a relation with your doctoral supervisor. The relation was to be properly whole, emotional as well as intellectual. As they put it, “[d]oing a PhD is a very emotional experience, which involves the whole person” (112). So they granted “isolation” many more pages than “knowledge” and “frustration” more than “facts.” The “psychological aspects” got twice as much space as the “practical aspects” of the PhD process. It was all very caring. However, read as a doctoral conduct manual or courtesy book, Phillips and Pugh’s earnest guidelines imputed a definite psychological norm to the process: the postgraduate thesis writer as whole person ought to think and talk about emotional anxieties that he or she might never have deemed relevant to the particular research task in hand. Wanting to lower the levels of anxiety among my students, I did not take well to this Oprah Winfrey line on thesis writing. Indeed, on noting that Phillips and Pugh’s index contained no entry for “bibliography,” I once expressed in public a wish to burn *How to Get a PhD* to save it falling into the hands of doctoral candidates. I recalled this incendiary urge when reading Alison Lee and Carolyn Williams’s “Forged in fire: narratives of trauma in PhD supervision pedagogy.”

“Forged in fire” is less earnest than *How to Get a PhD*. Exulting in trauma, its pretension is to critique. Lee and Williams would subvert current practice by de-repressing what they say has been repressed. They would bring to the surface all the “emotional and irrational dimensions of the PhD experience” (no longer the “PhD process”). Until this moment of psychoanalytic theoretical breakthrough and reflective revelation, these emotions have like a purloined letter avoided detection by the rational PhD police. So, much more psyche is now on show and tell than Phillips and Pugh ever imagined. Psychoanalysis and confession, not psychology and care, will now grant access to the hidden depths of doctoral study. This is not too startling. In fact, in Part 1, the move is entirely orthodox: Lee and Williams assert their theoretical advance over conventional (masculinist) understandings of what counts as the PhD “experience,” an advance achieved by an emancipatory (feminist) act of reflection. Neve-
Nevertheless, elsewhere in the paper they raise a serious policy question: what is the future of the doctoral thesis as we have known it, that original contribution to knowledge, that specialised, comprehensive, ponderously written, Germanic monster of hypothesis, disputation and conclusion? Yet, regrettably, this real question of whether we in the academy should continue to feed the monster is soon drowned out by something different: copious confession. This pours not least from the three senior academic men who, in the soulful ambience of the six-person encounter group (aka "a research workshop"), finally speak up about the painful yet repressed memory of their postgraduate mortification. Thus re-born, they return to their earthly role, transformed by re-acquaintance with their own trauma and ready to "supervise" differently those enrolling in the new age doctorate, now re-conceptualised as an "emotional" experience.

There is a danger. In purporting to break a "silence" that masks the doctoral trauma, do Lee and Williams risk what Foucault called "the speaker’s benefit"? This is the claim to moral authority by those who transgress a prohibition in speaking up for the silenced (or, as here, in re-writing in what is said to have been written out of the doctoral "experience"). There is also a moral arrogance and an intellectual snobbery in all this. Writing for an elect and doctored audience in the critical humanities and reflexive social sciences, Lee and Williams simply disrespect the commitment some of us might have to "organisational and administrative matters such as completion times, completion rates, costs and benefits." These matters are dismissed as driven by "policy" and an "improvement imperative" and derided as the instruments of an "engineering approach." Dealers in transformation, it seems, can sneer at improvement. For Lee and Williams, good administration only impedes their aim: to foreground the trauma attaching to doctoral thesis writing. To adopt the "improvement imperative," so they tell us, means that "trauma, abjection, isolation, loss are often read through an improvement discourse as 'noise' in the system." The authors know better:

questions of the emotions and the "irrational" dimensions of the PhD experience, far from being "noise" in the system of pedagogic relations and practices, are on the contrary both a necessary condition and an effect of the production of the subject of doctoral study - the licensed independent scholar.

Familiar targets return for deconstruction. The administration that issues licences and certificates is one. But worse still is the philosophical error and oppressive "politics" of an unauthentic subjectivity, that of the "putatively rational, autonomous subject of disciplinary knowledge...predicated upon both the production and disavowal of the 'irrational' and the emotions." So Lee and Williams set to work to reproduce the irrational and re-avow the emotional as counters to the rational and the autonomous.
II Methodology

Other readers will be more enthusiastic than me about the methodology to which Lee and Williams are committed. For myself, wrestling with the issue of a less elite future for the conventional PhD, exploring options for the training and performance management of supervisors, evaluating the pros and cons of committee-based supervision, observing the rise of professional doctorates, knowing something of American and European styles of graduate research studies, it would be at least as useful to pursue these matters further as to read the confessional “stories” and pathetic “anecdotes” of the workshop participants.

And it would be good if the basic facts were straight. Given the centrality of the story-telling and the play of gender, Lee and Williams should explain how a “six-person” workshop could be peopled by Karl, David, Peter, Jane, Robyn, Judith and Barbara! How many were there in the room at the time?

There is also a terrible predictability about the whole exercise. No doubt “compulsive anecdotes of trauma and loss, of abuse and neglect, of plagiarism and abandonment” gushed forth. Was this because the workshop was remorseless in rejecting “thin” stories and demanding “thick” confessions? Hence Lee and Williams are enthralled with the “critical moment within the workshop, as the ‘thin’, rational account shifts to a thicker and more reflexive story.” These people, meaning the authors, knew exactly what they wanted to hear: trauma tales from the three men and the three/four women. A painful memory of the scene of suffering, by definition repressed, was de rigueur. In disregard of the possibility that all anecdotes are atypical, general claims are then erected on these tales, claims about the fundamental psychical nature of the PhD experience and claims for the originality of Lee and Williams’s research. Yet, as indicated at the outset, there is nothing new in stressing the emotional side of thesis writing (although psychoanalytic theorising adds a cosmopolitan touch to the account).

III Capacities and subjectivities

Methodology aside, it is important to discuss Lee and Williams’s research in terms of the concepts they adopt as central to the argument: capacities and subjectivities, reason and gender. Some questions can be raised. First, it is not clear that Lee and Williams grasp the implications of a “capacities” approach. Why say this? Put simply, to approach human competencies in terms of the acquisition of capacities is quite different from talking about subjectivities and self. To take the mundane yet exemplary case of the capacities attaching to the status of citizen, say the citizen’s capacity to enter their own national territory: this capacity has no neces-
sary connection to self or profound derivation from psyche. It does not depend on subjectivity.

Lee and Williams might cite Foucault on the productive disciplinary power that could equip the boy peasant with the capacities attaching to the military status. However, they do not recognise that a "capacities" approach to the status or persona of doctoral supervisor or student would be concerned precisely with the "organisational and administrative matters such as completion times, completion rates, costs and benefits" that the authors so deride. The abhorred "improvement imperative" is much closer to a "capacities" approach than Lee and Williams's psychoanalytic theorising about subjectivity.

At moments, it is true, the authors note a socio-demographic circumstance and recognise their object as having - presumably unlike the structures of the human psyche - a restricted institutional distribution: the PhD in the humanities and social sciences in Anglo-Australian universities in the late 1990s. Once into their central theme of emotional trauma, however, the authors forget particular contingent circumstances but raise emotion to a "necessary condition" of doctoral study. The term "condition" gives the game away. Recourse to the psychical condition is how these intellectuals look beyond the institutional circumstances. As for the latter, Lee and Williams prefer to talk of "the complex conceptual field within which doctoral supervisors and students are operating and negotiating positionalities." This abstractness shows the authors' real commitment is to the deeper world of psychical forces. Hence their evident excitement in reporting a "remarkable feature" of their research: its spontaneous release, in those who hear of the project, of "compulsive anecdotes of trauma and loss, of abuse and neglect, of plagiarism and abandonment." Institutional decorum is fractured by these "compulsive anecdotes" of self. The authors take such performances as recovering a subjectivity, no longer repressed, that fractures official roles and status attributes. Yet these roles and attributes would be of prime interest for an approach to the topic in terms of capacities.

As I understand it, a capacities approach is more genealogical than psychoanalytic. It works at the mundane level of concrete interests and within the orbit of institutional arrangements. It would treat the PhD program in terms of explicit attributes attaching to actual statuses and permitting specific relations of exchange. A capacities approach is not closed to policy and not committed to critique. Lee and Williams, good critical intellectuals, have quite another program. They want to go much deeper. They look at the PhD and see "complex relations of power-desire-knowledge" and "unstable constellations of constitutive elements." They ask: "At what price is the 'rationality' assigned to the doctoral graduate bought?" Their question presumes a level of being that is prior to institutional capacitation. Institutional experience, they imply, has cancelled out some more fundamental human attribute, namely "the emotions, particularly emotional distress." This cancellation of emotion is the price paid by the present postgraduate (assumed to be a future supervisor). It
generates the "trauma" and the subsequent denial of self that Lee and Williams would de-repress and bring to centre-stage.

IV  Reason and gender

What of reason and gender? Again, there is a numbing predictability about the authors' critique of reason, whether as an abstract concept or anthropomorphised and gendered as the "Enlightenment man of reason." Why not try something new in dealing with this weary figure? Why not remember - historically rather than psychoanalytically - that in the seventeenth century appeals to reason emerged as an alternative to appeals to scriptural authority and sacred history? Why not remember what today's cultural historians of Enlightenment have shown: that as many Enlighteners were "men of religion" and spiritual illumination as were "men of reason"? Why not remember that already in the eighteenth century it was a man, Friedrich Schiller, who set about redressing what he took to be Immanuel Kant's one-sided stress on formal reason by proposing a return to the sensuous life that resisted rational programming? Why not remember the sheer longevity of this aesthetic device that remains the favoured instrument of critical intellectuals? After all, it is what allows Lee and Williams to address the PhD experience in late twentieth-century Australian universities in dialectical terms that Schiller would have grasped.

I recognise that none of these historical memories count as "compulsive anecdotes of loss." I recognise too that Lee and Williams's aims are not historical. But, ethically speaking, in deriding reason and rationality they seem willing to do wanton damage to doctoral supervisors' capacity for neutrality and impersonality. Of course, in promoting a return to emotions in supervision, the authors are not promoting undesirable forms of conduct such as sexual harassment. Yet they leave it quite unclear how far they take "desire," "pleasure," the "physical capacities of the body" and the "erotics of pedagogy." Perhaps sex is all just allegory and metaphors for them.

Nevertheless, we should pause on Lee and Williams's disrespect for the impersonality of supervision which they construe as a masculinist and rationalistic shelving of emotions. Remember, these are authors who justify complete deconstruction of "thin" stories on the grounds that "[p]eople construct the data of their lives so that they can live with them in relatively non-contradictory ways." Arguably, the greatest cultural achievement of the modern West is a capacity for official neutrality: the public capacity to treat different individuals or groups as equal regardless of their differences (in religion, morality, ethnicity, language, politics, wealth, sex, emotions, character, lifestyle and so on). Still incompletely achieved, this capacity for relative impersonality marks off the public ethos of administrative office from the private underworlds of individu-
als and groups. "Thin" story or not, the ideal impersonality of a well-administered doctoral supervision has something in common with the ideal impersonality of judicial office.

Imagine then the supervisor who, though expert in a field, expresses religious, moral, ethical, political, financial, sexual, emotional, characterological, lifestyle disapproval of a student (perhaps while expressing approval of another). This would deny the pluralism we now expect of anyone appointed to the status of supervisor. A prime ethical capacity attaching to that status - if not in all cases achieved by the incompletely trained occupants of the status - is neutrality with reference to difference. Its many critics, no doubt Lee and Williams among them, proclaim that this neutrality is not a universal principle but a particular interest. Absolutely. It is our particular historical, institutional and ethical advantage, of basic importance whether applied to the toleration of different religions within the one state, or different lifestyles within the one postgraduate population.

With their rejection of reason and impersonality, do Lee and Williams risk being moral evangelists and social redeemers bent on conversion, not PhD supervisors into careful editing? Do they see the supervisor's role extend to getting a student to give up his religion or change her politics? I cannot tell. Certainly their commitment to a politics of gender difference is clear. They seem to treat gender as exemplary of all other modes of difference. In this they are aided by their recourse to psychoanalytic theory - here conveniently harmonised with a certain feminist position. This recourse absolves them of any requirement to explore painstakingly the history of our present cultural circumstances. The easier certainties of this particular gender-based analysis and its scorn for complicity with "the masculinist regime" start to seem less obvious when set against the backdrop of moral education in the Christian west - the cloistering of monks and nuns, the courtisation of warriors, the social policing of populations, the domesticating of manners, the schooling in literature.

V Conclusion

Give or take some anxiety manuals in the style of Phillips and Pugh, Lee and Williams are correct in concluding that they have "foregrounded an aspect of doctoral training that has been previously 'written out' of or 'backstaged' in formal accounts - the emotional distress experienced by many PhD students during their candidature." But where does this actually get us? The authors answer as follows. This foregrounding shifts attention from the "student/supervisor relationship" to "the conflicts and difficulties produced for and between doctoral supervisors and students as they attempt to negotiate the complex and contradictory conceptual field they are operating within." But does this get us any further?

More promising is Lee and Williams's penultimate paragraph. Here
they turn away from psychical trauma to the very policy approach they had earlier rejected, the “improvement imperative.” Now, “by promoting better institutional supports and more efficient processes,” this administrative imperative is recognised as “likely to push the traditional PhD to breaking point, forcing an examination of its implicit assumptions and a rethinking of doctoral training.” Sadly, the final paragraph veers back to psychoanalysis, so nothing more is said about these pressing practical matters.

Lee and Williams leave us with the suspicion that they go so deep into the psyche as to detach themselves from today’s institutional practices. These include the broader scope of current doctoral programs, enabling hybrid projects that combine creative work and analytic elements. More to the point, the authors say nothing of the success of women students at doctoral level. We have to face the historical fact of women’s under-representation in PhD programs. But, demographically speaking, we also have to face the fact that such under-representation is no longer the case.

If the meat of “Forged in fire” is the ethnographic collection of “stories” and the psychoanalytic recovery of repressed “memories,” this too leaves me disappointed. It is not just that the women participants are immediately more emotional than the men, or that the men crack once the “thirmess” of their stories is revealed to them. Rather, it is the child-persona that these academic men and women adopt when caught in the cross-fire of psychoanalysis and this feminist pedagogy. What word other than “childlike” can characterise the confession/memories of “abandonment and loss” or “neglect” that they all seem to have come up with? Perhaps this is another sign that university work is being colonised by pastoral norms and pedagogic practices from primary and secondary schooling. Perhaps PhD supervisors will now be shepherds to their suffering postgraduate flock. Whatever the future holds, as “remembered” by Lee and Williams the doctorate is an experience to be suffered not a process to be managed. These last five words bespeak my own administrative take on the PhD. Others will see them as alien (and alienating). So let me end by returning to a historical perspective.

Many of my comments in this response to Lee and Williams either state or imply a persisting antiquity in today’s academic practices. The title “Forged in fire” is metallurgical. It refers — perhaps intentionally — to the alchemical tradition whereby illumination and holiness were achieved through a purgation that transmuted base substance into divine essence. It implies a PhD by purification as much as by publication. It also recalls the great tradition of Western asceticism, of the monastic and conventual life as one of the laboratories in which certain individuals were equipped with a capacity for ordered conduct, initially for spiritual purposes. The drill was hard and painful. This was “philosophy as a way of life” that trained its adherents to keep silent under torture. This was the drill of the scholarly life, before “scholarship” became a name for what those academics do who don’t quite do research.
In an attenuated mode, does something of the pain of this traditional Christian moral training persist in the solitary time and lonely labour of the traditional PhD? If this is so, it suggests how we might begin to get a historical rather than psychoanalytical purchase on the fascinating “paradox” that Lee and Williams have begun to explore: why, for all its misery, the doctors forged in fire remain so attached to the PhD. And then perhaps - one can only wish - their doctoral time and hard solitary labour will equip some men - and some women too - to keep silent in confessional encounter groups, even when these are re-baptised as reflective “research workshops.”

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WORKS CITED