

Title: That Role Ends

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Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. V, no. II
(Summer 2026), pp. 10-12

Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



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Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies is published by Memorial University of Newfoundland



*Janus Unbound: Journal
of Critical Studies*
E-ISSN: 2564-2154
5(2) 10-12
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Graduate degree university supervision is an unusually intimate institutional arrangement, involving years of mentorship, intellectual formation, evaluation, and often true personal investment. Graduate school encourages, relies on, and profits from these relationships, yet is not accountable when they fail in ways that do not meet any formal threshold of misconduct, producing a category of harm that is real but not institutionally recognizable.

To the student, the supervisor is effectively the institution—the gatekeeper of their academic trajectory, professional networks, publication opportunities, funding, and, ultimately, of whether the student graduates, and on what note. Supervisors criticize, praise, and advise. They are expected to be formative, not just academically. And they are unregulated. “There are all kinds of relationships between students and professors,” mine said over beer, shortly before wielding institutional authority like a shield.

In “Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process,” bell hooks argues that the transmission of knowledge is as much an erotic as a cognitive task. Distinct from sexual attraction, eros exists in the classroom as a vital, animating force (195) that propels toward learning and self-actualization. Institutions, hooks argues, tend to deny this dimension and operate as if education is neutral and uniformly administered. This suppression does a disservice to the role of the professor, as it causes the fear of losing control—conflating eros with the sexual—to override the desire to teach (199). In her own account as a young teacher, hooks doesn't realize she has been mistreating a student until acknowledging that she was erotically drawn to him: “Overly conscious then about ways such repression and denial could lead to the ‘wounding’ of students, I was determined to face whatever passions were aroused in the classroom setting and deal with them” (192). The problem is not eros in the classroom, but the inability to take responsibility for it.

Managing eros is nowhere in the supervisor's job description. Nor are they immune to the psychological responses that arise from suppressed emotions in a pseudo-intimate relationship. Under these charged and ambiguous conditions, the supervisory relationship can become about fulfilling needs that are more human than institutional. From the student's perspective, the relationship can feel uniquely meaningful precisely because it is difficult to understand. Its ambiguity reads as depth. But when the needs of the supervisor are no longer met, or their self-image has been threatened, the dynamic abruptly shifts. The student may feel betrayed but does not know by whom or what, or even if she

should. Fundamentally, she is confused about whether the injury is personal or professional.

Institutional betrayal is the concept born of Jennifer Freyd's earlier work on betrayal trauma theory to describe the harm done by an institution one depends on, not just in failing to protect, but in responding in ways that compound the harm. Research on institutional betrayal shows worse psychological outcomes than the original harm alone (Smith & Freyd, 2014), in part because the damage it does is epistemological: it attacks the ability to trust external systems of protection as well as one's own perception.

Because the student depends on her supervisor, she is motivated to preserve trust and to tolerate ambiguity when the erotic dimension of the relationship begins to operate against her academic interests. When the dynamic becomes unsustainable and the conflict feels personal, the supervisor can reassert themselves as the institution and retreat into professional language, while the student loses the ability to contest the relational aspect of the relationship.

'Hermeneutical justice' is Miranda Fricker's term for the type of harm that occurs when there are no shared interpretive resources to make sense of an experience, even to oneself. Fricker argues hermeneutical gaps are not incidental but reflect the experiences that the dominant power structure has historically deemed worth interpreting. The gaps are usually from the student's perspective, as nothing seems to fit: a workplace grievance requires documentable misconduct; a romantic betrayal presumes something mutually acknowledged; a toxic friendship ignores the power differential. Because there is no language, no narrative, for this kind of emotional fallout, it becomes hard to process and communicate to others, let alone to one's self.

This absence of form is precisely what makes institutional emails so effective: they assert a sort of genre—of “professional boundary-setting communication.” Within this form, the student is positioned as having misunderstood, and the supervisor's behavior is justified as course correction. Sara Ahmed describes such language as non-performative: naming a problem without bringing about the conditions that would resolve it (Complaint!, 2021). The language of professionalism acknowledges tension while avoiding the relational dynamics at hand, and leaves little room for pushback without either adopting the language—and accepting the terms of the genre—or else appearing unprofessional in turn.

But what was never officially named cannot be officially denied. In “Around the Performative,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that utterances and dynamics operating outside the official register are not without force. She describes “peripformative utterances” as those that cluster around the explicit performative, shaped by its prestige and charged with its proximity, without being governed by its constraints (75). The erotic charge in the supervisory relationship is peripformative because it forms the student without ever having to be named. To name it would invite regulation; to regulate it would dismantle the very conditions that make graduate supervision formative.

Whether intended or not, the university is protected by and benefits from the incommunicability of these pseudo-professional relationships. After extracting value in the form of output and retention, it responds with procedure when it should be with humanity. The ending is controlled by the person with institutional power. The injury remains private, the status of the supervisor is preserved, and the student is left with a loss that is difficult to process because it wasn't named—what Pauline Boss calls 'ambiguous loss' (1999).

What would it mean to communicate this harm—not as a grievance, which belongs to the institution, but as a genre that makes the experience recognizable and posits an alternate ending? This letter is my answer. "Thank you for emailing during regular work hours" was the supervisor's.

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