

# quake destruction/arts creation: arts therapy and the canterbury earthquakes

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## Abstract

As an arts therapist working in Christchurch, New Zealand, from 2010 my client body has consisted of those affected by the swarm of earthquakes that struck the Canterbury region. I explored my experiences as quake-arts therapist using arts-based autoethnography and was awarded a doctorate by Auckland University in 2016. In this summary, I demonstrate and present some core ideas about my arts-based a/r/tographic and arts therapy-informed research process. Following this, I outline seven core insights regarding the use of arts therapy and arts-based research that may have traction for others working within similarly unsettled contexts.

## Keywords

Arts-based research, autoethnography, soul-based research, trauma, earthquakes, liminality.

*I lie in the chill early hours, the darkness a crushing weight. Sweat-slick and tugging for breath, I desperately reach out past the fear. "Mum," I call to my dead mother. "Mum..." She (or my imagination of her) is quick to respond: "You weathered my cancer when you were a child, you survived the murder of your father and paralysis by gunshot of your brother, my death from cancer, your first husband's suicide, and you endured a swarm of earthquakes... but now you're responding to the public release of your PhD as if it's a life-threatening event!"*

*Her words sting, even though her tone is more curious than judging... "Distress is like that," I snap back, "it takes root in your body, creates deep grooves of patterned response..."*

*"I know," she cuts me off, "I'm a war survivor, among other traumas... And I walked beside and inside you as you created this thesis."*

*We both fall silent.*

*I notice how getting annoyed has shifted the fear from a sense of paralysis into something more usable. I check-in with my*

*senses – awakening and grounding my taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing in the now... before I drop-into this felt-sense of fear-fueled pissed-off-ness. At first it's swirling rotten-egg olive-tinged mist, but as I stay present and accepting, the fog thins and there...*

*("Oh so predictable..." whispers my dead mother over my metaphoric shoulder)*

*...is a scummy swamp-pond inhabited by my Crocodile. My age-old companion and symbol of chaos, calamity and fear-fueled contraction.*

*And yet...*

*I feel my mother smile as she interprets my fertile hesitation. "So," she says, "could this be you remembering you've carved out new, more life-affirming patterns as alternatives to the old trauma-riven ones? How about seeing the arrival of your reptilian-self as you inviting yourself to activate the same approach you used to craft this research from the chaos of your lived-experiences..." She looks about the cavern of my inner-self. "So, where are the rest of the Rogues' Gallery?" she asks fondly...*

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