

Staging areas: Vietnam veterans from Aotearoa-New Zealand and therapeutic  
landscapes in black box theatre

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Psychology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

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2016

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## Abstract

The purpose of this exegesis is to document my attempt to ride the practice-theory divide in an arts-based research project on therapeutic landscapes and war veterans from Aotearoa-New Zealand. Over a period of nine months, a group of Vietnam veterans engaged in photo-elicitation methods to explore the concept of therapeutic landscapes from their unique and subjective experiences as former personnel of the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). Of particular interest was to understand how veterans construct narratives of self-hood and wellbeing, as impacted upon by their service in an unpopular war, and their subsequent treatment by the government and public in the years hence. The data produced by the veterans was analysed and transformed into a draft script; then in collaboration with Te Rākau (a Māori community theatre group), the script and its underlying themes were re-worked in the studio using principles and techniques specific to theatre making.

The studio inquiry produced a picture of Vietnam veterans as highly motivated individuals who are politically cognisant, loyal to their cohort, media savvy, self sufficient, and who continue to draw upon their Army training to measure and maintain optimum physical health in their senior years. Key themes that emerged from the data was their belief in taking individual responsibility for one's health, an appreciation of alternative and complementary therapies as part of self-care, and a collective opinion that the current model of government support is inadequate and difficult for veterans to access. These and other findings were disseminated via a live presentation of the work-in-progress, which provided opportunity for further analysis by the veterans, and resulted in the creation of a final play-script, *The Landeaters*. Finally, by sharing excerpts from my production diary, this exegesis explores my input as a student researcher-artist, and, in doing so, brings to light both professional and personal challenges that may occur when practising arts-based inquiry with one's community – and on a topic close to one's heart.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the organisations and individuals who made vital contributions to this project in the form of logistical support, pūtea, and practical resources:

MAI ki Massey, Vietnam Veterans Children's and Grandchildren's Trust, Te Rūnanga o Ngāpuhi, Te Tumu Paeroa, Creative New Zealand, The Conch, Elspeth Tilley (School of English and Media Studies, MUW), Lily Ng and Mark Antony Steelsmith, and the whānau from Te Rākau Hua o te Wao Tapu (for giving your all to the development season of *The Landeaters*).

*“Mā te huruhuru te manu ka rere”*

And a massive mihi to those of you who contributed patience, wisdom, tautoko, aroha, smiles, and bottomless coffee:

Jim Moriarty, my supervisors, Kerry Chamberlain and Veronica Hopner (for standing with me), and my family (because you know all this to be true).

*“Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi; engari, he toa takitini”*

And finally to you, my elders from Ngāti Tūmatauenga (you know who you are):

A lifetime ago you trekked through the realm of Whiro-te-tipua, and came home with one hell of a story. Thank you for sharing some of it with me.

*“Tama tū, tama ora; tama noho, tama mate”*

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