

Researching Rupture: Engaged and Ethical Research on Extreme Nature–Society Disruption

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Abstract: Global escalation in social and environmental disruption raises crucial methodological and ethical questions for researchers working in impacted communities. Interpretive social science and humanities research can make visible the experiences of those living through socio-ecological “rupture”. Yet, there are important ethical and design challenges to face regarding: (i) the temporal and spatial scope of research; (ii) how we work with affective responses to extreme, cascading events; and (iii) how we address vulnerabilities and agency within shifting power relations. We examine these dilemmas through three case studies that illustrate why researchers need to reflect critically upon the purpose, design, and timing of research, and the demands of “being in the field” in crisis settings. Drawing on approaches from feminist and decolonial studies, critical disaster studies, and critical disability studies, we consider potential pathways to respond to these dilemmas, with the aim of catalysing further scholarly discussion about research in rupture settings.

Keywords: scale, temporality, emotions, fieldwork, social and environmental change, research ethics

This paper began as a sense-making exercise during 2019 and 2020 when five of the authors were living through the vast social and ecological impacts of Australia's Black Summer fires. The fires raged for six months and reached the bushlands that surrounded our home city of Canberra in January and February 2020. In addition to the heat, thick smoke enveloped everything: our lungs, our children's playgrounds, our homes, our workplaces, and eventually the entire city. We watched familiar landscapes burn, while neighbouring towns and communities on Australia's southeast coast attempted to cope with displacement and loss from successive fire events. Even after the fires were extinguished, the next six months brought serious flooding along Australia's eastern coast, a destructive hailstorm to Canberra, and then COVID-19.

The necessary time and space for crisis recovery disappeared within this cascading assault on people's coping capacities. Individuals, communities, regions, and the nation were on a "treadmill of trauma" (Hanscombe 2022). Disaster experiences were also intensified by underlying historical violence and inequalities, and by insensitive, top-down, and unjust governance interventions to "aid" recovery. Our embodied experiences and observations of these events led us to ask: What can engaged and ethical social research look like in such contexts? We addressed this question through a series of workshops, discussions, and joint writing as the "Researching Rupture Collective".¹

COVID-19 sparked further reflections on the methodological and ethical challenges of researching communities during crises, and how structural violence and conjunctural factors shape communities' "capacity to cope" (Ansoms et al. 2021). Questions remain about how to undertake emplaced research with communities experiencing intense and cascading socio-ecological change. In such contexts, researchers need to make sense of immediate and "fast" crisis events like rapid displacements or disasters. Simultaneously, we witness injustices and immediate human needs that stem from pre-existing, slow-moving, and interconnected social, economic, and ecological crises, including those wrought by colonialisation, industrialisation, and environmental change. These issues can call for a moral stance or response. Some of these challenges have been considered by researchers working in crisis settings, such as conflicts and disasters, and within the activist, relational, and ethical approaches that inform decolonial, feminist, and disability studies. In this article, we explore the methodological and ethical dilemmas of working in communities affected by extreme and cascading forms of socio-ecological change, or "rupture" (Mahanty et al. 2023b).

Drawing on our own empirical research experiences, as well as insights from adjacent fields, we illuminate three broad dilemmas that face social researchers and their interlocutors in rupture settings. These involve navigating: [i] the vast and complex temporal-spatial dimensions of rupture; [ii] affective and embodied responses to rupture; and [iii] tensions between structurally and historically framed power relations alongside new possibilities for agency in rupture settings. Our contribution joins a nascent genre of scholarship that "unsettles" preconceived ideas and norms about how we think about and undertake social research (Brown-Saracino 2021; Dolgon 2024).

As a group of social researchers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including geography, anthropology, and political science, we speak to empirical research that is *interpretive, emplaced, critical, and engaged*. Interpretive social research explores how individuals and groups make sense of, and act within, diverse social and political worlds (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015). Emplaced social research generates context-rich data using qualitative methods such as ethnography, oral histories, observations, interviews, and focus groups. A critical perspective recognises unequal power relations and processes of violence, while engaged scholarship involves research-based advocacy and collaboration with a wide range of actors to “make a difference” (Hirsch 2015). Our work in communities affected by nature-society disruptions and related governance interventions, including in the disability sector, has targeted distinct locations and topics but shares two commonalities.

First, we function within neoliberal systems of knowledge production where funding, reputational recognition, and political-economic pressures shape what research is funded, how it is conducted, and what it produces. We are expected to produce fast, high-volume research outputs and to demonstrate rapid “policy impact”, when emplaced social research takes time and relationships. Research administration and risk and data-management protocols front-load the research design process, constraining inductive and open-ended social research (Simula and Scott 2020). The neoliberal academy can squeeze funding for critical social scientists, as occurred when the government stopped funding for Social Sciences and Humanities under a key national scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand (Meduna 2024). Researchers also navigate multiple structural hierarchies between disciplines, genders, and career stages. Discriminatory attitudes and additional emotional and administrative burdens are especially pronounced for scholars from marginalised communities, especially disabled and Indigenous researchers (Mellifont 2019). Overall, the neoliberal academy’s heightened emphasis on managerial outcomes, metrics, and employment precarity frames who can do research and how. In this environment, we ask: how can social researchers design ethical projects that build meaningful solidarities with communities on the frontline of rupture?

Secondly, our academic institutions operate in the settler colonial societies of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Our universities and research funding institutions often venerate Western scientific perspectives at the expense of Indigenous ways of knowing and telling. This comes into friction with ongoing struggles by First Peoples for recognition, reconciliation, and self-determination. These systemic and structural issues underlie Western academic knowledge production and require ongoing attention in contemporary research; hence our continual engagement with decolonial scholarship.

From here, the paper proceeds in three parts. First, we introduce the concept of rupture to describe the cascading nature-society disruptions we increasingly encounter in our field sites, and identify three related methodological dilemmas for interpretive scholars. Second, we illustrate these dilemmas through three cases

of our own research in affected communities. Third, we discuss relevant insights from adjacent fields to help navigate these research dilemmas.

On Researching Rupture

The heuristic of rupture helps us to examine the intense and unrelenting nature-society disruptions facing the communities we study. Mahanty et al. (2023b) define rupture as a set of adverse, interactive, and temporally complex nature-society disruptions, that have deep structural/historical drivers, and far-reaching material, emotional, and social effects.

The concept draws from diverse scholarship that recognises how colonialism and capitalism drive ongoing, sudden, and cascading disruptions in nature-society relations (e.g. Harvey 2006; Massey 2005; Moore 2015). Rupture specifically accounts for the acceleration and intensification of change (Eriksen 2016), while taking seriously the material and emotional impacts on affected communities. Drawing on conjunctural analyses of social revolutions (e.g. Hall 2021; Lund 2016; Sewell 1996), Mahanty et al. (2023b) propose that rupture amplifies risks *and* opens opportunities to challenge the status quo, meaning that we need to look beyond “damage” stories (see Tuck 2009). Furthermore, departing from systemic or universalist lenses on cascading crisis scenarios, such as “polycrisis” (Lawrence et al. 2024), the rupture lens advocates for emplaced, decolonial, and experiential approaches that recognise how deep historical processes like colonisation have played a fundamental role in producing the conditions of the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd 2017). Interpretive social research has a crucial role to play in studying rupture, but faces inherent dilemmas, to which we now turn. These dilemmas call for attention to *how* and *why* we conduct research in settings of extreme socio-ecological change in ways that differ from more linear investigations into the causes and effects of change.

Dilemma 1: Understanding Rupture’s Temporal and Spatial Complexity

Research activity is inevitably bounded in space and time, but rupture processes are not. They can be slow *and* rapid, and cascade in unpredictable, uneven ways. Timescales and significant events are also viewed differently depending upon stance and lens. For instance, Indigenous non-linear temporalities contrast with the compressed and modern time-space of capitalist societies (May and Thrift 2001). Studying rupture processes in specific places and times therefore raises practical and epistemological questions.

The first question relates to how we understand the long-term and structural factors producing rupture. Visible and rapid crises (such as a bushfire, pandemic, or flood) overlay slow-burning crises based on racism, colonisation, climate change, environmental degradation, and others. The immediacy of specific crisis events can distract from these slower and longer-term forces (Storying Geography Collective et al. 2023:10) and contribute to “disaster pornography”: sensational

and decontextualised depictions of suffering (Recuber 2013). We therefore underscore the importance of exploring how long-term structural injustices shape contemporary events (Sewell 1996). This recognition raises practical research design questions about how far back our analysis should go, and which influences to consider.

The second question is about the timing of research in ruptured communities. Some disaster scholars observe that efforts to study and learn from community-led responses may inadvertently alter the nature or impact of such responses (Louis-Charles et al. 2020). Multiple and successive social researchers may also overburden and fatigue affected communities (as we discuss below). In disaster-prone regions, unethical practices can escalate and make communities wary of research participation, leading some emergency managers and community leaders to vet and coordinate research access (ibid.). However, important lessons can be learned from responses at such times.

The third question surrounds the spatial scales of research. The expansive impacts of rupture require a wide spatial lens to grasp their full extent and implications (Eriksen 2016). Yet interpretive research prioritises the local—working at the granular scale of households, neighbourhoods, settlements, and familiar/lived landscapes where rupture takes on social meaning (Campbell 2018:26). Rupture also demands attention to interconnected, multi-scalar, and spatially uneven processes of structural inequality and capital accumulation (Harvey 2006). Our capacity to understand such large and multi-scale phenomena through interpretive research is inevitably limited, yet interpretive methods provide essential grounded insights.

This first dilemma thus speaks to frictions between remaining grounded while comprehending rupture's vast spatial and temporal dimensions within ongoing histories and structures, and how we set research boundaries in space and time.

Dilemma 2: Seeing Rupture's Embodied Emotional Dimensions

The second methodological dilemma addresses embodied and lived experiences of nature–society rupture (Albrecht et al. 2007; Celermajer 2021). Embodied emotions go beyond individual responses to reflect systemic oppression, historical trauma, and ongoing struggles for liberation (Ahmed 2014; FRIDA Fund 2024). They can therefore be integral to collective action, resistance, and solidarity (ibid.). Understanding embodied responses and their catalytic effects is therefore crucial for making sense of individual and collective experiences and actions during rupture (Ahmann et al. 2023; Ahmed 2014).

Novel methods, such as visual and narrative journaling, help to interpret the embodied experiences of participants and researchers (e.g. Trogisch 2022; Wittmer and Qureshi 2023). Here, two issues remain underexplored. First is the risk that discussing challenging emotions can cause further distress in settings where people are traumatised and trying to rebuild their lives. Institutional ethics protocols often refer participants to local support services, which may be absent or stretched beyond capacity in rupture settings. We also need to guard against

telling trauma stories in ways that fetishise disaster (see above) or commodify trauma for advocacy purposes without concurrent support to those living with it (Colvin 2006). This is why decolonial research cautions against “damage centred” research where “stories of pain” can reinforce narratives of community depletion and disenfranchisement (Tuck 2009). These insights signal the importance and challenges of understanding embodied emotions during rupture.

The researcher’s own embodied emotions are also significant and may be especially charged in research settings where they have direct connections (Celermajer 2021). Strong emotions may create a sense of shared experience between researchers and participants. Yet caution is vital, as the challenges and risks of *living with* rupture are not entirely shared between researchers and participants, whose resources to cope with risk may differ significantly (Tuck 2009). Researchers’ material and embodied experiences of rupture are thus distinct from those living in those environments.

Another challenge for researchers is that listening with “empathy and support” often takes significant emotional labour (Giri et al. 2023). Methodological guidance on how to navigate researchers’ emotional engagements is scarce, however. Current work suggests that researchers “protect themselves” by safeguarding with preparedness, peer support, counselling, and reflexivity (Bloor et al. 2007:2). At the same time, the temporal and spatial scale of rupture research can limit the time for advance preparation, while research settings typically lack counselling or peer support services.

An essential starting point, which we explore in our cases, is the need to recognise emotions in our research settings, as well as our own embodied responses as researchers. In sum, the second dilemma is about navigating embodied emotions, among participants *and* within ourselves.

Dilemma 3: Understanding the Interplay of Power and Agency During Rupture

The damages wrought by nature-society rupture can centre narratives of vulnerability and marginalisation in affected communities (Brennan et al. 2023). Vulnerability narratives can, however, reinforce assumptions that affected groups are passive subjects rather than active agents, creating new vulnerabilities and risks in the process (Brown et al. 2017). Disability scholars thus stress the importance of recognising people’s agency and adaptive capacities rather than simply approaching them as vulnerable “victims” (Priestley and Hemingway 2007). Rupture-affected communities are similarly not just sites of vulnerability but also of innovation, resistance, and adaptation (Holloway et al. 2023). Scholars of social revolution and conflict show that episodes of turbulence can produce “open moments” for new forms of agency and collective action (Lund 2016:1202; Sewell 1996). Research in rupture settings therefore requires us to reassess assumed positions of vulnerability to consider how those most impacted might organise or exercise agency in processes of repair.

At the same time, state and non-state efforts to manage and rebuild—or govern rupture—can produce diverse outcomes. These include intensified violence, solidification of existing power relations, or facilitation of new reactionary responses (e.g. Nightingale 2018). Rupture researchers must then consider the complex interplay between agency and power, to understand how governance interventions interact with local experiences and responses to rupture.

Exploring the Dilemmas of Rupture Research in Practice

The three dilemmas discussed above challenge rupture scholars to develop methods for navigating spatio-temporal complexity; embodied emotions, in reflexive and relational ways; and shifting power–agency dynamics, including in the academy. We now illustrate these dilemmas through three cases of rupture that reflect distinct stages of research, diverse settings, and complex scales. These are: (i) grant preparation for research on rupture in a fire-impacted region of Southeast Australia; (ii) fieldwork to study rupture intensified by dams along the Sesan river system, Cambodia; and (iii) long-term research on processes of rupture in earthquake-affected Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Research Design for Rupture in a Region: Southeast NSW, Australia

Australia's Black Summer bushfires in 2019–2020 deeply affected the region of Southeast New South Wales (NSW) where some of us have deep personal and material ties. In early 2020, this motivated Mahanty, Milne and Hendriks to seek competitive grant funding to study the nature-society rupture unfolding around them. They proposed to explore how communities navigate rupture, and its associated governance interventions for recovery and renewal. The grant team's personal entanglements with the Black Summer fires collapsed the usual researcher/researched dichotomy. Conventional approaches frame the researcher as “the knower” while the participants are “to be known”, often producing a paternalistic dynamic in which “research participants are vulnerable and in need of protection” (Moore et al. 2021:182). Yet, with the fires at their doorsteps, the grant team had to reckon with their own vulnerabilities and affective experiences. Though the project was ultimately not funded, the design process provided pertinent methodological insights on rupture research.

Southeast NSW is a heavily forested and sparsely populated coastal region that is 150 kilometres wide, covering about 50,000 km². Canberra is the main population centre—a city of approximately 450,000 people, many of whom are professionals and service providers. In contrast, the surrounding region has a dispersed rural population of around 75,000, marked by pockets of socio-economic disadvantage and seasonal reliance on fishing, forestry, farming, and tourism. The grant team found Southeast NSW an appropriate scale for their proposed project, as it represented a landscape with identifiable and connected populations, while

enabling multi-scalar processes to be considered. Project assessors, however, asked whether the regional scale of analysis was sufficient to comprehend the fire's vast spatial footprint.

To study local experiences of rupture and its governance, the grant team planned for interpretive research in four fire-affected localities. But the vast geographic scale, complex timelines, and differentiated experiences of the Black Summer fires raised design questions about which communities to research, and why. One of the project's assessors questioned the representativeness of participants within proposed localities, and of the proposed study locations for such a large-scale phenomenon. In their view, the grant team's emplaced, contextualised project design was too "micro" to study such a "macro" bushfire event.

In raising these concerns, the assessors were speaking to Dilemma 1: Southeast NSW was consumed by fires of such magnitude and intensity that localised and linear considerations of space and time were stretched. The rupture caused by the fires in this region was of national, international, and planetary significance. Tellingly, smoke drifted across the Tasman Sea to Aotearoa New Zealand, turning their skies an apocalyptic orange (ABC News 2020). The fires brought future climate change into the present, collapsing space and time onto a single stage for all to witness (Flanagan 2019). This manifested in our struggle to determine appropriate analytical and empirical boundaries for our study.

The grant team also contended with the question of how far back in time the research should go, to make sense of community experiences of rupture and its governance. The Black Summer fires rendered visible long-term damage wrought by slow and ongoing processes of capitalism, extraction, neoliberalism, and colonialism. These produced increased fire risks and vulnerabilities through: (i) long-term degradation of forests due to logging, which arguably increased flammability (Lindenmayer et al. 2021); (ii) increased fuel loads from the disruption of cultural burning, due to the dispossession of First Peoples (Gammage and Pascoe 2021; Williamson et al. 2020); and (iii) erosion of bushfire preparedness due to the hollowing out of services under successive conservative Federal and State governments, influenced by climate denialism and neoliberal policies (Adcock 2021). Climate change then supercharged the conditions for fire through an intense two-year drought across Southeast Australia, followed by an extraordinary convergence of two cyclical, weather phenomena in 2019 (ibid.). The fires need to be understood within these historical and ongoing processes—a challenge for researchers who are limited to a "slice" in time.

Subsequent disasters and crises in this region immediately after the fires further complicated the team's project design and its temporal boundaries (Dilemma 1). In 2020, damaging floods coursed through the burnt landscapes of Southeast NSW, lifting topsoil and ash into the rivers, causing erosion and diminishing water quality (Kemter et al. 2021); a severe hailstorm hit Canberra, causing AUD 1.9 billion in damage, and yet more trauma and disruption (Gallin 2021); then COVID-19 brought illness and lockdowns across Australia. The pandemic conditions left little opportunity for local communities to process the trauma of the bushfires,

let alone to recover or rebuild. Five years on, a regional housing crisis and intense cost-of-living pressures have deepened persistent, intergenerational cycles of disadvantage in rural NSW (Azzopardi 2023). The grant team has often reflected on how one spatially and temporally bounded empirical project could capture such diverse community experiences of cascading disasters, and interrelated, long-term processes of socio-ecological change.

Time has also revealed how shared crises can impact researchers and communities differentially. For example, socio-economic conditions in Canberra now differ markedly from those in remote and rural areas of NSW. Some fire victims still live in tents and caravans, while Canberra-based university researchers have been able to continue their lives. This highlights our need to remain sensitive to how the trauma of rupture is experienced differently by the researcher and affected communities.

Field Research on a Ruptured River System: The Sesan River, Cambodia

Mahanty's research with Cambodian colleagues along the Sesan River—part of a larger project spanning the Mekong River Basin—provides a rupture case that grappled with complex emotional and political terrain. Since the 1990s, the Basin has seen the construction of 745 operational dams, aimed at transforming the Mekong “from a Cold War ‘front line’ into a ‘corridor of commerce’” (Bakker 1999:209–210). These infrastructures overlay the reshaping of social and land relations by French colonists from the mid-1800s. Independence in the 1950s was followed by violent episodes of conflict and ongoing land seizures for state and private development projects (Mahanty et al. 2023a). The Sesan River research team prioritised site-specific empirical work to examine the intimate and experiential dimensions of rupture, while using secondary research to understand wider Basin dynamics.

In 2018, the team began fieldwork at two large dam sites on the Sesan: the Lower Sesan 2 Dam (LS2) in Stung Treng Province, Cambodia and the Yali Falls Dam in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam. LS2's 400-megawatt capacity made it Cambodia's largest operational hydropower dam. The dam displaced around 5,000 predominantly ethnic Lao and Indigenous Bunong people. A vocal and regionally connected resistance campaign opposed resettlement, gaining international media attention and, for a time, gained “poster child” status in the Mekong anti-dam movement. These developments made LS2 an important case for insights on the power–agency dynamics associated with rupture (Dilemma 3).

The larger (720 MW) upstream Yali Falls Dam (Yali) in Vietnam displaced around 8,475 people in the 1990s (Dao et al. 2004). Compensation was very limited, and communities faced critical land and resource shortages that ongoing dam and land developments intensified (ibid.) The dam also muddied the waters and livelihoods of downstream Cambodian communities (Hirsch and Wyatt 2004; Wyatt and Baird 2007). Only by looking at both LS2 and Yali could these

combined effects be made visible; for instance, how routine water releases from Yali were experienced downstream as erratic and distressing flood events (Mahanty et al. 2023a). Yet studying both sites in–depth extended the time, resources, and complexity of field research (Dilemma 1) and made it susceptible to shocks like COVID-19, which ultimately derailed research at Yali.

Temporal challenges also surfaced in the Sesan research (Dilemma 1). The team arrived just after dam-induced displacements, although communities had already endured long-term changes in water levels and volatile river flows. Indeed, the Indigenous Bunong community could not separate LS2 from their longer history of nature–society disruption and violence. They viewed the dam as one “hot” or intense period of pressure (*pel khdau*) within a far longer history of violence by the French, various companies, and the Cambodian state who had enclosed Indigenous lands for conservation, plantations, and resource extraction.

In a 2025 revisit, Mahanty found that Indigenous struggles for land and state services for resettlement were ongoing. Communities that were celebrated for their feisty resistance to forced resettlement between 2016 and 2020 were being heavily surveilled and intimidated by the state five years on. The government sought to use LS2 as a model for resettlement at other planned Cambodian dams, and dissent was inconvenient. Such fluctuations in community agency, and state and civil society responses could only become visible over this longer period (Dilemma 3) (see also Milne 2021). The case highlights the importance of long-term research engagements with sustained funding commitments rather than the serendipity that enabled Mahanty’s post-project field visit.

The Sesan team had a strong interest in understanding embodied emotions during rupture and their role in lived experiences and agency. They were less prepared to contend with their own embodied emotions as researchers (Dilemma 2). The team keenly felt the emotional labour and responsibility of bearing witness to community accounts of displacement and violence. They discussed these issues at length during fieldwork; for example, about whose voices and emotions were visible to the team and whose were invisible. They were conscious of the risks the community faced relative to the team, reflected in the Khmer proverb: “The boat leaves but the pier remains” (*touk tau, kompong nau*). This is why one Cambodian colleague, after returning to Phnom Penh, would take calls from villagers seeking help on land negotiations and their struggles with local authorities. He responded by connecting them to potentially helpful civil society organisations through personal networks. Finally, the Sesan team was challenged to interpret participants’ emotions across our experiential and cultural differences. In the immediate aftermath of dam construction and resettlement, LS2 appeared as a “griefscape” (after Trogisch’s [2022] “fearscape”). Villagers mourned the loss of land and broken connections with ancestral spirits and other species. They feared repercussions from this more-than-human world due to dam-driven destruction. The team used visual methods to gain insights on emotional experiences (Mahanty et al. 2023a). Later, feminist methodologies helped to interpret this emotional landscape (on which see below).

Long–Term Research on Rupture in a City: Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand

Cretney's research in Ōtautahi Christchurch across multiple, and sometimes fragmented, projects over 13 years reflects the challenges in understanding complex processes of rupture (Dilemma 1) alongside the possibilities for agency and resistance in a place now renowned for crisis (Dilemma 3). This longitudinal—albeit patchy—approach has been shaped by the precarity of early-career research pathways in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, which constrains experientially and relationally intense engagements with rupture across time and space.

The February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, the most destructive event in a sequence of over 12,000 aftershocks, took 188 lives and led to the almost complete rebuild of parts of the city's centre. The earthquakes were followed by over a decade of cascading and overlapping crises: multiple wildfires in peri-urban areas, urban and regional floods, and in 2019, a white supremacist terrorist attack that took the lives of 51 people at two mosques. Characterised as an “extreme city” (Matthewman and Uekusa 2022:9) or with the “tiresome and wearying” moniker “the city of resilience” (Harris 2020), residents of Ōtautahi Christchurch have known both the cutting edge of innovations in participatory, community and Indigenous-led post-disaster initiatives, and the sharp edge of government interventions shaped by development and business interests over community aspirations (Dilemma 3). Residents are used to the frequent arrival, and departure, of social researchers studying how to respond to and deal with such extensive crises (Dilemma 1).

The earthquakes were formative in Cretney's career, as a scholar positioned both inside and outside of her focal communities. She lost her family home in one of the quakes and lived through the subsequent community response. This experience kickstarted Cretney's Master's and PhD research on the politics of community response to disasters. Throughout this time, she continually navigated the complexities of being a researcher with close connections to these disasters, while having the privilege and ability to leave the impacted city (Dilemma 2).

The challenges of rupture research were clear soon after the initial earthquakes when overseas and domestic researchers flooded the city. Two weeks after the most damaging quake, Civil Defence personnel received 100 research-related enquiries per day, not including researchers who bypassed officials (Beaven et al. 2016). In response, a short-term moratorium on research was issued under the state of emergency, especially targeting social scientists, to reduce pressure on impacted communities (ibid.).

This raises several tensions for researchers who are both insiders and outsiders during times of rupture. For Cretney, connection to the city helped to build relationships for PhD fieldwork four years after the quakes, but the field reality was nuanced. During fieldwork, many participants and local researchers commented upon the massive researcher influx, their requests for information, and—at times—extractive research approaches used by those with little to no connection to the region. At one point, Cretney was asked if she was “one of those fly in, fly out researchers”. Cretney had a close emotional and experiential connection to

the earthquakes but could leave the area and was not tied in the same material way to the city as many research participants, such as those battling insurance claims many years later. Thus, even where rupture research is prompted by a researcher's personal connection to places and communities (see also the work on Southeast NSW above) difficult questions remain around power differentials, mobility, and emotions in both research practice and analysis (Dilemma 2).

The entanglement of researcher identity and experience also enabled longer-term insights that complicated traditional narratives of crisis. Research in the context of sudden crises has often focused more on immediate impacts, rather than longitudinal impacts and subtle shifts in politics and society. In contrast, Cretney's research over a decade has traced the response and mobilisation of communities to the political disasters that follow initial crises, often to become "second" or "third" disasters (Quarantelli 1999). Being able to work in one place over a decade made visible the nuanced ways in which communities craft and subvert narratives. This can help to "unflatten" (Sousanis 2015) binary thinking in the face of rupture's complex governmental and socio-political dimensions, such as emergency response versus recovery, community versus government, progressive versus regressive, and politicised versus depoliticised.

In Ōtautahi Christchurch, the concept of resilience became a focal point for this nuanced contestation. Resilience was both loathed by some as a tool for the adjudication of government responsibility to communities in the wake of disaster, and re-appropriated by others to build momentum for projects of resistance or prefigurative politics. These radically oriented uses of resilience acted to reframe the narrative that communities wanted the world to hear (Cretney 2019). Cultivating research over longer periods of time is vital for challenging post-disaster framings of passive vulnerability and victimhood, to allow observations of everyday enactments of power and agency as communities navigate rupture (Dilemma 3).

Cretney's journey enabled her to trace how communities have engaged over time in dynamic ways with ideas like resilience, beyond their immediate response. Her experience highlights that long-term and flexible research engagements are needed to understand how impacted communities might adopt, resist, subvert, or reject narratives or governance arrangements during both slow and sudden crises.

Discussion: Navigating the Research Dilemmas

In navigating the research dilemmas discussed above, it is vital not to place the burden of action only on individual scholars who already face structural constraints and power asymmetries in the neoliberal academy (Simula and Scott 2020). Instead, we advocate for a relational approach that engages networks and tackles power relations to nurture "pathways for resistance" (Chmutina et al. 2025:7) through forms of collective action and solidarity. Within universities, this requires open discussions about the purpose of research to foster more collaborative approaches between staff, students, civil society, and communities

(Racimo et al. 2025). In this spirit, we now revisit the three dilemmas of rupture research and consider ways to navigate them.

Navigating Spatio-Temporal Complexity by Rethinking Research Design

The complex temporal and spatial dilemmas faced in our cases included questions about how far back the analysis should go, especially given the significance of colonisation in settler contexts, and whose concepts of time should prevail. Ethical issues also arose in considering the optimum length of time for researchers to stay in the field, to be more than “fly in, fly out” researchers, but also not overstaying in stressed communities.

For rupture processes to be contextualised critically within structural and historical influences, we need to go beyond the temporal logics of colonialism and modernity (Chakkalakal and Ren 2022): these are the logics that drive harmful mega-infrastructure like LS2. Instead, scholars can challenge linear notions of time and engage local and Indigenous timescales (Sewell 1996). Davies (2022:411) calls for “slow observation” to make the “slow violence” of rupture visible. While specific research projects only see a slice of these long-term processes, we can still attend to them through historical sources (e.g. Chann et al. 2024) and by following community perspectives on significant events—in a sense relying on *their* “slow observation”.

Longer-term research engagements, as described for Ōtautahi Christchurch, are challenging to do in the neoliberal academy, but crucial. Possible pathways to overcome existing constraints could include working in partnership with philanthropic foundations and civil society organisations that are committed to social justice in marginalised communities. This may require greater flexibility in project design, to incorporate the perspectives of partners and to address unforeseen challenges. Where possible, rupture research should encompass large temporal and geographic scales. As we noted above for the LS2 dam, systematic opportunities for longitudinal research are preferable to chance opportunities. Yet, these methodological suggestions sit in tension with current academic trends for tightly focused research and extractive fieldwork.

All three cases required us to work with messiness, uncertainty, intra-action, planetary entanglements, and emotions like grief (Kelz and Knappe 2021). Decolonial and situated approaches, like “future memory work” (Chahine 2022) and autoethnography (Teo 2023), may help to navigate this new ground. Also relevant are approaches that provide time and space for research participants to collectively grieve past and future loss, and acknowledge past, present, and future injustices (Kelz and Knappe 2021). Decolonial and feminist lenses provide powerful ways to do this, through co-produced and collaborative knowledge production grounded in local experience and entangled histories (Streule 2024; Tsing et al. 2017). This might involve new collaborations that engage multiple epistemologies to understand the social and political conditions that produce crises,

and to centre justice—moving beyond aid, charity, and “pain stories” (Tuck and Yang 2014:8).

Such approaches help to address research-scoping dilemmas by exposing the systems of inequality established by capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and colonialism (see Peet and Watts 1996). Co-production can take many forms, like the new work by Milne’s PhD student to co-design her study on the Black Summer fires with key community organisations in her field locations. Building these possibilities involves working around the constraints of the neoliberal academy in creative ways. For instance, resisting pressure to articulate front-end research designs in grant proposals, allowing space for co-design, and navigating institutional ethics protocols in ways that are also responsive to community obligations and requests.

Finally, in reckoning with the vast and multiple scales of rupture, the use of spatial boundaries—a region, a river system, a city—went some distance in bridging local interpretive work with wider contextualisation and multi-scale analysis. This approach also applies to temporal boundaries, as each case involved historical, rapid, and cascading events, all symptomatic of capitalism’s vast geographical and political connectivity (Martin et al. 2022). These processes can only be seen through the analysis of broad spatio-temporal scales and causalities in crisis events: an approach that allows us to explain how vulnerabilities and other outcomes emerge (Robinson et al. 2021). Interpretive scholars are uniquely placed to expose these multi-scalar relationships with a critical lens. Collective and collaborative sense-making can then produce new possibilities for action in settings of rupture.

Treating Embodied and Affective Responses with Reflexivity and Care

The three cases illustrated the emotive and potentially controversial character of rupture research. We saw that researchers’ embodied responses are not divorced from the affective landscapes we are studying. Furthermore, our own experiences still sit within uneven researcher–community power relations (Bilgen et al. 2021). This is why we are cautious about research protocols that emphasise practices of physical and emotional self-care and safeguarding for researchers (Bloor et al. 2007). In our experience, as seen at LS2, studying and understanding lived experiences of rupture calls for researchers to balance between inward and outward care. This means looking after oneself while simultaneously being receptive to what participants are grappling with: ongoing struggles with state violence, loss of hope, and rebuilding amid fears of the next rupture event. In LS2, this was achieved through personal and team reflection, and exchange with other scholars interested in affect. Cretney has additionally found support for the emotional labour of her research in relationships with mentors outside of the crisis context and undertaking crisis intervention training.

Drawing on these insights, we advocate for “uncomfortable reflexivity”, which “leaves us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged research” (Pillow 2003:193). As seen in LS2 and Christchurch, this kind of reflexivity extends to

understanding the “workings of power” (Pillow 2003:188) and remaining accountable to struggles for self-representation where we work (ibid.). Our rupture research cases also show the importance of going beyond self-centred care strategies that can reproduce hierarchies (Gani and Khan 2024), separate scholars from their research context (McGowan 2020), or absolve researchers from guilt and complicity in exploitative power relations (Tuck and Yang 2012). A practical example of “uncomfortable reflexivity” is the online exhibition and book called the “Bukavu Series” (Nyenyezi et al. 2020). Here, 30 research collaborators and assistants reflected on their experiences of doing research in conflict-affected areas, teasing out how local contributions are often hidden behind lead researchers from the Global North. Beyond individual responsibility, accountable forms of reflexivity can involve challenging the institutions we inhabit.

A feminist ethic of care can also support reflexive and accountable research. The notion of “collective flourishing”, for example, views researchers and participants as being part of “relational, material and affective webs” (Lindén and Singleton 2021:2). Care within this frame involves challenging paternalistic hierarchies (Moore et al. 2021) and supporting self-determination along with bodily autonomy, responsibility, egalitarianism, mutuality, and solidarity. To care fundamentally means recognising and embracing our interdependencies and connections to larger politics, which calls for rupture researchers to make visible the “current reign of carelessness” (The Care Collective 2020:11).

Care is also relevant to challenging the structural constraints imposed by the neoliberal academy. Cultures of mentoring, collaboration, and co-authoring may look quite different through a care lens. In this vein, feminist geographers Caretta and Faira (2020:173) argue that researchers need to invest in “time and care”, including “slow mentoring” that holds space for reflection and collaboration. Collective reflexive strategies, as used in this article, can also recognise the multiple ways in which authors contribute and collectively learn (Mountz et al. 2015:1239). By enacting care in our practice, ethical rupture research can then become a means to “prefiguratively disperse power from below” (Milstein 2024:8).

Nurturing Possibilities for Agency through Relational Knowledge Production

Our cases illuminated the importance of exposing how power structures shape outcomes and possibilities for action in rupture settings. We also showed how long-term, emplaced, and interpretive approaches can contribute important insights into formal and informal power dynamics across scales—including the power imbalances between researchers and the communities we study. Here, we explore critical orientations that can actively centre the knowledge, agency, and leadership of communities affected by rupture.

The first is a “strengths-based approach” from disability studies, which recognises the agency and adaptive capacities of disabled people rather than simply approaching them as “victims” (Priestley and Hemingway 2007). A

strengths-based approach to researching rupture takes seriously the expertise and resilience of affected communities (Ton et al. 2021), providing space to acknowledge and document both systemic oppression and community agency.

The second is a relational approach that challenges extractive research norms and fosters opportunities for community empowerment and co-production. Relational approaches are used in diverse fields but have been particularly embraced by feminist and disability scholars. They suggest research is better attuned to the needs and priorities of participants if we treat consent as an ongoing, negotiated process (Yanchapaxi et al. 2023). Using participatory methods, they integrate community voices throughout the research (Ybarra 2014) and maintain long-term engagements rather than treating research participants as one-time sources of data (Hall et al. 2021). These methods are particularly relevant where communities are navigating overlapping crises, and conventional research protocols do not accommodate evolving needs and priorities.

Disability researchers similarly emphasise the principle of “nothing about us without us” in advocating for collaborative methodologies where disabled people are co-researchers, from agenda-setting to dissemination (Kuri and Schormans 2022). During the pandemic, Kuri and Schormans (2022) demonstrated methodological flexibility and an ethic of care through participatory, arts-based research with people with intellectual disabilities. Their work highlights how a commitment to inclusivity, collaboration, and epistemic justice can shape more ethical and impactful research practices.

On a cautionary note, our cases all reflected the need for rupture researchers to navigate power hierarchies within impacted communities. These shape the negotiation of responsibility and action during crises (Brinks and Ibert 2020; Lerner 2011), and if misunderstood, can deepen community trauma. Indeed, without reflexivity and attention to inequality, researchers can deepen rather than aid in transforming community frictions or inequalities (Mertens 2021). Interpretive research has a strong record of interrogating overly simplified notions of community. Our cases all signal the importance of examining internal power dynamics and inequalities when undertaking rupture research, especially as we begin to embrace strengths-based and relational approaches.

Finally, we are encouraged by the growing recognition of community-led disaster and climate adaptation research; although this remains unmatched by funding and attention in mainstream academic and policy discourses (Taylor et al. 2025; Ton et al. 2021). Community-engaged research in rupture contexts therefore demands not only methodological shifts, but also structural changes in how research systems are organised.

Conclusion

This article has argued for greater attention to *how* we research nature-society rupture. This involves thinking more critically about the *why* of our research, the *scope and boundaries* of our study, and the *demands* that our “being in the field” present—both to us as scholars and to those with whom we work. To navigate

these issues, we presented three methodological dilemmas in rupture research, which were elaborated through three cases. We then drew upon insights and approaches from adjacent fields to flesh out future approaches for rupture research; these represent attunements or sensitivities to consider, rather than models or prescriptions. Our goal has been to stimulate discussion on the methodological dilemmas experienced by interpretive scholars and others working in settings of rupture, based on different cases, locations, and scholarly debates.

Researching rupture raises crucial questions about relationality and complexity that challenge how we think about the scope and boundaries of our research. We have argued for explicit attention to the potentially vast scale of rupture. Rupture is not always defined by suddenness and speed but can involve slow-burn processes of structural injustice that we should not lose sight of. We have highlighted the need to interrogate colonial and capitalist logics that take historical settings as a “given” from which environmental crises unfold. Interpretive scholars especially can contribute place-based analysis rather than event-based analysis that exposes how cascading processes constitute rupture and its effects. Future research could probe further the practical and ethical dimensions of navigating the sheer scale of rupture events in research design. Boundary-setting must inevitably be negotiated in context-appropriate ways. Our call is to give these decisions explicit attention because they are consequential in framing what is made visible and invisible—with the potential to reify structural inequalities.

Alongside questions of scale, we have drawn attention to the emotional dimensions of rupture research. Here, we need to see and understand (embodied and socially framed) emotions among both research participants and scholars. Methodological discussions on these points are crucial for developing new approaches. Attention to our own affective responses can help to level traditional researcher–participant hierarchies, while building new forms of relationality and accountability based on feminist principles of care. We note, however, that power differentials will necessarily remain. We therefore agree with decolonial scholars on the need to “unsettle” conventional approaches to reflexivity—to go beyond comfortable or routine procedures that can be easily “ticked off”.

Another key insight is that research needs to go beyond the despair and trauma of rupture to consider agency and opportunities. This is both to recognise the capabilities and desires of impacted groups, and to document practices of hope. We also need to witness where prefigurative practices are quashed by governance and recovery interventions by state and non-state actors. By fostering agency, reciprocity, and solidarity, researchers can contribute to a non-extractive research landscape that meaningfully responds to, and supports, the futures imagined by rupture-affected communities.

Ethical social research on rupture demands not only methodological shifts but also broader shifts in how knowledge production is structured and valued. The neoliberal academy places many constraints on the long-term and open-ended studies needed for emplaced rupture research. We hope that this contribution will foster collective ways to transcend some of these constraints. In this context, collaborative sharing of our experiences and stories on rupture research can itself

become a practice of hope and solidarity. We look forward to further praxis-centred discussions.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that we have no actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest in relation to this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnote

¹ The listed authors comprise the “Researching Rupture Collective”. Between 2022 and 2025, the Collective examined the ethical and practical challenges of research in settings of intense nature-society disruption. This article is the outcome of our collective reflections to which each author has contributed in diverse and significant ways.

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