The Penguin and the Wahine: Shipwrecks, resilience and popular culture

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# Introduction

On the 12th February 1909 the SS Penguin foundered and 75 were lost. On the 10th April 1968 the Wahine sank, with a loss of fifty-four souls. Both passenger ferries, they were lost to storms in the treacherous waters of the Cook Strait, Aotearoa New Zealand. On 12th February 2009 and 10 April 2018, crowds gathered on the foreshore of Wellington Harbour as part of the 100th and 50th anniversaries of the Penguin and Wahine disasters. Shared through globally syndicated networks, local news media ran special features to publicize the anniversaries. For those who wanted to attend, memorial services were held and new plaques were unveiled. Locals and tourists alike were also guided to the permanent exhibitions and cultural excursions at local museums and cemeteries. And for the Wahine commemoration there was a gathering for remaining survivors, displays and a flotilla steam-past of over 40 boats, including some used in the rescue 50 years before. These commemoration activities were feeding into and off a rich seam of memorialisation practices embedded in a diverse range of popular culture forms. News media, documentaries, cemetery tours, historical exhibitions were all at work normalizing death and the dead in particular ways –as binding the dead in service to the needs of global risk-orientated society.

This chapter explores popular culture’s impact on how we engage with and understand death and the dead. As argued by Ruth Penfold-Mount, popular culture generates ‘complex cultural conversations that create and perpetuate rich narratives that allow an engagement with what it means to die and what it takes to matter in the world’ (Penfold-Mounce, 2018, p. 3). When we consider popular culture and disasters together, stories of disasters may work as both models for and models of social practices. This is because mass media and entertainment are important avenues through which people acknowledge significant loss of life. As disasters enter into popular culture, the presence of the dead becomes normalized outside of personal experience or the death industry – death is not questioned, but accepted and consumed (Penfold-Mounce, 2018). What gets consumed can therefore impact upon social practice and stories about disasters can therefore impact upon how we respond. As Anders Ekstrom and Kyrre Kverndokk (2015) note, within popular culture, the ‘myriad of stories about disasters are structured around a limited number of narrative forms and motifs - the theodicy, the apocalypse, the state of exception and trauma. This repertoire of cultural patterns not only structures how we imagine disasters, they also structure how we handle disaster’ (Ekstrom & Kverndokk, 2015, p. 358). In this chapter, we argue that this funneling of disaster narrative is observable in the current commemorative story-telling associated with two historical Aotearoa New Zealand shipwrecks. While the Penguin happened over 100 years ago and the Wahine over 50, and despite a significant shift from photography and print to live- recording news reportage at the time of the disasters, both are subjected to the same restrictive narratives that repeat through a wide range of interconnected popular culture platforms. The form that this funneling takes, i.e. the kind of narratives that dominate, tell us something about how death is understood in the contemporary globally –syndicated age.

Yasmin Ibrahim reminds us that ‘the communal consumption and experience of pain and suffering can be fundamentally social… enabling human communion through media narratives’ (Ibrahim, 2010, p. 122). When news of disasters are broadcast, often the tone is of “factual” information representing the events as they unfold. As hours and days pass, reports broaden to include not just information about for instance funerals and inquests, but also human-interest stories particularly of survivors or those who died aiding others in danger. As months and perhaps years pass, commentaries and opinions on investigations, public inquiries, and memorial and commemoration events add successive layers of stories and meanings associated with the disasters. And in doing so connect cultural understandings to material forms such as wreckage, gravesites, tombstones, memorial plinths and museum displays (Jones, 2007). The form and content of these mediated messages serves to shape and be shaped by broader social narratives of disaster and therefore ways in which we cope with them, conventionally understood through concepts of resilience. Cultural domains and social-organisational structures connect in complex relationships as disaster culture and disaster management engage in the interface that is memorialisation. It is important therefore to pay attention to how disaster reportage and story-telling guide survivors and broader communities towards particular forms of memorialisation that encourage a distinctive understanding of resilience. Furthermore, we examine how those understandings of resilience sit with resilience models that underpin institutional efforts to forestall, manage and mitigate disasters.

To do this we closely examined the ways in which two shipwrecks are memorialised and commemorated through mass media news, commemorative public events, communal acts of remembrance, the making, placing and visiting of public memorials, the publication of memoires, hosting curated exhibitions and constructing memorial culture walks. We recount how the two tragedies are commemorated to show how a particularly restrictive narrative of resilience shapes them. We explain that while each shipwreck is from a different decade, the post-disaster commemorations, as forms of popular culture, collectively constitute how these deaths are understood. We observed a funneling of available narratives towards theodicy and exeptionalism and away from technological failure and responsibilisation. In that narrative limitation we also observed what we think is a significant cultural tension in how death and the dead are positioned in relation to the living. On the one hand, those killed in the disasters are “used” to encourage a particular model of resilience in those who consume the narratives. On the other hand, the popular culture narrative of resilience seem to stand against and undermine disaster management narratives of resilience that “use” the dead as warnings to be heeded by the living. We argue that this discordant relationship between disaster culture and disaster management is an outcome associated with Ulrich Beck’s (1999) *World Risk Society*. As the living engage with the dead through multiple forms of resilience-orientated disaster culture, they are offered discourses that construct, contest and critique the management of risk, as they participate as self- reflexive, risk-orientated individuals living in the second modernity (Beck, 1999, 2014).

## The Penguin Disaster

SS Penguin was an inter-island ferry steamer that sank off Cape Terawhiti after striking a rock near the entrance to Te Whanganui-a-Tara[[1]](#footnote-1) (Wellington) Harbour in poor weather on 12 February 1909. Penguin's sinking caused the deaths of 72 people, leaving only 30 survivors. At the time this was considered the worst maritime disaster of the 20th century. Penguin departed Picton on 12 February 1909 en route to Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) in good weather conditions. However, by 8pm, the weather had changed, with very strong winds and bad visibility. At 10 p.m, the ship’s captain, Francis Naylor decided to head farther out to sea to wait for the weather to break, but while making the turn, the ship smashed into Thoms Rock and water poured in. Women and children were loaded into the lifeboats, but the rough seas dragged the lifeboats underwater; only one woman survived, and all the children were killed. Other survivors drifted for hours on rafts before reaching safety. In the following hours, men women and children climbed or jumped onto waiting lifeboats and while there were more than enough lifeboas for the numbers of passenger and crew, many were swamped or capsized as they were lowered into the roughest of seas. People were catapulted into the water and those who did not drown, clung to upturned boats or bits of floating wreckage as the ship quickly sank. As the Penguin sank, seawater flooded the engine room, the cold water reached the boilers, and a massive steam explosion violently fractured the ship.

Of the 102 people on board there were 30 survivors - 14 passengers and 16 crew.

Seventy-two people drowned including 17 women and 14 children. Of the 25 women on board, only one woman, Ada Louise Hannam, survived.

She was proclaimed in the WellingtonPress as the heroine of Penguin. Readers were enthralled by the heart-rending account of her struggle underneath the upturned (life) boat with (the body of her daughter) two-year old Ruby in her arms and her dramatic rescue of teenager Ellis Matthews. (Collins, 2000, pp. 81-82)

Survivors were washed ashore and as day broke some, including Captain Naylor, made their way to an isolated sheep-station – the McMenamen Homestead at Terawhiti. The alarm was raised and while some station hands headed to the shore to help survivors and retrieve the bodies tumbling in the surf, two were sent over the hill to Makara to the nearest telephone to call the police. As there was some delay in the police arriving, Captain Naylor set out around the rocky coastland to the Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) suburb of Island Bay so as to contact ‘the appropriate authorities of the Union Steam Ship Company …at 10.17 am’ (Collins, 2000, p. 43).

Following the disaster, a half-day holiday was declared in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington to allow the many funerals to be held, as some 40 people were laid to rest in Karori Cemetery. On that Tuesday, the 16th Februrary ‘at 10am the funeral procession commenced through the streets of Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) on the way to Karori Cemetery. Shops were closed, flags were at half-mast and church bells tolled’ (Collins, 2000, p. 57). Contemporary by-standers were witness to the pain and suffering. The connections between those lost, survivors, the bereaved and the networks to which they belonged were woven in the capital city’s main newspaper, the Evening Post:

It was plain that the horrors of the catastrophe were still unblurred in the people’s minds. Their knowledge of the agonies endured by the stricken was something that reached well down into the heart, and a sorrow was in their faces. The tempest and the sea destroyed a ship and seventy people, but that destruction was at once attended by the creation of a warm feeling of fellowship between the people of New Zealand and the bereaved. (Evening Post, 16 February 1909)

A public inquiry on the wrecking of the SS Penguin took place within days of the wreck. The judgement handed down on Tuesday 2nd March 1909 covered a variety of issues from the causes of the wreck to the seaworthiness of the vessel. The steamer of 45 years was

found to be “properly attended to” and sufficient in lifeboats and lifesaving equipment. The cause of the wreck, as determined by the Court, was an exceptionally strong flood tide and Captain Naylor’s breach of article 16 (the regulations for preventing collisions at sea) by his “failure under existing circumstances to put out to sea when he had run a course of 18 miles”. The court added that if Captain Naylor had put the vessel’s head to sea at 9.40 pm the disaster would have been avoided. The captain’s certificate was suspended for 12 months but he was spared from having to pay the costs of the inquiry. (Collins, 2000, p. 75).

In response to criticism that the Captain had put the reputation of the company’s punctuality first, the shipping company sent out missives to its many captains advising them not to put the ship’s timetable above the safety of its passengers, cargo and crew. While the court of inquiry determined that the ship had hit Thoms Rock near Tongue Pt, Captain Francis Naylor swore to his dying day that he had struck the submerged wreck of the brigantine Rio Loge, which had been seen floating back and forth across the strait for several weeks (Wood & McDonald, 2009). Subsequent to the wreck of the Penguin, a new lighthouse was built at the foot of Karori Rock.

## Memorialisation of the Penguin

More than 40 Penguin victims were buried at Karori Cemetery and in the ensuing days and weeks, newspapers published the names of those lost. Around the country, Sunday services offered prayers for the dead, especially those parishes that had lost members of their congregation. Longer-term memorials to those who had perished were organised including stained glass windows in the Church of Nativity Blenheim and Wellington Cathedral. As effects from the Penguin came ashore, passers-by gathered them as mementos of the wreck (rather than flotsam and jetsam for their own personal use). Some of these effects are now at the Museum of Wellington City and Sea, while other artifacts remain in private possession. Generations have come and gone since that shipwrecking storm and various commemorative activities were enacted over the decades. Centennial commemorations left material markers such as a plaque cemented into the ragged shoreline nearest to Thoms Rock and digital ephemera for the curious to click through (Wellington City Council, 2009).



(<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/ss-penguin-plaque>)

While the Thoms Rock plaque was to be unveiled to mark the disaster's centenary on 12 February 2009, ironically, the event was moved to Makara Hall because of bad weather. The remote Makera Hall had been a rescue and recovery point for the original disaster.

Memorials to the disaster also take the form of experiences. Memorialisers, those who come to acknowledge loss, can enroll themselves into a by-stander experience. We can walk around Karori Cemetery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) to see the graves of some of those who drowned in the Penguin shipwreck. Memorialisers are guided through the cemetery by means of special “Penguin Shipwreck” grave markers. At each mark, memorialisers can read about the person interred and reflect upon the loss of life. They are hailed as graveside mourners some time removed.



Author’s own collection R. McManus

As we stand at the spot where family members mourned the loss of their loved-ones, we also become witnesses to their grief and loss as they themselves stood witness to the disaster over a century ago. The online Cemetery Tour guides the visitor to emotionally connect to the disaster through the shared experience of loss, of being a mourner at the graveside, connecting to any personal experience the visitor may have of standing at a grave side of a loved one. As visitors read the inscriptions, they connect with the disaster as a witness to and personal connection with the departed individuals.



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The collective memory is constituted through the enactment of a shared emotion of loss. Each memorial frames the individual accounts in consistent ways to generate a single unifying message of resilience as a collective memory of the individuals as brave and self-sacrificing in the face of insurmountable odds. The collective memory is clearly articulated on the memorial plaque on permanent display at the Museum of Wellington City and Sea and reproduced on the last page of the Penguin Self Guided Walk Karori Cemetery Heritage Trail (Wogan, n.d.):

To the Glory of God

and

in Loving Memory

of the Passengers officers and crew

who were called away by the

foundering of the S.S. PENGUIN off

Terawhiti, on the night of Feb. 12th 1909.

THIS TABLET

Is erected by friends and members

Of the Missions to Seamen to mark

The splendid heroism and self-denial

displayed in a time of great peril when 75 persons lost their lives.

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“GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS, THAT A MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS.” JOHN XV 13

“TO LIVE IN HEARTS WE LEAVE BEHIND US IS NOT TO DIE”.

The enrolment of the audience as witness to and connection with personal loss in splendid heroism and self-denial focuses the memory work towards a particular kind of person as brave and selfless against the inescapable and supernatural power of God who called them away. This speaks to a form of resilience as coping with a loss that was unavoidable; who can escape being called away by God? This articulates a theodical narrative of disaster that stands alongside the exceptionalist story offered by Collins.

Other forms of popular culture including commemorative books, museum ephemera and digital archives reiterate and repeat the collective memory as one of unavoidable loss in the face of insurmountable odds. Bruce E. Collins sums up his investigation of the Wreck of the Penguin by agreeing with the enquiry conducted at the time. ‘My opinion is that the court of inquiry came out with the correct verdict, Francis Edwin Naylor was a victim of circumstance beyond his control’ (Collins, 2000, p. 94).

If the argument of this chapter is to consider the event through the way in which the deaths have been recounted and memorialised, we can see that narratives of theodicy and exceptionalism are privileged over other possible narratives. For instance, a narrative that would emphasis the lack of useful technology and a willingness to ignore warnings is certainly not one that prevails in both the inquiries and the ensuing re-telling of the events over time. Captain Naylor’s suspension publicly notes his failure to apply existing safety regulations in light of the fact that the technologies available to him either failed or were unserviceable. Para-ngārehu (Pencarrow) Light was a piece of badly positioned technology as, sitting high on the hills of Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) Harbour; it was habitually obscured by bad weather. The sequestering of technological failure narratives has the effect of flowing against preventative readings of heeding warnings so central to planning orientated, preventive models of resilience. When this elision of technological failure combines with narratives that individualise and personalise connection to the lost, the effect is to bolster a narrative of post facto recovery based resilience. But does such remembrance belong in a time capsule relegated to those events that are now beyond living memory, when technology was unsophisticated and collective sentiments more explicitly driven by imperial renditions of belonging in colonial outposts?

## The Wahine Disaster

We now turn to consider a more recent shipwreck, the Wahine, on a stormy autumn evening in April 1968. The Wahine was a purpose-built, first of its kind, roll on, roll off passenger service ferry that had the capacity to carry approximately 200 vehicles (such as cars, trailers, caravans, heavy trade vehicles, containers and cargo trays) and ‘accommodate 928 passengers and 123 officers and crew’ (Makarios, 2003, p. 9). Since its launch in 1965, the Wahine had made numerous sailings between Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) and Rititana (Lyttleton) without a hitch. On April 10th 1968, the Wahine’s master, Captain Hector Gordon Robertson, made the decision to ignore a severe weather warning that gale or storm force winds would hit Raukawa Moana, (Cook Strait). Even though the Wahine set sail at 8.43pm, 43 minutes late, Robertson assumed his ship would be safely berthed before the worst of the storm hit. As the night wore on, and as predicted, Tropical Cyclone Giselle made its way down the Te Ika-a-Māui (North Island), leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Cyclone Giselle is recorded as the worst storm to hit Aotearoa New Zealand shores.

As the ship sailed through Raukawa Moana (Cook Straits) the worsening weather conditions began to batter the ship. The crew assumed that once in the harbour they would be protected from the wind and that a tug boat would be able to guide the Wahine to berth. At 6.10am, the ship sailed past Para-ngārehu (Pencarrow Head), the harbour entrance. Once in the harbour the weather continued to deteriorate. With diminished visibility, Robertson put the engines into stand-by and reduced speed but then the radar stopped working and the ship strayed off course by 23 degrees. Attempting to rectify this, Robertson turned the helm firmly to starboard, but it did not respond. Robertson then commanded both engines be driven full steam ahead to gain enough momentum to support the ship’s steering. While under full power, the ship rolled sharply to starboard. Robertson was thrown across the bridge, crew and passengers were thrown off their feet and on the vehicle deck, ropes broke causing one truck to topple. Loose cargo and vehicles slid around the deck. Robertson hoped to steer the ship to the open sea to ride out the storm but as he struggled to control the ship the Wahine hit the southern point of Te Raranga o Kupe reef, the starboard propeller severed and the shaft broken, the ship began to take on water. The emergency pumps were activated, all doors were sealed and crew helped passengers put on life jackets. Eventually Robertson ordered the anchors to be dropped. While they waited for the anchors to take hold, crew were ordered to prepare the lifesaving craft. While the Wahine was drifting the tug Tapuhi was able to secure a line to the back of the ferry in the hope of towing it to shore. The line snapped but Captain Galloway of the Tiakina was able to jump to a lifeboat ladder and climb aboard the Wahine where he offered Robertson his help.

With Galloway on board, Robertson was able to leave the bridge and inspect his ship. Water was reaching the deck through the ventilation system. The vehicle deck was also covered in water, and F Deck was flooded. The Wahine was now tilting. Passsengers were now very concerned. At about 1pm the Wahine was riding her anchors and the ship began to swing and the starboard list increased. Now in danger of capsizing at 1.25am the Captains agreed it was time to abandon ship. The Wahine had enough life boats and life rafts to evacuate all on board however the gale force winds blew away many life rafts as they were inflating or before passengers could get on board. Passengers and crew were told to make their way to the starboard side, however passengers could not hear announcements and many went to the wrong side of the ship. Lurching about, they became separated from family and friends and many panicked. Despite the chaos the crew managed to get all of the passengers off the ship. The last two crew on board, Captains Robertson and Galloway jumped just before the Wahine capsized.

At the mercy of the wind and tide, the life rafts and lifeboats drifted people either to the west side of the harbour, or the rocky coast on the east side. And while many vessels attempted to rescue survivors from the water and the rafts, and as people waited onshore to help, fifty-one lives were lost that day, with most deaths occurring on the easterly Para-ngārehu (Pencarrow) Coast. One person died onshore.

A Court of Inquiry convened on June 25th 1968, ten weeks after the Wahine sank.
After 26 days and 81 witnesses, the court ruled the exceptional storm was the main cause. The ship sailed off course onto Barrett Reef because of failed radar and poor visibility. Neither the ship’s master nor the chief officer was found guilty of negligence and unduly action. The court did rule that there were ‘errors of judgement’ but justified these by acknowledging the extreme weather conditions, the difficult situation and the danger (Makarios, 2003, p. 50).

According to internet sources, such as New Zealand History (Ministry of Culture and Heritage, 2009) the Court of Inquiry did focus on the length of time it took for Captain Robertson to give the order to abandon ship, however it was found that more people would have perished if the decision to abandon ship occurred earlier as there were no rescue boats prior to 12.30pm as the storm was too fierce. It was further reported that Captain Robertson was remiss in not reporting that the deck was taking on water or that the ship’s draft was at 6.7 meters after hitting Barrier Reef. Like Makarios (2003) however, the New Zealand History website asserts that the weather event was responsible for what occurred.

As with the Penguin, the New Zealand public stopped and paid attention to the funerals for the dead and instigated changes in response to the events. According to the Ministry for Culture and Heritage there were a catalogue of changes in response to the Wahine disaster that include ‘improved safety procedures on ships and prompted the creation of two significant rescue services: the Wellington Volunteer Coastguard and the Life Flight Trust. The Wellington Volunteer Coastguard – previously called Wellington Sea Rescue – was formed and its first rescue vessel launched in response to and within a year of the disaster. A trained duty crew – from a pool of more than 60 volunteers – is on Wellington harbour every weekend and public holiday and on-call at all other times, ready to respond to calls for assistance. And it was witnessing the demise of the Wahine and loss of life that motivated Peter Button to take flying lessons and, with neurosurgeon Dr Russell Worth, found a helicopter rescue service able to reach those in trouble as quickly as possible. The service, officially established as the Life Flight Trust in 1982, operates the Wellington-based Westpac Rescue Helicopter and a national air ambulance service, rescuing and airlifting some 1500 people every year. The nation-wide storm – Cyclone Giselle – that led to the Wahine’s demise, also triggered the instigation of mandatory civil defence plans by local authorities’ (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018).

## Memorialisation of the Wahine

A key narrative source for the Wahine disaster is a well known story-telling mode, a memoire by Makarios (2003) *The Wahine disaster: A tragedy remembered.* Makarios had personal experience of the Wahine having travelled across the harbour on the ship as a young boy, just two weeks prior to its sinking. Growing up in Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington), he remembered the Wahine and when he became a Merchant Navy seaman he worked alongside some of the Wahine crew and listened to their tales. Some years later while working at the Wellington Maritime Museum and the Museum of Wellington City and Sea that he felt compelled to write his book. In this way, Makarios’s memoire, to ‘respectfully remember that time’ and help those to understand the trauma that was felt’ (Makarios, 2003, p. 5) has authenticity and emotional legitimacy that feeds into the ways that the Wahine is memorialised and commemorated. The dominant story is an exceptionalist narrative of self-sacrifice and an overwhelming and therefore unavoidable series of tragic events.

As the decades pass, memorials have been fund-raised, organised and put in position. These include the four main Wahine memorial sites around Wellington: JG Churchill Park – Seatoun; Wahine Memorial - Frank Kitts Park; the ship’s mast erected in Eastbourne in 2010 and Wahine Memorial Park - Breaker Bay. The Wahine anchor and chain, lies at Churchill Part, Seatoun. Each link of the chain represents a victim. The ship’s ventilators are also in this area, and the rock the Wahine capsized on, Steeple Rock is visible at only a few hundred meters out at sea. A plaque states the anchor is angled so that it directs people towards the rock, while the anchor is partly buried to represent the dragging of the anchors prior to the sinking. Also, the Wahine Memorial – Eastbourne. Most of the passengers – survivors and those that perished – washed up along the Eastbourne Coast on the eastern side of Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) harbour. This memorial is of the foremast of the Wahine, painted white.

This plaque reiterates the sense of helplessness of the ship, its passengers, crew and by-standers as events unfolded.



(author’s own collection D. Blake)

The Wahine Memorial Park is another memorial site which sits at the southern edge of Moa Point Rd, Breaker Bay, Wellington, an isolated and craggy bay that provides views of the reef that the Wahine struck. On of the Wahine’s propellers lies here, with its plaque identifying where the propeller is from and how many people perished.



(author’s own collection R. McManus)

With the 50th anniversary of the Wahine in 2018, there was a plethora of media attention. Reports on the commemoration focused on re-running the archived reels of live coverage of the disaster, salvaging of the ship and the memorials that acknowledge the event. The commemoration ended by listing the names of the survivors. In doing so it hails the reader to reflect on those that were lost, as one would scan a list of survivors, searching for loved ones names after a disaster, in the hope of recognizing a name. In a similar way as the Penguin memorial walks engage the reader as memorialiser by walking in the shoes of the loved ones who experienced the loss, readers scan the lists as worried family members would have done fifty years before. The emotional connection achieved through scanning lists places the memorialiser as a witness again to the loss of individual lives in the face of an overwhelming turn of events. The narrative effect is to “entertain” the consumer viscerally to induce feelings of loss, worry and helplessness.

The Wahine 50 Charitable Trust worked with local councils and others to plan and deliver a day of events to mark the 50th anniversary of the Wahine disaster – on 10 April 2018. A dawn service at Eastbourne; a midday event on Wellington’s waterfront; a reunion lunch for survivors, rescuers, and family members of those on board; and an afternoon visit to the Wahine memorials at Seatoun. A mode of witnessing made famous by Claude Lanzmann’s archetypal Shoa (Felman, 1994), documentary film-makers recorded first hand accounts with survivors, rescuers and the families of those involved ‘to help ensure future generations understand the very intense personal experiences many had 50 years ago, and the impact it had on their lives’ (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018). The recently elected Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, directs her audience at the commemoration, to consider that the ‘legacy of the Wahine is one of sadness for the lives lost but also one of gratitude to the rescuer. Recognising events, such as the Wahine tragedy, ensures New Zealanders are aware of our history. It's important that we learn from these tragedies and continue to build our resilience as a country’ (One News, 2018).

Both the Penguin and the Wahine are significant maritime disasters in Aotearoa New Zealand waters that represent the dangers of crossing Raukawa Moana (Cook Strait). It is beset with strong currents from the convergence of Tasman and Pacific waters and rough weather blown up from the relative proximity of Antarctica. And while Raukawa Moana continues to be a site of heavy water traffic between the two main islands of Aotearoa New Zealand, for some, its perils are looked upon in awe, while for others, it is a risk that needs to be managed.

Multi-layered memorials to both the Penguin and the Wahine call Wellington’s rocky coast into broader communities of dark tourism sites where visitors can browse in depth displays in the local maritime museum or track down the graves of those who were found, in local cemeteries, and take a refreshing walk round the headlands and bays of the harbour, guided by their favourite tourist app such as Tripadvisor ™ that links the traveller into a network of commercial tours that take them to key memorial sites of the Wahine and Penguin. Local graveyards and museum displays enmesh world and local travellers together in a specific presentation of the past that connects to specific conceptions of resilience drawn from humble heros as the base and core of community in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Heros are made as ordinary people are acknowledged for their acts of bravery and fortitude in the face of unavoidable danger and personal loss.

These maritime disasters, commemorated through popular culture modes of news, memoires, memorials, public commemorations, curated exhibitions and culture walks offer restricted theodical and exceptionalist narratives that frame resilience as something that comes after a disaster. These narratives structure our imagery of disasters as events that cannot be foreseen or avoided. They are inevitable, unavoidable, unmanagable.

Such popular culture narratives of disaster resilience intersect uneasily with discourses of disaster management that perceive resilience as prevention and as risk-management strategy. It is at this point that we can really begin to get a sense of the impact of popular culture on how contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, a globally connected community, understands death. Popular culture narratives of disaster memorialisation push a model of resilience that contradicts disaster management narratives. This “social inconsistency” may explain the difficulty that disaster planners have in getting communities to heed warnings and so avoid mortal risks.

The intersection of disaster culture and disaster management seems to display the hallmarks of an emerging global risk society and second modernity. According to Ulrich Beck, societies have changed and are now living in second modernity. No longer concerned with the bourgeoise or the proletariat, different problems define our world. As advances in science and technology continue there is an increased awareness and concern around risks. It is the reflexive nature of modernity which has made it become aware of itself and its unintended consequences or side effects and, he argues, the mass media are fundamental to processes of reflexive modernisation. Coining the phrase relations of definitions ‘Beck identifies the mass media as a priviledged site for (1) the social construction, (2) the social contestation and (3) the social criticism of risks and risk society’ (Cottle, 1998, p. 7). In our review of popular cultural renditions of resilience we hope to have demonstrated ways in which these multiple media platforms have simultaneously constructed, contested and critiqued concepts of risk and risk society. Popular culture narratives of resilience silence the human processes, frames of mind and attitudes to events constructed and constrained within a context of preparation and risk minimisation that aims to avoid situations becoming insurmountable. And so a discourse of planning based resilience is undeniably absent, denied, challenged and critiqued through these narratives of memorialisation and commemoration.

# Conclusion

Through the layers of memorialisation of the Penguin and Wahine, we identify key moments and sites of community imaginings that generate a collective understanding or resilience as repair and recuperation in the face of insurmountable situations and cascades of uncontrollable events. This narrative constantly works against and contradicts narratives associated with disaster planning that seeks to generate forms of resilience linked to preparedness and a willingness to heed warnings and instigate evasive action.

These disasters were made meaningful through the translation of news and information into stories and emblems of individual human survival and heroism in the face of nature’s wrath and broken technology. While human courage and survival when facing great danger were memorialised, other narratives such as poor judgement, technology blaming and infrastructural deficiencies were hidden and silenced.

The role of popular culture media as a multi platformed means through which people today can engage with past disasters is clear and implicates communication media in the on-going tensions and disconnect between remembering past disasters and planning for future disasters. In so doing, popular culture is implicated in constructing, contesting and critiquing discourses of resilience associated with risk-management and the turn to risk society of second modernity. As death informs the threat that defines resilience, so death serves the living in second modernity.

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1. Maori place names are used, with their English version given in brackets [↑](#footnote-ref-1)