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Material mediations: nonhuman agency in *New Zealand Herald* representations of Auckland's volcanoes, 2000-2012

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ABSTRACT

Auckland city is built on over 50 volcanoes. Here, I draw on Lorimer's model of "nonhuman charisma" to highlight the agency of the physical volcanoes within their representation in *The New Zealand Herald*, 2000-2012. This model offers materialist, more-than-human insights into of the prominence and appeal of nonhuman entities. I detail its application to Auckland's volcanoes and illustrate how "ecological" and "aesthetic" charisma in particular can be used to understand some features of the volcanoes' presentation, including rhetorical strategies arguing for volcanic preservation. Nonhuman charisma can also be seen to influence the emotive prominence of Maungakiekie/One Tree hill as a symbol for Māori-Pākeha relations in the early 21st century, and the celebratory invocation of imagined disaster even in articles aimed at risk mitigation.

Keywords: media, materiality, charisma, Auckland, embodiment, landscape

Sociologists have increasingly placed emphasis on the agency of the nonhuman and more-than-human within human activity. This is part of a broader "material turn" within social theory (Shove 2010), with manifestations including attention to ontology (Roberts 2012), affect (Wetherell 2012), and more-than-representational accounts of places, processes and experience (e.g. Carolan 2008; Thrift 2008). Within this, the "old news" of representation has often been bypassed or dialectically contrasted with the complexity, "life" and dynamism of the more-than-representational (Castree & MacMillan 2004; Wetherell 2012). Here, I suggest that engagements with nonhuman agency are useful in unpicking news practices concerning Auckland's volcanoes within *The New Zealand Herald,* a daily national newspaper with a focus on the city, between 2000 and 2012. Auckland is built on over 50 volcanoes that vary considerably in size, shape and location: from lagoons and recessed explosion craters to prominent scoria cones. Many mauna (mountains) have been recently returned to indigenous ownership, although were publically owned during the period of analysis. I explain how Jaime Lorimer's "nonhuman charisma" can be used to unpack the uneven affective potency of Auckland's volcanoes that drives elements of their

Herald presentation. I then briefly illustrate selected manifestations of this, organised in relation to key themes within their representation. Nonhuman charisma can be seen to underlie some rhetorical strategies used to argue for volcanic preservation. It can be understood as influencing the repeated return to Maungakiekie/One Tree Hill as an "iconic" focus for discussion of relations between indigenous Māori and Pākeha (non-Māori New Zealanders, usually referring to New Zealanders of European descent). It is also present in the persistence of evocatively imagined disaster when discussing Auckland's volcanoes as volcanic entities.

Theoretical background

Analysis is backgrounded by an understanding of *The New Zealand Herald* as a site of ongoing meaning negotiation. The assumed reader (Fairclough 1989) has a spatiality that has traditionally focused on the central city, the symbolic unifier of a city and locus for business activity (Parisi & Holcomb 1994). In Auckland this is further concentrated by the convergent geography of the area and its transport lines. The assumed reader can be therefore expected to have pre-existing familiarity with many physical elements of this area, part of the "common stock of knowledge" (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts 1978: 55) that journalists expect many readers to share. Representation here is seldom an attempt at mimesis (see Castree & MacMillan 2004), but is one practice among others in the context of ongoing engagement. Yet this familiarity, and these engagements, are not simply intellectual. Rather, the volcanoes form part of an affective world in which Auckland residents are already embroiled. Jaime Lorimer's typology of "nonhuman charisma" can be used to unpack the volcanoes' differing affective potency. Contrasting Weber's (1978) "charismatic authority", nonhuman charisma comes from a materialist, more-than-human perspective and focuses on the agency of nonhuman entities. It can be used to identify properties that make an entity stand out to human perception (Lorimer 2009: 324), most frequently in the form of appeal.

Nonhuman charisma is comprised of three components. The first of these, "ecological charisma", relates to ethological correspondences between human and nonhumans that increase the chance of their engagement. It also comprises of "jizz", or those properties of an entity that make it immediately recognisable. Because these sensory affordances are the product of physical interrelations, regardless of attributed meaning (Gibson 1979), ecological charisma is the foundation for other types of charisma. The second and third types are subsumed under "affective charisma". "Aesthetic charisma" refers to immediate judgments as to the appeal of the nonhuman. Examples include the near-universal "cuddly charisma" of animals reminiscent of human children, and a common preference for animals that share similarities with humans, inviting anthropomorphism. The third, corporeal charisma, refers to associations developed over a period of interaction. Notably, the temporal nature of this distinction avoids the common pitfall (Wetherell 2012) of attempting to categorise an affective response as "natural" or "cultural": responses may be immediate but culturally specific.

When applied to Auckland's volcanoes, the afforded contact of "ecological charisma" can be related to the volcanoes' form, size, and spatial distribution. Large and central scoria cones are favoured: even large explosion craters, such as Lake Pupuke, are seldom perceptible from a distance. Larger volcanoes are visually imposing at close range and also likely to be visually encountered from further afield. Similarly, relatively distant volcanoes such as Maungataketake, while sometimes sizable, are "out of mind" for many within urban Auckland and have borne the brunt of recent decades' extensive quarrying (Hayward, Murdoch, & Maitland 2011). Those volcanoes with semiotic prominence are usually spatially and visually proximate to the central city. Such differences in visual encounter have been augmented since the 1970s through protection of "regionally significant views" to prominent cones (Auckland Regional Authority Planning Division 1976). These views are predominantly from centrally-converging arterial routes.

Beyond this, the aesthetic charisma of some volcanic cones is also seen in their potential resonance with the human body (cf. Bloch 1998). As illustrated below, this can facilitate anthropomorphic identification. Such resonance notably includes a defined and imaginable moment of geological origin/"birth". Unlike massive landforms such as the Waitākere Ranges, Auckland's volcanic cones are also usually readily identifiable discrete entities or small clusters. This is analogous to individuals or small family groups that are favoured units within Western societies, and resonates with a common preference for animals exhibiting "bounded individuality" as opposed to unsettling mass tendencies (Lorimer 2007).

Methods
A focus on these comparatively "charismatic" volcanoes is borne out in analysis of *Herald* articles from 2000 to 2012 inclusive. A digital keyword search within the *Herald* archives from this period yielded a primary corpus of over 400 articles "about" or with over 150 words concerning the volcanoes, individually and as a group. This excluded articles concerning issues that were unusually specific to one volcano, such as debate surrounding baches (small holiday homes) on Rangitoto Island. These, and more brief mentions of the volcanoes, were nonetheless digitally retained and used to background analysis. Analysis was informed by Ethnographic Content Analysis (e.g. Altheide 2004; Altheide & Shneider 2013), where a corpus is treated as akin to a "culture". A variety of methods are then potentially used to explore meaning within this. Particular use was also made of "articulation", inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; see also Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999), as a kinaesthetic metaphor to conceptualise the "work" done within any given piece of text. Here, meaning is understood as relational and altered through moves of alignment and distinction. Such attempted articulation can cross modalities: physical objects can be linked to or distinguished from ideas, people, political movements and so forth. Notably, affective relationships are also negotiated in text (Wetherell 2012). Articles were readily sorted thematically into relatively discrete categories, and the three most significant broad categories guide discussion below: the volcanoes as threatened, as tied to contemporary Māori, and as primarily volcanological. Particular attention is paid to the presentation of volcanoes as threatened as rhetorical tactics used to do this parallel the active *mobilisation* of animal nonhuman charisma (Lorimer 2007).

Volcanic advocacy
A number of articles were what I call "advocate articles", arguing for particular visions of volcanic preservation. Several rhetorical tactics within these could be understood as drawing their efficacy from, and negotiating, relationships between the assumed audience and the material volcanoes. Notably, over 70 articles relating to volcanic preservation can be attributed to opinion columnist Brian Rudman. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) notes, while regular news articles must wear a veneer of objectivity (eg. Fairclough 1995), opinion columnists are able to write in their own idiosyncratic "voice" and make explicit arguments. Rudman launched a concentrated "campaign" for volcanic protection beginning in 2001 with the threatened encroachment of State Highway 20 on the northern slopes of Puketāpapa/Mount Roskill, also called Pukewiwi. As part of this, more charismatic, familiar volcanic cones were frequently articulated with less prominent volcanoes. This was seen in the opening of the SH20 "campaign", a comparison between concerns over cattle damage on central Maungawhau/Mt Eden and apparent willingness to dramatically alter the more distant, "working class" Puketāpapa (Rudman 2001). While this may be viewed as a logical argument for consistency, it was also an articulation resonant with the use of "flagship animals" to foster sympathy for a more complex cause (Lorimer 2007). Such equivalences utilise a contagion of concern where the reflected affective glow of charismatic cones extends the argument beyond the purely conceptual and into the personal.

Advocate articles further repeatedly exploited the volcanoes' pre-existing anthropomorphic resonance with human bodies, that is, their affective charisma. Milton (2002) argues for the importance of attributed "personhood" in granting an entity moral status. Advocate text relating to the protection of Auckland's volcanoes often utilised strong, anthropomorphic language that facilitated this. Examples within the SH20 campaign included "butchery", "amputation" and the signing of a "death warrant", while the proposed vertical retaining wall was "disfiguring", a "slash across the face" of the cone. "Rape" was used ten times in the articles studied, "scar" or its variants fifteen. Such invocation infuses the campaign with visceral affective concern, exploiting and underscoring the similarities between the material volcanoes and the bodies of readers themselves.

Māori-Pākeha relations

The materiality of charisma can also be used to help conceptualise the way that discussion of Māori-Pākeha relations within this period repeatedly returned to focus upon Maungakiekie/One Tree Hill. This maunga has particular significance to many Māori (Paterson 2009). However, as is typical of mainstream media within New Zealand (e.g. Rankine et al. 2007) early coverage often seemed to assume a Pākeha audience, suggesting other influences behind this focus. Within the *Herald* itself, the site's significance was discussed in terms of its "iconic" status. However, this term is used promiscuously and often simply as intuitive description (Kearns & Collins 2000). Contrastingly, the language of nonhuman charisma provides specific terminology to discuss components of this maunga's physical, and potentially its semiotic, prominence. In particular, Maungakiekie is high in ecological charisma: large and central, with protected views from arterial motorways. It uniquely sports an obelisk, accompanied in the decades up to 2000 by a distinctive *radiata* pine. This ecological accessibility and "jizz" (Lorimer 2007) make Maungakiekie instantly recognisable, a notable and familiar presence on the skyline.

This charismatic prominence was utilised by Mike Smith in 1994 through a chainsaw attack on the "lone pine". This was to protest the proposed sale of state-owned assets and plans to swiftly settle all Treaty claims out of a drastically limited "fiscal envelope" (Kearns & Collins 2000). The pine survived but was attacked by others in 1999, and ultimately felled late 2000. In over a decade following, numerous significant issues and events were repeatedly brought back to Maungakiekie and distilled into the question of replacing this absent tree. This included the historic formation of iwi collective Ngā Mana Whenua o Tāmaki Makaurau, and criticism of the previous Treaty settlement process that impacted on nationwide procedure (Waitangi Tribunal 2007). Such distillation was facilitated by the charismatic prominence of this summit. This enabled it to be readily and emotively articulated with city identity: a symbol of Auckland and potential location for desired symbolic reconciliation. This familiar background presence can further be understood as itself fostering affective concern through repeated engagement (Tuan 1974), adding emotional salience to protests and subsequent occurrences.

The imagination of disaster

The framework of charisma can further be used to understand the fascination with fiery disaster that underlay scientific, civil defence, and touristic presentation of Auckland's volcanoes as explicitly volcanic. Touristic articles readily exploited the "imagination of disaster" (Sontag, 2006 [1976]) to add interest to these sites, often focusing on large and distinctive craters as anchors for this imagination. Remarkably, this affective imaginary was also used to spice articles working to *contain* volcanic disaster: those raising civil defence awareness and presenting research concerning volcanic danger. This persistent imagination can be understood as drawing on a culturally specific "sublime" aesthetic that long predates contemporary discourses of "risk" containment (Beck 1992). This aesthetic is also material: founded on a recognition of human bodily frailty in the face of overwhelming natural forces, enjoyed when the actual danger is minimal (Clark 2011). Volcanic imaginary was fuelled by ready representation of volcanic destruction through cinematic

prosthesis (Sigurdsson 2000), drawing on the charismatic fascination of fire itself (Bachelard 1964). Contemporary enjoyment of sublime thrill was readily articulated, through imagination, to volcanoes that appear distinctively different from more benign "natures". Yet it was also underpinned by their material quietude: 80km of lithosphere, or hundreds of years, seeming to separate Aucklanders from actual bodily danger.

Conclusion

As illustrated above, "nonhuman charisma" provides tools to explore the affective potency of Auckland's volcanoes. Such potency is seen to underlie and give emotive resonance to the volcanoes' presentation within *The New Zealand Herald*. While this exploration may be considered ad hoc, it nonetheless highlights a number of concrete mechanisms. These include ecological correspondence that can be related to form and spatiality, jizz, and attention to anthropomorphic resonance. This provides a specific language to situate what may otherwise be an intuitive recognition of appeal within a materialist framework, aligning it with theoretical concerns that are increasingly prominent within the social sciences. This analysis also highlights nonhuman agency within mediated representation. Affective agency can be invoked in rhetorical arguments, as in for volcanic protection; it provides an emotive impetus and focus for discussion, such as Maungakiekie with regard to Māori-Pākeha relations; and can add an exciting "spice" to presentation, as may be paradoxically seen in the imagination of disaster within articles aimed at risk minimisation.

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