Social & Cultural Research Working Papers

Re/Touch:
Project Methodology

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Introduction

When I joined the Touch project team, my first objective as a social and cultural researcher was to conduct a traditional scholarly literature review on the social and cultural aspects of touch. While there are many psychological and philosophical accounts of the importance of human touching, the only book I knew that dealt specifically with the social and cultural dimensions of touching—or how touch is used to create, maintain and change relationships between people, places and things—was Constance Classen's The Book of Touch. While it is an extraordinary book in its entirety, something I read in the introduction particularly resonated with me.

Introducing the subject of her book, Classen remarks that touch "requires something different from ... typical scholarly elucidation" and suggests that "touch is better served by a rough and ready approach that acknowledges and grapples with the tangled, bumpy and sticky nature of the topic" (2005:5). In reading this, I finally understood that not only was the subject matter going to be more difficult to wrangle than I had anticipated, but the project's primary audience of design researchers and practitioners would not be best served by the "typical scholarly elucidation" of a traditional literature review.

Taking Classen's call for something "rough and ready" as my starting point, I first envisioned some sort of cross-cultural encyclopaedia on touch comprising short essays on topics related to touch and touching, suggestions for further reading, possible research questions, activities and even design briefs. But I very quickly found myself leaning towards something far more selective and evocative—or at any rate, something not quite so comprehensive or prescriptive.

In conversations with Touch project leader Timo Arnall, as well as with students and colleagues at the Oslo School of Architecture & Design, I began to appreciate how much I take for granted the kinds of cross-cultural practices that form the foundation of anthropological knowledge. Most notably, I witnessed the ephemera of my research notes—things I would not have included in any final product because they were 'simply' personal pointers and reminders—become the centre of attention for non-anthropologists.

Following Classen's (2005:1) reminder that "the culture of touch involves all of culture," one of the first places I had looked for social and cultural research on touch was the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF) Collection of Ethnography. Part of a larger collection housed at Yale University, the eHRAF is an online database comprising tens of thousands of full-text documents on more than one hundred different cultures around the world.

My early attempts to get a sense of the collection content were complicated by the lack of "touch" as a subject in the HRAF classification system, and exact word searches yielding more than 10, 000 results. Initially, the sheer magnitude and rather idiosyncratic quality of the collection discouraged me from using the eHRAF as a primary source for my research. After copying into my notes several dozen quotes that represented both recurring and unique types of touching from around the world, I moved on to other resources.

But in conversations with others, it was these accounts I found myself using in order to explain how cultural values and social norms surrounding touch shape people's everyday interactions. For example, certain kinds of touching are prohibited or punished in some contexts, and encouraged or rewarded in others. Unsurprisingly, these are points easier made with concrete examples, and several designers

remarked on how these examples inspired them to think in new and exciting ways.
From these discussions, I began to see the eHRAF collection as an incredibly rich resource for something truly "rough and ready ... tangled, bumpy and sticky." But I also knew what kind of complexity I faced, and it ultimately took over a hundred hours of research and development to come up with the **re/touch** website.

The remainder of this paper addresses some of the questions and concerns I had as a researcher, and outlines the methods I used in designing the final product. It is my hope that other researchers will see opportunities for improving both the creativity and rigour of these approaches, and I welcome any comments or suggestions on my processes and/or products.

A situated and partial bricolage

Suspecting that quotes would form the basis of the collection, I was initially concerned that any attempt to assemble and present such partial accounts—stripped of their broader cultural relevance and contexts of their production—could result in some sort of post-colonial cabinet of curiosities or exotic spectacle. After all, collections and archives have long been considered politically and ethically fraught (see for example, Kaplan 2002). There was also a small part of me concerned that, in making anthropology's work relevant to others, I would be doing 'bad' anthropology by discouraging more holistic approaches to understanding culture.

But anthropology has always been, to greater and lesser degrees, a fragmentary and interpretive endeavour. It was over 50 years ago that noted cultural anthropologist Ruth Bunzel claimed that in practice "there is no magic formula, but there are many paths to partial truths" (1952). More recently, James Clifford (1986) re-invigorated an anthropological focus on partial truths and Marilyn Strathern has long argued that the work of anthropology always already involves partial connections (2004/1991) and persuasive fictions (1987).

Put another way, anthropological accounts of culture are never objectively complete or completely objective—they are situated within particular places and times, guided by certain interests and values (Abu-Lughod 1991). In many ways, ethnographic accounts say as much about their authors as the peoples and cultures studied, and for the past two decades anthropologists have paid careful attention to the ways in which our practices shape culture and vice versa (see for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fischer 2007; James, Hawkey and Dawson 1997; Marcus 2008).

So rather than treating the partiality of the eHRAF collection—or the partiality of a new database filled with excerpts from it—as problems to be avoided or overcome, I considered the possibility that what I had at hand was an opportunity to experiment or play with taking the eHRAF collection apart and making new situated and partial connections. After all, I was not trying to create a comprehensive cross-cultural encyclopaedia; I was trying to present a "tangled, bumpy and sticky" exploration of touching across cultures.

My desire to playfully approach the collection was further inspired by the curation of material culture and the practice of bricolage, or creative tinkering. For example, museum artefacts are regularly taken off the shelf or removed from exhibition in order to be examined, adjusted, cleaned and protected, pieces added or removed—and ultimately to be repositioned on another shelf or wall, behind another velvet rope or piece of glass, inside another box, above another label. In these and other ways, both the

subjects and objects of collections are continually maintained and reconfigured, inscribed with old identities and new possibilities. Along these lines, I wanted to explore what manipulating, or handling, cross-cultural accounts of touch might mean—and bricolage, as a multi-methodological and multi-theoretical approach to qualitative research, offers interesting possibilities.

Still in pursuit of Classen's "rough and ready bits" rather than any definitive or authoritative account of touch across cultures, I found that bricolage offered me the means to pursue multiple paths at once. As Joe Kincheloe explains,

> "[M]onological knowledge is a smug knowledge that is content with quick resolutions to the problems that confront researchers […] Bricoleurs understand a basic flaw within the nature and production of monological knowledge: Unilateral perspectives on the world fail to account for the complex relationship between material reality and human perception […] In this context, bricoleurs seek multiple perspectives not to provide the truth about reality but to avoid the monological knowledge that emerges from unquestioned frames of reference and the dismissal of the numerous relationships and connections that link various forms of knowledge together" (2005:326-327).

In other words, I wanted to revel in the complexity and messiness of touch, as much as I wanted to revel in the complexity and messiness of the eHRAF texts. But I also understood that I would still need to find ways to search the eHRAF collection, to determine criteria for selecting, sorting and classifying quotes, and finally, decide how to present a new collection—or bricolage—of my own.

Making sense of the HRAF Collection of Ethnography

Despite a clear enthusiasm for effectively re-mixing some of the HRAF content, I had to first acknowledge concerns I had about the organisation of the collection, and when it came to making sense of the HRAF I found nothing more informative and inspiring than James Tobin's article, "The HRAF as Radical Text?" According to Tobin (1990:473),

> "The Human Relations Area Files began in 1937 as the Cross-Cultural Survey at Yale's Institute of Human Relations, an interdisciplinary think tank where behavioral and social scientists joined colleagues from medicine and law in the quest for a 'unified science of individual and social behavior'."

Best-known amongst researchers, and promoted by its creators, as a uniquely coded database of information on the world's cultures, the current HRAF ethnographic collection is still organised according to a unified taxonomy of cultures developed and refined as part of America's scientific, industrial and military efforts over the past hundred years. Critiques of the Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM) subject codes and comparative methods are covered at length in Tobin's article, but former HRAF Director Clellan (Joe) Ford makes clear what drove the HRAF in the first couple of decades:

> "In the early 1950s HRAF was receiving support from the government at the level of $200,000 a year. The Navy, the Army, the Air Force, and the Central Intelligence Agency each contributed $50,000 a year to support research on four major areas: Southeast Asia, Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Near and Middle East. The arrangement was helpful from HRAF's viewpoint […] In 1954 it was decided in Washington that the Army should develop a series of handbooks on selected portions of the world's population. In view of HRAF's experience in developing similar handbooks for the peoples of the Pacific Islands in World War II, it seemed appropriate for the organization to collect and make available the

> necessary background information and to oversee the production of the required volumes. . . The manuscripts prepared at HRAF and at the subcontracted universities were sent to a branch office established at American University, Washington, D.C., where classified information was added to the unclassified material, and the final handbooks were prepared for submission to the Army.' This unit in Washington thus played the role of alleviating the universities and the HRAF from being hampered in any way by security precautions. It also served as a direct link with the Army and was therefore in a position to fashion the final products to Army specifications" (Ford 1970: 13-15, as cited in Tobin 1990:476).

And Tobin rather dryly concludes:

> "The HRAF is a synthesis of several of the least cool inventions of the last century: the 'everything in its place' taxonomic imperialism of the Victorian zoological garden, the 'A to Z' encyclopedism of the Sears and Roebuck catalog, the 'car a minute' efficiency of the Ford assembly line, the 'one-stop' ease of the shopping mall, the 'world of information at your fingertips' accessibility of the computer, the 'Big-Brother is watching you' panoptic control of FBI files, and the 'within an acceptable margin of error' logic of cross-tabs and multiple regression" (1990:477).

Nonetheless, as an ethnographic collection or assemblage, the HRAF is unparalleled:

> "HRAF files themselves are composed entirely of reprints of over 6000 ethnographic books, monographs, and papers on over three hundred cultural groups. At 750,000 pages, the HRAF is certainly the biggest ethnographic text and it's growing every year [… It is] a unique compendium, containing complete versions of many texts that can be found nowhere else in university libraries, texts ranging from missionaries' accounts and traders' and travelers' journals to lost classics of the 19th-century anthropological canon and translations into English of French and German ethnographies" (Tobin 1990:474-5).

And as Tobin further suggests, the HRAF ethnographic collection as a whole can be appreciated as a stylistically radical and playful text:

> "Behind its rational scaffolding of topical, subtopical, and area indexing and cross-referencing … the HRAF is a teeming mass of discordant voices and narrative disorder … The HRAF is also radical in being a model of dispersed authority, a prototype of ethnographic polyvocality. The HRAF is a compendium of voices, voices of millions of informants and thousands of ethnographers. As we read anywhere in the HRAF, we cannot avoid heteroglossia … Although on the surface a humorless and intimidating collection of directories, file drawers, and plastic fiche, the HRAF is playful. It is joyfully nonlinear and anti-narrative, like a children's flipbook or a postmodern novel that can be read forwards or backwards. It defies us to read linearly; it beckons us to play, to begin, like naughty pubescent boys with a dictionary, to put aside the pragmatic task at hand and flip the pages (the fiche) looking up favorite terms … When we dismiss the HRAF as nerdy and reactionary, when we make the HRAF into ethnography's Other, we miss out on a unique compendia of ethnographic texts and we miss the chance to let the HRAF play with and against our too conventional notions of ethnographic authority, intention, coolness, and morality" (1990:479, 483).

So, despite the serious political and ethical concerns raised by the Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM) subject codes, I was confident that such a resource was too rich to dismiss and offered too many possibilities for more playful research to ignore. And since 'touch' does not actually appear in the OCM subject list, I knew that I had the opportunity to access and use the collection in ways not intended by its organisers.

Searching the database, selecting the quotes & tagging the content

The electronic version of HRAF (eHRAF) contains over 350,000 pages of text that have been categorised and linked, at the paragraph level, according to HRAF OCM codes. Even as a significantly smaller collection than the full paper-based version of the HRAF, I knew that practical constraints would limit my engagement with it. Nonetheless, I began with exact word searches of the collection's full-texts using standard Boolean operators. For example, a search for 'grasp OR hold OR restrain' yielded 18,577 matching terms within 2225 documents, while a search for 'hugging AND kissing' produced 36 matching terms within 12 documents. It quickly became clear that due to the sheer pervasiveness of touch in everyday life, it would not be practical to search for all the words that could be used to describe types of touching. I considered limiting my search to particular structures or functions of touch, but decided that would be both too broad and too prescriptive. Eventually, my desire to encourage a more evocative sense of touch led me to the results of an exact word search for 'touch OR touching.' However, since the word 'touch' is used quite diversely in English, I knew that not all of the 7439 matching terms within 1426 documents would be relevant, and this brought me to the matter of actually selecting quotes for inclusion.

Understanding that the excerpts or quotes would be the central content in **re/touch**, I knew that my choices would create a particular kind of collection and encourage particular ways of thinking about touch. By focussing specifically on accounts of physical interaction or exchange between people, I hoped to make **re/touch** something that would appeal to the Touch project team, as well as to other researchers and designers interested in social and material relations. These self-imposed constraints led me to exclude all instances of metaphorical touch (e.g. being 'in touch') and emotional touching (e.g. 'a touching story'), although I think that further research along those lines could prove quite fruitful. The exclusions removed a large number from the initial search results, although once I began to select quotes, their continuing volume suggested further filtering would be needed to work with my available resources. Accordingly, I next chose to exclude repetitive accounts on the same culture, from different sources. For example, if several different sources mentioned a particular touch prohibition amongst the Maasai, I copied only those that provided further detail or context. Given the large number of cultures represented, and the strong likelihood of a predominantly European and North American audience for the final product, I also chose to exclude those culture areas from my initial search.

Due to the structure of the OCM, no search match was ever longer than a paragraph and sometimes only one sentence, so the **re/touch** quotes are generally short. Occasionally I would look up passages before or after the matched text to better understand the characters, events or actions described, but I tried to keep all the excerpts short. Unable, or unwilling, to decide how much context would be 'enough' I finally decided that as long as relations between individual people, objects and actions could be distinguished, the quote would be included. While individual textual fragments were meant to be evocative, matches I considered too vague to make basic sense on their own were excluded, as well as any that were unclear. These final exclusions brought the number of quotes to a manageable size.

By that point, I saw my task not just as building or curating a collection, but also assembling a set of building blocks or modules for research inquiry and interaction design concerned with touch. Given the importance of contextual information, I thought it was crucial to remain faithful to the original texts, and so most excerpts appear exactly as they do in the eHRAF search results. Nonetheless, occasional edits for coherency and clarity were made and marked with hard brackets. Furthermore, each excerpt was copied along with its associated eHRAF culture and geographic region names, as well as a reference to the original source.

Deciding to exclude or ignore the existing OCM codes was, I believe, a crucial step in getting away from a unified theory of culture or touch, and instead creating a unique resource of quotes relevant to researchers, designers and others interested in the interactional (i.e. social, cultural and material) dimensions of touching. If my retouching of the eHRAF texts had so far been reserved to cutting out bits and pieces, replacing the existing codes with new tags was an explicit act of remixing, and perhaps the first solid indication that **re/touch** could be more than a pastiche of the eHRAF.

Continuing in the spirit of playfulness and bricolage, my approach to tagging the selected quotes was considerably less planned or controlled than that of the OCM. Reading the quotes over a period of several days, I first took a piece of paper and drew lines dividing it into four quadrants for People, Things, Ideas and Places, respectively. Then, while skimming the quote spreadsheet for about half an hour, I wrote down all the descriptive terms or phrases that came to mind, assigning each one to a category but noticing that they often belonged in more than one. Ultimately, a list was compiled from everything written on that piece of paper and I began using it as my tag pool.

In practice, however, I did not stick to this controlled vocabulary. While I always assigned terms or phrases from that list, there were some terms that were never applied and whenever a new term occurred to me I simply added it. Since each quote was assigned multiple tags, I often deleted from or added to past combinations that were automatically presented by the spreadsheet software as I filled in new cells. Assigning tags was done in batches loosely according to region, and after the last quote from each region was added I went back and double-checked the tags I had assigned. I was not overly concerned with strict consistency of application, but I did find myself refining sets to stress interactions between people, objects and ideas in particular places and times.

After noticing that I was focussing more exclusively on touch-based actions, I wondered what the tag cloud would look like if I used only verbs or action words. Using all the quotes associated with African cultural groups, I created a new list of tags and immediately saw the usefulness of positioning touch as a force in the world—one able to expand and limit people's relations to each other and the world around them. I saw all the disparate and fragmented cultural knowledge offer up patterns of interaction that could help designers and researchers create design briefs, refine interaction scenarios and devise game play. Classified in this way, the material seemed to encourage more questions to be asked and more actions to be taken. I felt as though I had finally hit on an incredibly playful and productive means of sorting the content, and so I proceeded to retag all the quotes in much the same way as I had done earlier.

When each piece of content was tagged with multiple action words, I knew that I wanted to design an online resource but I was still faced with the decision of how best to present it.

Presenting re/touch

The most immediate interaction design problem was figuring out how someone visiting the site could search or browse through hundreds of text excerpts. I knew that each quote had an author, a culture group and a culture area associated with it, as well as the tags I had assigned, so I knew I could offer the ability to search the collection by any of those terms. I quickly eliminated the ability to search by author, assuming few if any, site visitors would know or have an interest in individual authors. I seriously considered offering the ability to search culture groups and areas, but when I mocked up the tag clouds I was again concerned that I was creating a cabinet of curiosity or guide to exotic cultures—

especially given my earlier decision to exclude European and North American culture groups. But even if I had included those culture groups, I realised that I did not want **re/touch** to serve primarily as a cultural resource. In fact, it is as a cultural resource that I believe **re/touch** fails.

I understood that if ethnographic accounts always already comprise what anthropologists call "partial connections" and "partial truths," then **re/touch** is even more partial. While the collection attempts to communicate the cultural richness of touch, it would be naive to suggest that it adequately represents the richness of human culture in general, or of any cultural group in particular. In other words, given the highly decontextualised nature of **re/touch** quotes, I believe it is inadvisable to draw specific conclusions about the cultures to which each excerpt is attributed. This doesn't mean there are no reliable patterns to be identified, but rather that the quotes—both individually and in aggregate—do not present holistic cultural models. The original decision to recategorise these ethnographic accounts using verbs, or action words, was specifically meant to address these limitations. What **re/touch** does offer is the ability to reimagine models of touch-based social and cultural interaction.

Furthermore, each of the ethnographic accounts excerpted is a product of its own place and time, and can often tell us as much about its writer as the people it purports to describe. For example, the very desire to send certain people out in the world to make sense of other people indicates the interests of particular historical periods and locations. Readers will see accounts written at the turn of the 20th century and accounts that were written in the past decade. Some are associated with trading and travelling, others with church activities, military or government endeavours, and others still with scientific expeditions and university research. In all cases, the resulting ethnographic accounts are the result of specialised interests and privileged experience.

Over the past hundred or so years, anthropologists have learned that the interpretation of culture is tricky business. In some of the **re/touch** quotes readers will notice that the original writer used terms like "savage," "primitive," "strange" or "curious" to describe customs and values unfamiliar to them. Today, anthropologists would avoid those kind of descriptions or evaluations, in part because of their negative connotations. Some might describe this as a more objective approach, but it may be more accurate to say that we strive to understand cultures on their own terms instead of ours. This doesn't mean that we think it's possible to take ourselves out of the equation—quite the contrary, in fact—but one of the primary goals of anthropology is to avoid what we call "ethnocentrism" or the perspective that our own culture should be the basis for comparison and evaluation of another.

Deciding to exclude the ability to search by culture group, culture area or author did not mean that any of those pieces of information is irrelevant. Actually, I believe that they offer a much needed, if necessarily incomplete, attempt to present a quote's cultural context and discourage ethnocentric evaluations. But I wanted to draw more attention to **re/touch**'s ability to reimagine models of touch-based social and cultural interaction, and so I decided that the primary means of interacting with the collection would be to browse the action words tags. In this way, I hoped to encourage people to explore how people use touch to relate to each other and the world—and to get inspired to think, make and do things touch- related.

Conclusions and further questions

The interests and concerns I have outlined in this paper are mine, in particular, and should not be understood as the only or even most important ones that could be raised. I realise that the research and

design of **re/touch** posits far more questions than it provides answers, and while we could view that as a problem to be solved, I believe that it is one of its main contributions to both cultural and design work.

More specifically, I am unaware of similar attempts to work with the HRAF collections of ethnography, and I think that **re/touch** raises interesting questions about its authorship and authority. My searching and tagging choices should also be subjected to further criticism—especially if there are to be any particular claims to rigour. The question of playful methods remains underevaluated, and also deserves further consideration.

The political and ethical implications of my website design also merit further attention. For example, I am not convinced that my attempts to avoid ethnocentrism have been entirely successful, or if they were even possible, and neither do I know if other anthropologists and non-anthropologists place as much value on that goal as I did.

And finally, the success of the website's interaction model and overall usability remains untested, and it might be interesting to see if more participatory approaches could be incorporated in future iterations.

Comments are welcome. Please email anne@plsj.org.

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