

Call for papers – 2007 Association of American Geographers Annual Conference.
17-21 April 2007, San Francisco, California, USA.
<http://www.aag.org/annualmeetings/SF2007/>

Touching Places / Placing Touch: Space, Culture and Tactility

Session organisers:

Sara MacKian, Chris Perkins and Martin Dodge
Space, Culture and Society Research Group,
School of Environment and Development, The University of Manchester

Context:

Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth. (Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*)

Touch is integral to every aspect of social action and its symbols and meanings deeply infuse all cultures. It is the most intimate spatial relationship between people, and between people and their environment and a vital and subtle communicative practice. The places where people want to touch, are allowed to touch, are obliged to touch, refuse to touch or are forbidden to touch, form a complex and delicately patterned landscape, but one that is negotiated largely subconsciously. Children learn their place and where to touch and not touch. Touching is also integral to mobility and access - the unthinking turn of a handle, unlocking doors, opening latches, pressing levers, pushing buttons and so on. And people understand and organise the world through touch in differing ways. As Classen (2005: 1) notes “Touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies.”

Given the deep importance of touch in all aspects of human spatiality, the tactile senses are poorly researched by human geography. Geographers have quite simply been out of touch. There are many reasons why touch is an overlooked spatial practice. The nature of touch is obvious and yet it is also hard to encode these intimate sensations, and their subtle meanings, into representational forms. In many respects touch is an under-theorised sense more generally: “Like the air we breath. It has been taken for granted as a fundamental fact of life, a medium for the production of meaningful acts, rather than meaningful in itself” (Classen 2005: 2).

Encouragingly, the neglect of touch is beginning to change as part of wider conceptual developments in geography around affective aspects of everyday spaces and performance, focusing on the sensual and the emotional. Much of this work moves beyond representational (visual and textual) readings of landscape, to an interpretative emphasis on embodied practices. The affective turn has so far however underplayed the socio-cultural complexity that regulates touch in different places – the conventions of when, where and with whom one can touch. And we do not really understand how these conventions are policed, or the degree to which places of touch are gendered, or how age, culture or ability are associated with touch.

Our goal in organising this AAG session is to further advance understanding of touch in geographical scholarship by a focus on the differential cultural meanings of touching places. We aim to move beyond a physical mapping of uneven tactility, to focus on developing a rich understanding of touch in terms of individual social life, personal experiences and tasks, and spatial contexts.

Suggested themes around experiences of touching places:

We invite theoretically informed analysis on the following broad themes and are open to suggestions of other papers that consider the differential meanings of the places of touch:

- **Dirty Places and Contagious Contacts**
- **Erotic Spaces and Seductive Feelings**
- **Touching Domestic Spaces and Caring Practice**
- **Placing Tactile Play**
- **Violent Places and the Feelings of Pain**
- **Tactile Art and Artefacts**
- **Crossing Tangible Cultures**
- **The Healing Touch: Places and Wellbeing**
- **The Tangibility of Knowledge Spaces**
- **Working through Touch**
- **Touch and Technology**
- **Getting Back in Touch: Epistemological Futures for Tactile Research**

Proposed papers in the form of a title and short abstract (250 words) should be submitted to Sara.MacKian@manchester.ac.uk by 1st October 2006. Further details on the paper requirements and registration for the AAG meeting are at <http://www.aag.org/annualmeetings/SF2007/call4papers.cfm>