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Introduction: QUALIA

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Abstract
This special issue proposes that the semiotically theorized concept of 'qualia' is useful for anthropologists working on problems of the senses, materiality, embodiment, aesthetics, and affect. Qualia are experiences of sensuous qualities (such as colors, textures, sounds, and smells) and feelings (such as satiety, anxiety, proximity, and otherness). The papers in this issue, first presented in a conference in honor of Nancy Munn and her groundbreaking book, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim Society* (1986), offer ethnographic accounts of the discursive, historical, and political conditions under which sensations come to be understood as being sensations of qualities – the qualia of softness, lightness, clarity, pain, stink, etc. – and in which those qualia are endowed with cultural value, whether positive or negative. The papers in this issue demonstrate that qualia are not just subjective mental experiences but rather sociocultural events of 'qualic' – and qualitative – orientation and evaluation. These papers thus provide models for the analysis of experience by calling into question what counts for social groups as the senses, materiality or immateriality, interiority, embodiment, or exteriority.

Keywords
Nancy Munn, qualia, qualisign, C.S. Peirce

Sociocultural anthropology has always been interested in the senses, materiality, embodiment, aesthetics, and affect. Our discipline is fundamentally concerned with the perceptible qualities of the world: looks, tastes, sounds, smells, and feels. We are interested in qualities insofar as qualities are interesting to people – even if sometimes these interests are not explicitly stated, but remain only obscure points of orientation. We focus not so much on the material properties of things as on people's reported experiences of and reflections on what they perceive to be their qualities. To emphasize

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this point, we have named this special issue of *Anthropological Theory* 'QUALIA' to refer methodologically to the experience of qualities as a fact of sociocultural life, rather than to qualities as purported properties of things in the world. The papers in this issue, first presented in a conference in honor of Nancy Munn and her groundbreaking book *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim Society* (1986), offer ethnographic accounts of the discursive, historical, and political conditions under which sensations come to be understood as being sensations of qualities – the qualia of softness, lightness, clarity, pain, stink, etc. – and in which those qualia are endowed with cultural value, whether positive or negative.

Theoretical orientations

The Latin term 'qualia' (singular: *quale*) has survived in philosophical discussions of the epistemological status of sensory experience, a central problem of western philosophy. In this philosophical tradition, the term 'qualia' is used to refer to perceptions and sensations 'in' or 'of' the mind, and the terms 'quality' and 'property' are used to refer to material properties of entities in the world. This distinction has led philosophers to ask how the two are related. How can we know if qualia reliably stand for or correspond to the material properties of things 'in the world'? Are experiences of qualities such as color or taste unique to individuals or can they be shared? If different people can claim to experience the same qualia, what facilitates this intersubjective sharing? Philosophers have frequently attempted to describe perduring intersubjective frameworks that shape perception and in so doing make possible shared experiences of *qualia*, including 'logical categories' (e.g. Aristotle[1]), 'transcendental categories' (e.g. Kant), and 'conceptual schemes' (e.g. Quine, Putnam). All of these theories attempt to explain the mediation of sensation by the mind.

The effect of cultural categories or schemata on experience has likewise always been a central theoretical concern for anthropology and the ethnographic analysis of sociality. Continuous with this tradition, in this issue we are concerned not with subjective, mental experiences taking place in the 'secret grotto of the head' (see Geertz 1973: 360ff.; see also Dennett 1988), but rather with the cultural framing of meaningful social practice. A semiotically theorized understanding of qualia as social, rather than purely subjective, helps us avoid the often awkward lines drawn between ''conscious'' and ''unconscious,'' or ''cognitive'' and ''corporeal,'' that appear without a theory of the modalities and scales of the metapragmatics of awareness (see Silverstein 1981). In the early years of the discipline, anthropologists repeatedly challenged universalist approaches to qualia by arguing that the categories and concepts that shape experience are specific to particular groups. Franz Boas's paper, 'On Alternating Sounds' (1889), showed how naïve linguists were misperceiving the uttered sounds in one language according to a system of phonological likeness and difference – meaningful categories of qualia – from their own language. Boas's interest in linguistics and anthropology stemmed from his earlier research in psychophysics and geography (see Stocking 1968). Boas showed how linguistic biasing resulted in the linguists' own 'alternating apperception', which

they projected onto, and thus mistakenly took as evidence for the 'alternating sounds' of, languages (and speakers) they deemed primitive and irrational. This interest in the linguistic mediation of categories of qualitative experience was carried on in the work of Edward Sapir and especially Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose account (e.g. Whorf 1956 [1939]) of the analogical projection of properties from one realm of conceptualized experience (e.g. 'space') onto another (e.g. 'time') demonstrated that tokens of qualitative experience and their abstractions as qualitative types are semiotically mediated (for example by categories embedded in 'fashions of speaking') and thus culturally differentiable – an argument that can be read as a reply to Kant's theory of space and time as transcendental categories of perception. Likewise, Evans-Pritchard described Nuer experiences of time and space as both 'oecological' (formed by embodied experiences of particular material environments) and structural (formed by social structures and practices), but pointed out that 'in a sense all time is structural, since it is a conceptualization of collateral, co-ordinated, or cooperative activities' (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 104).

Anthropologists and sociologists have also repeatedly argued that groups are formed, sustained, and transformed through beliefs and practices that make possible a sense of the social sharedness of experience. For cultural anthropologists from Boas to Geertz and beyond, the concept of 'culture' has been central to ethnographic accounts of intersubjectivity. For others, the concept of 'habitus' has served to explain the coordination of experience. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) adopted this latter term from Marcel Mauss and, drawing on the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, used it to describe an embodied framework of normativity, shaping both thought and action, perception and behavior – positional relative to gender, class, age, and other social categories. One dimension of the habitus involves the sociological structuring of qualia according to stratified categories of likeness and difference (e.g. 'taste'[1984]).[2] A second dimension is the organization of objective structures (such as houses and calendars) that in turn structure experience by 'generative schemes' (1977). From this perspective, the problem of qualia – although not always named as such – has long been central to anthropology across many theoretical lineages.

Our usage of the term 'qualia' in this issue comes specifically from Charles S. Peirce's writings on semiotics. The epistemological problem of experience was one of the central questions framing Peirce's pragmatic (later, 'pragmaticist') philosophy. John Dewey (1935: 701) explained that part of Peirce's project was to consider 'the matter of experience as experienced' and to give 'a logical analysis of experience'. In addition to writing 'On a New List of Categories' (1868) in the Aristotelian tradition of logical categories, Peirce also conducted controlled experiments on 'increments of sensation' with Joseph Jastrow (Peirce and Jastrow 1885), the psychologist who later developed the famous 'duck-rabbit' image (Jastrow 1899) on which Wittgenstein (1953) based his theory of 'seeing as'. Peirce's semiotic account of qualia is addressed in several of the papers in this issue but, in brief, he regards *qualities* as firstness (abstract, uninstantiated properties or attributes); he regards *qualia* as secondness (qualities instantiated or embodied in entities or events), and *qualisigns* as thirdness (as linking an object with an interpretant in a sign or 'standing-for'

relation). While the 'qualisign' is the first part of Pierce's first trichotomy of signs (qualisign, sinsign, legisign), 'it cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied; but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign' (Peirce 1998 [1903]: 291). Properties like greenness and hotness only appear to us in the form of things like leaves and fire, and yet we get the sense that these properties can be abstracted 'hypostatically' from any particular object (see Parmentier 1994: 28–9). In the qualisign, it is this abstracted property itself – greenness, hotness – that signifies, not just the leaf or the fire. As Harkness (this issue) argues, such qualisigns are frequently conventionalized, and it is their conventionality that makes it possible for social actors to recognize particular people (and particular things) as having particular 'qualities'.

The Peircean term 'qualisign' is perhaps most familiar to anthropologists from Nancy Munn's *The Fame of Gawa,* which took as its object the actions through which a community creates value and, through the process of value transformation, produces itself. Central to Munn's analysis of these processes was the concept of the 'qualisign of value'. In processes from gardening and canoe building to marriage exchange and witchcraft, people work to produce qualities such as lightness and darkness, heaviness and buoyancy. In producing these qualities, people produce value, and in producing value they generate 'intersubjective spacetimes': selves, relationships, communities, and also hierarchies and inequalities.

The Fame of Gawa developed Peirce's concept of the qualisign by linking, ethnographically, processes of Gawan socialization, exchange, value transformation, and the semiotics of quality. By examining how qualities like heaviness or darkness could confer or negate value in entities ranging from rocks, to human bodies, to gardens, Munn showed how value is constructed through qualitative experience – what we are calling 'qualia'. She did this by showing how qualities can have the 'standing-for' functions of signs, and how these qualisigns endow everyday material objects with use- and exchange-values that are key to their role in producing the social world.

> Value creation . . . is a complex symbolic process, both a dialectical formation of the symbolic system of meanings constituted in sociocultural practices and an ongoing dialectic of possibilities and counter-possibilities – explicit assertions of positive and negative value potentials – through which the members of the society are engaged in an effort to construct and control themselves and their own social world. (Munn 1986: 3)

Whether positive or negative, value is 'embedded' in material objects, such as shells, and in bodily states, such as sleep, which are associated with expansions or contractions of spacetime. For instance, eating produces sleep, and 'lying down and sleeping involve a minimization of social activity and of the physical space controlled by the body' (1986: 75); on the other hand, shells expand circuits of exchange as they travel. Munn writes:

> In the symbolic system, positive or negative value transformations involving food are systematically conveyed in certain key bodily qualities. . . . My general thesis is that these qualisigns characterize bodily spacetime in terms of a complex of polarized

> quality clusters that signify the positive or negative value transformations – the levels of intersubjective spacetime – effected by the acts. (1986: 74)

Peirce's notion of iconicity – when something stands for its object to someone by virtue of a perceived resemblance or formal similarity – was central to Munn's analysis of qualitative experience. She demonstrated that an iconic identification of lightness in boats and lightness in bodies is key to Gawan conceptualizations of 'lightness' as a qualisign of value. Through her examinations of garden magic, canoe-carving, and other forms of value production, Munn showed how iconic logics of metaphor are linked to indexical logics of causation. For example, in her description of Gawan marriage exchanges, Munn argues that 'the qualitative state is both the outcome of the act, and also an icon of it' (1986: 121). This phenomenon elsewhere has been called an 'indexical icon' (Silverstein 1993: 52, 1998: 137–8; Tambiah 1985: 156–61) and has become a central concept in semiotically informed anthropology. As is argued in several of the papers in this issue, indexical iconicity is at the heart of the signifying function of qualia in large part because of the intersubjective achievement of a sense of shared experience that it facilitates.

In drawing our attention to the conventionality of qualisigns and the discursive registers through which such conventions emerge, this special issue thus follows on the work of Nancy Munn and many other anthropologists by offering ethnographic analyses of what Bourdieu called the 'theory of the theory effect':

> which, by helping to impose a more or less authorized way of seeing the social world, helps to construct the reality of that world. *The word or, a fortiori, the dictum, the proverb and all the stereotyped or ritual forms of expression are programmes of perception*. (Bourdieu 1991: 106, emphasis added)

The theory-theory belongs to the aforementioned Aristotelian and Kantian tradition of theorizing categories of perception. Much of the Anglo-American philosophical work in this tradition has been concerned with regarding language as a solution to the problem of the excess and confusion of sense-experience: 'the function of the conceptions is to reduce the manifold of sensuous impressions to unity' (Peirce 1991: 23).[3] But, as the papers in this issue demonstrate, it must be remembered that qualia serve as much to proliferate cognitive associations as to delimit them:

> Instead of providing a simple means of delimiting the sensations, if we consider it in the experience itself which evinces it, the quality is as rich and mysterious as the object, or indeed the whole spectacle, perceived. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 5)

The papers

The papers collected here were first presented at a conference held at the University of Chicago in the spring of 2010.[4] The conference was organized around the

ethnography of qualitative experience, inspired by Michael Silverstein's graduate seminar on qualia (held at the University of Chicago in the Spring of 2005). We asked participants to develop their papers by following Munn's lead in *The Fame of Gawa* and incorporate the semiotic contributions of Charles S. Peirce into their ethnographic accounts of qualitative experience. Thus, the papers here draw on the ethnographic approaches and analytical conclusions in *The Fame of Gawa* as well as Peircean semiotics – including its more recent conceptual innovations in linguistic and semiotic anthropology – to theorize qualitative experience and its valuation in society.

The result is a set of papers ranging from the more broadly ethnographic to more technical-semiotic approaches to the anthropology of qualitative experience. All of them contribute both methodologically and theoretically to our understanding of the role of qualitative experience in social life. Harkness's paper looks at the way the gustatory qualia of Korean *soju*, as relatively 'soft' or 'hard', become the basis for larger frameworks of sensation and sociality. Also linking the qualia of food to metaphors for the qualities of groups of people, Gal's analysis of the qualia of talk (and of pastry) in a Hungarian town serves in the narrative framing of people's actions leading up to and during the Second World War. That social space can be organized in terms of qualitative space is evident in Hankins's paper, which discusses the way the smell of leatherwork – more of the chemicals for treating leather than of the leather itself – lingers in the noses of people as they use cultural memories of olfaction to categorize people. Lemon's paper on human-to-human contact in Russia shows how qualia do not just figure in the organization of society but in the very stuff of sociality. This concern is extended in Ralph's and Silverstein's papers, both of which focus on the role of shared qualitative experiences in a community. Whereas Ralph's paper describes the place of narratives of pain in a US city, Silverstein's paper accounts for the very proprioceptive feeling of kinship in the bodies of kin in aboriginal Australia. Moving from the strictly sensory to broader regimes of qualitative differentiation, Munn's and Calvão's papers both explore the place of qualia in relation to shifting systems of value: Munn traces the qualitative transformation of a country estate in New York in relation to social and economic transformation over time; Calvão traces the qualitative transformation of diamonds from Angola in relation to phases in the extraction and trading process – as they are pulled from the earth and delivered into circulation. Finally, in describing contrary models of evaluation in Chinese art education, Chumley's paper homes in on the ways that qualia are converted into values and the evaluation regimes through which these conversions are sanctioned.

By focusing on qualia this issue brings together a range of themes that might otherwise be treated as separate areas of research. For example, Silverstein, Lemon, and Ralph all deal with issues that might be classified as 'embodiment'. Gal, Hankins, Chumley, and Munn deal with topics often considered under the rubric of 'aesthetics'. Calvão, Chumley, Harkness, and Hankins display a concern with classically 'material' entities. Calvão, Harkness, Gal, Hankins, Lemon, and Ralph

all deal in some respect with the qualia of 'affect'. And all of these papers deal with the 'senses' as culturally conceptualized channels for qualia.

The discursive formations discussed in this issue – from parenteral maps of the body to ethnonational categorizations of food items – are not just programs of perception but also forms of embodied experience. Not surprisingly, then, the human body is a crucial framing structure for some of these papers and figures centrally in all of them: Silverstein on the body as indexical *origō*, Munn on the bodily experience of elevation and space in Richmond Hill, Lemon on the problem of contact and gap, and Ralph on immobility, Gal on 'fancy' artisans versus 'dense and thick' farmers, Hankins on the stigmatized Burakumin body, and Harkness on 'shaking' soju as a way of producing softness in both bodies and liquor. The papers in this issue show not just how evaluations are embedded in or emerge through discourse, but also how the body and its spatial orientations serve as crucial frameworks for those evaluations: moral orders and hierarchies are indexically and iconically linked to parts of bodies and the spaces around and between them, just as they are linked to qualic experiences.

By focusing on qualia—and, crucially, grounding this focus in ethnography—the papers in this issue offer a dialogue between the various subfields working on the senses in anthropology today. Materiality can be regarded as an attribution of qualities to objects in an external world, which can then be experienced and acted upon through qualia.[5] Embodiment can be viewed as an array of qualic normativities, clustered according to genred forms of activity, which often lie beneath the radar of awareness and beyond denotational representation. Aesthetics can be described in terms the valuation of, stratification of, and specialized engagement with, or discourse about, realms of qualia. And affect can be described in terms of qualia of feeling more generally. We hope this special issue of *Anthropological Theory* will honor Munn's profound impact on our discipline by making a lasting contribution to a semiotically and ethnographically informed anthropology of experience.

Notes

1. It must be noted here that Aristotle's theory of categories is not explicitly framed in terms of perception (or phenomenological experience), but rather in terms of habits of reference and description: 'By a quality I mean that in virtue of which things *are said to* be qualified somehow. But quality is one of the things *spoken of* in a number of ways' (Aristotle 1963: 24 [8b25]; emphasis added). He goes on to list the various ways that quality is spoken of: states and conditions, capacities and incapacities, affective qualities and affections (sweetness, bitternesss, sourness, hotness and coldness), and shapes and form. Qualities that have their origin in affections that are hard to change are called qualities, 'for in virtue of them *we are said to be* qualified' [9b19]; 'It is in virtue of qualities only that things are called *similar* and *dissimilar*; a thing is not similar to another in virtue of anything but that in virtue of which it is qualified' [11a15]. The *Categories* is more concerned with the epistemological problem of predication as a logical activity than with metaphysical problems of existence. For Kant, writing in response to Hume's skepticism, epistemology and metaphysics become inextricable.

2. See Throop and Murphy (2002) for an argument that Bourdieu's understanding of the 'habitus' owes more to Husserl than Bourdieu would admit.
3. For Husserl and his empiricist followers, this limiting function must be developed into a 'pure eidetic science' that allows for the possibility of empirical contact with the world, despite the inescapable mediations of human subjectivity: '. . . the practical Ideal of exact eidetic science, which in truth the more recent mathematics first taught us to realize: To confer the highest grade of rationality on every eidetic science by reducing all the mediated mental steps to mere subsumptions under the definitively systematized axioms of the eidetic field' (Husserl 1931: 56).
4. The conference also featured excellent papers by Yarimar Bonilla, Judith Farquhar, and Daniel Miller, as well as penetrating discussions by Shunsuke Nozawa, Jonathan Rosa, and Eitan Wilf.
5. See Manning (2012) on 'new materialist' semiotic anthropology, which draws on and is in direct dialogue with Munn's work, as well as that of many authors featured in this issue. See also Parmentier (1994).

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