

OBITUARY

Nancy D. Munn (April 13, 1931–January 20, 2020)



Nancy Munn. (Photograph in Nancy Munn Papers)

Nancy Dorothy Munn was an arduous fieldworker, a scrupulous ethnographer, a creative theorist, and a dedicated teacher. Bridging anthropological generations and national styles over the course of her long career, she was a key figure in the development of symbolic anthropology at its most sophisticated conceptually, and most grounded empirically. One of the first to bring phenomenology to bear on anthropological analysis, she was an early and important contributor to practice theory and an instigator of the new materialism. She influenced the revival and rethinking of the Marxist and post-Marxist theories of value (Graeber 2001, 2013) and material culture (Appadurai 1986), while also introducing the phenomenological concept of “spacetime” and the semiotic one of “qualisigns” to new generations of researchers.

Nancy Munn grew up in the Yorkville section of New York’s Upper East Side, at that time a largely German neighborhood. Her parents divorced early, and she was raised by her mother, who worked as a fashion model for department stores. Although Munn’s parents were Jewish (her father’s surname was Nussbaum), she did not discover this until she was in high school, her mother having changed her name from Schiffman to Munn. With little intellectual support at home, Munn was encouraged by a high school teacher to apply to college. Perhaps attracted by its distance from home, she entered the Letters Program at the University of Oklahoma. Upon receiving the bachelor’s degree, she went on to the Indiana University for a master’s degree, where she worked as a research assistant for David Bidney. She was responsive to Bidney’s own philosophically imbued approach to anthropology, but the department was falling into disarray, and she left to complete her training at the Australian National University. Munn intended to work with S. F. Nadel, but after his premature death, she studied eventually with W. E. H. Stanner.

Awarded a Fulbright, Munn carried out her first fieldwork in central Australia with the Walbiri living in Yuendumu, in two periods from 1956 to 1958, with additional research in Alice Springs (Figure 1). In addition to overcoming pervasive sexism and the physical challenges of desert life, Munn had to persevere in the face of arbitrary restrictions that local administrators put on her interactions with community members. She was forced to interrupt her fieldwork for three months, passing the time in Alice Springs, then a remote little town. After Stanner intervened, Munn was allowed to return to Yuendumu, but on the condition that she camp on the edge of the settlement, properly set up with tent, shower, and pit latrine. Lacking funds to stay on in Australia, she was enabled to write the dissertation while in residence at Cornell University with two years of support arranged by Lauriston Sharp, and she received the PhD from ANU in 1960. Munn returned to the Northern Territory in 1964 with support from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and conducted research at the Areyonga Government Settlement (renamed Utju), where primarily northern Pitjantjatjara-speaking people lived.

Munn’s teaching career began at Bennington College in Vermont. Not long after that, she took a position at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with an interim year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1972. For her second fieldsite, she turned to the Massim archipelago, home of the kula ring, made famous by Malinowski. With support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), she carried out fieldwork on the small island of Gawa in two stints between 1973 and 1975, presenting an initial analysis as the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in 1976. That same year, she became the first tenured



FIGURE 1 Nancy Munn, April 1957, returning to Alice Springs from a long journey to Wyndham, Western Australia. (Photograph by John Turner, PhD) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

female professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago and (Judith Shapiro having departed a year before) the sole woman on the department's faculty until the arrival of Jean Comaroff as assistant professor in 1978. By all accounts, life as a single woman amid a crew of highly self-assertive men was not an easy situation, but the department's intellectual milieu seems to have been a good fit for her own conceptual style. She returned to Gawa from 1979 to 1981 with another NSF grant and published her magnum opus, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*, in 1986, discussed further below. Although her strongest theoretical statements were always grounded in close attention to the minute details of ethnography, one of her most influential publications beyond this book was a work of theoretical synthesis, "The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay" in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Munn 1992).

As a teacher and advisor, Munn was an extraordinarily close reader and careful thinker who saw no need to muffle her comments, which could be quite direct. Her graduate seminars at the University of Chicago offered students the rare chance to get inside the kitchen and grapple with ethnographic materials before they became thoroughly cooked. Shortly after returning from Gawa, she offered one seminar largely devoted to working through her raw fieldnotes. Although this could be bewildering to the student, it was also a salutary demonstration that even the most polished monograph did not start out that way. Munn made liberal use of Post-it notes to flag comments on student papers; her feedback, however austere in style, was always an induce-

ment to reach toward a higher standard. It was a fitting memorial that the journal *HAU* chose to honor her by publishing the comments she had sent them shortly before her death for an article they had sent her for peer review (Ferme 2020). She raised critical responsiveness to its highest level.

Nancy Munn's final project, supported in part by a Guggenheim Fellowship awarded in 1992, brought her back to her roots in New York City. It started with an interest in Olmsted and Vaux's nineteenth-century plan for Central Park and their ambitions for social reform through the manipulation of the visitor's experience in and of space. She presented an early version of the project as a brief comparative aside in the Frazer Lecture that was otherwise devoted to Indigenous Australian control over the landscape (Munn 1996). The topic expanded into a large-scale project, described below, on the spatiotemporal dimensions of New York during an era of rapid change. After her retirement in 1997, another piece of the project came out as the 2003 Edward Westermarck Lecture.

Munn's first book, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society*, was published in 1973 as the first title in Victor Turner's "Symbol, Myth, and Ritual" book series. It is characteristic of Munn's deliberate, unrushed working style that the book did not appear until fifteen years after the completion of the fieldwork. The result of this slow process was a deeply thought-out account of the dynamic role that material forms can play in the production and integration of individual experience, social systems, and cosmology. While acknowledging the insights of Lévi-Strauss, it

pushed beyond the structuralism dominant at the time, pioneering the use of phenomenology to bring subjectivity and structural order into a single frame of analysis.

Written in a disarmingly straightforward style, the volume is on one level a holistic ethnography of Walbiri design, from the sand drawings that accompany women's narratives to the esoteric carvings and body painting of men's rituals. But the wider significance of the work lies in its conceptual innovations and analytical scope. Munn rejects the assumption that art is "essentially trivial in comparison with such hard-core problems as kinship and social structure" (Munn 1973, 2). Without great fanfare, her analysis makes use of concepts from psychology, semiotics, Schutz's notions of social time, and Simmel's reflections on experience to show that designs do not just refer but mediate the actions that forge subjectivities, reproduce social relations, and integrate the living with the ancestors. She criticizes both structuralism and hermeneutics for tending to treat "symbols" as vehicles for conveying concepts whose formal properties did little beyond signify meanings. Pushing beyond this static idealism, Munn emphasizes the materiality of signs, and thus the causality involved in their production and circulation. She suggests that the footprint is a type concept for designs, since it is produced by the interaction of the body and the ground (137). At one end of the analysis, then, is the ordinary experience of a body drawing in the sand. At the other end, this body is a "mobile being" that is bound by the designs to external space that transcends the individual artist in the here and now and binds them to larger social and cosmological orders.

By emphasizing the materiality of designs, Munn links their power to the physical sensations of those who produce, bear, and perceive them, and the emotions they induce. Since designs are "objectifications" of the subjects who make or wear them, and are physically detachable from their bodies, they extend the self in both space and time. The role that objects play in the spatiotemporal extension of self becomes a central concept in Munn's later work. In developing the nexus of person and things, she pushed phenomenology beyond the tendency to privilege individual subjectivity. This in turn led her toward a highly original synthesis of phenomenological and Marxist traditions.

Munn's basic premise that bodily and social being are "intrinsically spatiotemporal" (Munn 1986, 268) shaped the publications that sealed her legacy as an innovative anthropological theorist. After a preliminary trip in 1972, Munn chose to work on the small island of Gawa (Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea, pop. 532) rather than the less remote Muyuw (Woodlark Island), where she had spent short periods at Guasopa and Wabunun villages. Her fieldwork on Gawa extended over thirty months. As in Yuendumu, this fieldwork involved significant physical and logistical challenges.

The Fame of Gawa develops a general model of transformative actions that is nothing less than a conceptual framework for understanding how people—all people—create the value they deem essential for their viability. The book, a thoroughly revised version of the four Morgan Lectures presented ten years earlier, begins by laying out Munn's distinctive approach to symbolic processes, "the practices by means of which actors construct their social world, and simultaneously their own selves and modes of being in the world" (1986, 7). Munn's

ambitious goal is "to suggest a more general anthropological model of practice as symbolic process" (7)—an undertaking reminiscent of Bourdieu's ([1972] 1977) theory of practice, but doggedly pursued through scrutiny of the ethnographic particulars of a single case. Her model seeks to reveal the underlying structure or "generative schema" of the Gawan sociocultural order, comprehending practices as diverse as bloodletting and dancing as "components of a single symbolic system" (Munn 1986, 268). Reviewers of the book alternated between praising its philosophical sophistication and intellectual force, on the one hand, and warning about its exacting technical vocabulary and "flight from conventional categories" (Young 1989, 318), on the other.

Munn's general model first appeared in a 1975 seminar paper (published as Munn 1977) that described the sequence of transformative acts—or, more precisely, "qualitative conversions"—through which Gawans turn heavy, rooted trees into swift, seafaring canoes to trade with overseas partners for armshells that can be circulated in kula. Munn observes that men exercised proprietary rights over these shells, called *kitomu*, thereby adjusting Malinowski's view of kula valuables as system-communal property of which only temporary possession was possible. This revision of received wisdom was consolidated at the landmark 1978 kula conference held at Cambridge University, which Munn attended. Her contribution to the conference volume (Munn 1983) brilliantly describes kula as a tournament of intersubjectivity: a man "moves the mind" of his kula partner with magic spells, thus effecting like-mindedness and persuading his partner to release a shell to him. A successful kula career of such influence-creating transactions produces fame—a name known throughout the interisland world—for both the individual actor and the larger Gawan community.

In Gawa, transformative acts include, besides making canoes and transacting kula shells, planting gardens and, most importantly, giving food to others. Such acts potentially generate desirable outcomes; they are "outward, self-extending acts" (Munn 1986, 13) that demonstrate present productivity and ensure future hospitality. By contrast, selfish acts, such as eating excessively or refusing to give, yield no positive effects and might even, as in cannibalistic witch attacks, nullify the "positive spatiotemporal control capacities of others" (13). The potency or "general value" of any particular act can therefore be measured in terms of the act's "relative capacity to extend [or contract] ... *intersubjective spacetime*—a spacetime of self-other relationships formed in and through acts and practices" (9). As Munn puts it, "In producing a given level of spatiotemporal extension beyond the self, actors produce their own value" (15). Munn's model thus weds her long-standing concern with the dynamics of spacetime to a theory of value in dialogue with the Marxian ideas of Terence Turner (Graeber 2001).

Although Munn does not orient her study to debates in feminist anthropology, her model attends to the gendered complementarities and tensions of Gawan value transformations. Women, who prepare and cook food, are positively associated with the intra-island garden produce that, through affinal gifts and generous care of visiting kula partners, yields shell valuables that traverse the inter-island world. This association, however, categorizes women as consumers rather than donors and so, stereotypically, as retentive and willful witches.

Men nonetheless rely on women's supportive aid and must actively persuade women to consent to men's projects.

Munn's model equally attends to how the sensuous material properties of things and persons reflect and constitute each other. Temporally durable kula shells with unique names define their transactors as famous individuals spoken of by spatially distant others, and vice-versa. Similarly, bodily states iconically represent the acts that produce them; for example, a sleeping, motionless body is an icon of excessive eating and, hence, a qualisign or embodied quality of the "negative intersubjective spacetime" created by gluttony and the resulting denial of social relations. Munn's approach to value creation thus entails a semiotic strategy that addresses in a wholly novel way Mauss's ([1925] 1967) question of how persons and things become substantially identified with each other. Such identity exceeds analogy or metaphor. Food or armshells given as gifts undergo "subjective conversion" into the recipient's memory. When subsequently prodded, this memory is reconverted into reciprocal gifts—a version of the transformation of subjects into objects and back again that Munn (1970) saw in Aboriginal myth and ritual. Causing another person to remember and perforce to give, the Gawan self engenders and expands intersubjective spacetime by creating an external agent who transmits tokens of the self's positive value.

The Fame of Gawa swims outside the anthropological currents of its day. Published in the same year as *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), it betrays no interest in or doubts about ethnographic authority, literary style, or critical self-reflexivity. The book is likewise indifferent to the rapprochement between history and anthropology then being brokered in different ways by Munn's own departmental colleagues. Despite the fact that Munn's first two trips to Gawa occurred during the nervous years leading up to Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, the spacetime of the nation-state is barely considered. And although the book's concerns with gender symbolism intersect at several points with the preoccupations of the so-called New Melanesian Ethnography inspired by Marilyn Strathern (1988), *The Fame of Gawa* foregrounds "action as a medium of transformation" (Munn 1986, 270) rather than culturally variable forms of personhood and sociality. The book is, in the end, *sui generis*—not unlike Bateson's *Naven*, the product of a singular vision that offers profound insights but defies easy replication.

The final project, left incomplete at the time of her death, extends the concept of spacetime that she developed in her Walbiri and Gawa ethnographies to New York. In the Frazer Lecture, she considers how the designers of Central Park created a series of scenes or viewpoints that situate the viewer within what she calls a "spatiosensual field of mobile actors." She pits Olmsted and Vaux's strategies for channeling park visitors' perceptions and movement in and through space against the conventional objectivism that treats space and time separately. This objectivism, she argues, results from abstracting time and space from the activities of embodied humans. To counteract these objectivist distinctions, she attends to how, in very different ways, both Indigenous Australians and New Yorkers developed practices that "coordinate elements of space, time, and bodily action within a sin-

gle paradigm of changing relations" (Munn 1996, 465). Looking at the longer historical record to consider how the city was constantly being demolished and rebuilt, she proposes that as the places New Yorkers knew and navigated disappeared, resulting in breaks in their mundane experiences of place and their perception of things gone missing, they came to see them with renewed attention: "the spacetime of the place-world becomes problematized and must be worked out, as it were, 'anew'" (Munn 2013, 376). It's hard not to see a trace of autobiography in this formulation.

A precise and painstaking writer, Munn produced slowly, but her relatively modest publication record (two monographs and a handful of major articles) belies her impact on social and cultural theory. Although her own fieldwork was carried out in Indigenous Australia and Papua New Guinea, areas that are commonly identified with the most traditional styles of anthropology, her influence can be seen in research on topics as different as middle-class English consumerism (Miller 1987), Romani ethnoracial identity (Lie 2020), art schools (Chumley 2016) and transnational remittance payments (Chu 2010) in China, the taste for bacon (Weiss 2018) and the economics of street people in the United States (McGill 2013), and brands and commodity chains globally (Foster 2008). As we note, her own final incomplete project brought her back to the urban world of the industrial nineteenth-century United States. Through her teaching and writing, Munn's theoretical innovations have had an enduring utility for anthropological analysis. Her papers have been donated to the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library.

Despite being a private, even shy, individual, Nancy Munn had a gift for inspiring warm, devoted friendships. Those who were close to her recalled her idiosyncrasies fondly. Rejecting the traditional female roles of her generation, Munn took no interest in cooking. She strictly monitored the ingredients of her diet, preferring hot water with lemon to tea or coffee, but she also loved eating at La Petite Folie, a local French restaurant. Munn thought nothing of phoning a bleary-eyed graduate student early on a Sunday morning to launch into a detailed critique of their dissertation chapter. Many of us will recognize the image of her driving style remembered by her fellow Australianist Howard Morphy: "As we slowly drifted across the lanes of the crowded freeway accompanied by the sound of car horns from either side, she calmly said, 'Chicago drivers are always blowing their horns at one another.'"

Apart from annual visits to old friends in New England, Nancy Munn remained a habitué of Chicago's Hyde Park who liked vigorous walking and lived in the same third-floor walk-up until her final illness. Her apartment was divided among her research interests: one room for Australia, one for Papua New Guinea, and one for New York. Pride of place went to her collection of Victorian children's books. She enjoyed reciting *bad* poetry from memory, easily burst into song, and maintained a menagerie of toy animals, about whom she created biographies and social lives, often narrated to close friends in letters under the logo of "the Lost Horizon Press." She was, in Morphy's words, "a magical and cerebral person."

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