

Introduction to special section 2: Anthropology and Character

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The concept of character has a strange twofold life in anthropology. As was discussed in the introduction to an earlier special section that this is a companion to and a sequel of, character is an effectively forbidden explicit analytic, tainted by its association to mid-twentieth century attempts by the culture-and-personality school of anthropology; at the same time, character is constantly invoked, albeit often in an ad-hoc manner, by contemporary anthropologists. As such, it was proposed that much could be gained by an explicit and conscious disciplinary discussion regarding the place of character in anthropology; our last special section dealt specifically with its place in the anthropology of ethics and the anthropology of Christianity. But this essay argues that concerns with such sub disciplines and programs do not exhaust the intellectual challenges and opportunities inherent in the concept of character. This is in part because there is a much wider range of ethnographic objects that can be addressed, either 'emicly' or 'eticly,' through character as a concept; to stop with Christianity or ethics would be to turn back too soon. But just as pressing as the expanse of spaces where 'character' could matter, is the peculiar aspects of character, aspects which stand out in sharper outline when taken beyond special fields such as morality or Christian praxis and belief. Continuing with our refusal to think of character in terms of some essentialist accounts of culture as a psychological phenomenon, we instead focus here on character as exquisitely social and aesthetic. But society should not be thought of as indicating a collectivity of the exclusively human, and such social and aesthetic grounding does not mean that the concept of character is not a volatile one. As we discuss, character either interpolates, or is claimed by, entities such as meerkats, buildings, and even fictive personages. Indeed, the fictive may well be integral to character, as is a sort of doubling. And finally, absence and contradiction in character may be more important than presence and order. The etymology of character may go back to objects passively receiving a stamp of some enduring mark or glyph, but as discussed here, there is nothing passive or stable in the idea of character.

Inhuman, absent, and disruptive character

Indeed, thinking about the productive consequences of identifying character as lacking, absent, or unstable is perhaps the other side of thinking about character as productively present. Consider, for instance, the essay by Wardle included in this special section. In contrast to spaces like Melanesia, where character as a concept is rare or absent (see Strathern 2018), he tells us that the anthropology of the Anglophone-Caribbean has had a long and sustained engagement with the concept of character, both as an emic and etic

form of knowledge. Working through his own ethnography in Jamaica, Wardle reflects on the ways in which character potentially captures the essential contraction or oscillation at the heart of much Caribbean self-presentation, discourse and social interaction. It is precisely the requirement to alternate between character as an index of 'reputation' (i.e. that which makes the human subject recognizably distinctive to others in the world) and character as an index of 'respectability' (i.e. that which demonstrates the subject's awareness of a position within a local relational hierarchy such as that defined by church or state). The impossibility of resolving that tension is also precisely what makes character so good to think and act with. As a 'living concept' in the Caribbean everyday (see Wardle this section), Wardle suggests that character is useful precisely because it can contain and allow that contradiction or inconsistency, both in the person and in Jamaican society at large, to thrive. This should not be taken to mean that character belongs to the *individual*, even if it is *individualized*. Rather, for Wardle each instantiation of character is a particular concretization of a larger pluriform multitude of ways that society could be expressed.

An understanding of character as doubled, in this and the other senses explored by contributors to the special section, could be taken to necessitate a return to one of the first anthropological texts to take seriously the concept of personhood as an anthropological issue. Indeed, as both Tinius and Candea note, it is possible to trace a genealogy for anthropology and character back to the work of Mauss. The latter observed, rather in passing, that the French term *personnage* may be predominantly used to connote role-playing or a fictional character but that it can also be made to suggest what is characteristic or true in an attribution (1985:17-18). Mauss makes the point in order to highlight the deficiency of character as a simulacrum for the modern self, whose rise he is concerned to chart and which, he has it, cannot bear such ambivalence over the real and artificial dimensions of the person. But for Candea it is precisely this 'double nature' of character (see Candea this section) that makes the concept interesting and contemporary.

For our purposes, what is especially relevant about Candea's claim is that he chooses to make it in the context of a study of non-human characters. Indeed, he offers us a portrait of character attributed to the non-human operating at two incommensurate yet interlinked scales: the work of characterization by which meerkats filmed at the Kalahari Meerkat Project (KMP) in South Africa become rendered as individual actors and personalities in a popular television docu-soap and the technical attention given to 'behavioural characters'-identified kinds of behaviour or interaction that can be recognised as possessing a causally significant function in evolutionary terms- by biologists conducting research at the Project. If the former transforms meerkats into

narratively coherent individual subjects (a register that scientists working at KMP may also deploy in their more informal moments [see Candea 2010]), the latter reconfigures character as a 'unit of action' that traverses or eclipse the individual subject altogether. Candea takes this difference and shows how at both scales of characterization the entity attributed character, individual meerkat or certain forms of animal activity, remains at once both real and artificial in nature.

Although certain essays in the first special section on Anthropology and Character drew attention to the ways in which the concept invites a convergence of ethical and aesthetic forms of practice, technique and judgement (see Faubion 2018; & Reed & Bialecki 2018), the entities thus attributed were generally assumed to be demonstrating human (or perhaps divine) character. Indeed, the assumption largely remains that character is a concept targeted at the description of the human. The ethnography offered by Candea begins to open up a set of entirely new questions. This is reinforced when we consider the ethnographic example offered by another contributor, Yarrow. Here, character operates as a concept that describes neither human nor non-human animal nature nor units of animal activity but rather historic buildings and landscapes deemed to be worthy of Scottish heritage preservation. The common assumption, at least in a British context (see Balthazar 2017), that all sorts of artifacts (from a building to a tea cup) can be valued for their character or that character provides part of a professional language for assessing and understanding what is distinctive about those objects reminds us that a focus on Anthropology and Character offers the potential for novel recombinations of familiar anthropological sub disciplinary fields and modes of analysis.

There is an understandable temptation to read such examples as a demonstration of the concept's success and spread over time. We might claim that character has colonised non-human animal and material worlds, inscribing subjects and objects that are more-than-human with human-like attributes and qualities. This perception may be reinforced by the very dominance of human-centred appreciations or critiques of the character concept, whether found in moral psychology (see Doris 2005), law or moral philosophy. Their effect can be to make the attribution of character elsewhere appear as supplementary or surplus to its core purpose. In this special section, one of our ambitions is precisely to defer that judgement or reading, to resist the temptation to either explicitly or implicitly analyse or understand non-human characters as an after-effect of cultures of human characterization. The deferment is partly born out of a respect for ethnographic example; while it may make sense to provide a historical reading of character in that vein, we should recall that the multiple attributions of character that we might document and encounter are equally contemporary and that

the question of precedence may or may not be relevant to the subjects that invoke the concept or may involve alternative orderings of character's origins. Indeed, we believe that it may be productive to at least consider a decentering of character as a human-centered concept, or to remain open to the possibility that historical and contemporary attributions of character to the non-human may feedback upon and influence our notions of human character. What might happen if we imagined a reversal of normative understanding, conceive for example of human character as an after-effect of the character of buildings or of places, or of units of animal behaviour with a discernable causal function in scientific terms of description? There is a deliberate conceit to such a question but also a provocation for anthropological inquiry.

Characterizing the characterizers and the characterized

The capacity to discuss character as expressed in individual animals, evolutionary features, and even buildings opens up two questions. Does the scale and ontological category of the character bearing object matter? Or is the variable that controls the expression of character located instead in the agency of those judging character or making assessments? Broadly speaking, these questions invite a closer inquiry into the nature of the object or subject identified as characterful. It asks how character is materialised in the world and how its particular materializations impact upon the dimensions and potentialities of the concept for those who recognise it. The question opens up attention to issues around the scale of character (several authors across both special sections make the incommensurability or complementarity between different scalings of character central to their ethnographic description of the concept in action), but also to the possibilities and limits of experiencing character. Attributing character to a human subject obviously connotes certain assumptions about the nature of the person and about the forms of sociality that can flow from that attribution. Likewise, the act of attributing character to buildings or landscapes inevitably elicits assumptions about the nature of the object and the kinds of interactions that can emerge from it. As Yarrow highlights, one distinctive aspect of heritage conservation is precisely the way in which it complicates the experiencing of character. The heritage professional learns to assess the character of historic buildings from at least two vantage points: a point of external perspective, from outside the building, and of internal perspective, from a position occupied within it. Indeed, the straightforward act of being able to enter the building, to come inside it and conceive of its uses as either a place of work or dwelling, reconfigures experience. When assigning character to humans, there may be a multiplicity of ways in which character gets identified and scaled, but there is not usually an equivalent experience to that internal perspective. It is this capacity to not just witness but to be *in* the landscape or building - the space that is characterful -that enables more diffuse experiences of character, for instance those linked to common

articulations about the distinctive mood or atmosphere of a place. Heritage professionals and visitors to historic buildings and landscapes in Scotland may visualize character but they also regularly profess to *feel* it. There is then an ambient quality to the nature of character and its experiencing that could be said to be an outcome of its particular materialization in buildings and landscapes or in other 'old things with character' (Balthazar [2017: 223] suggests that among those who search for items in the secondhand shops of the English town of Margate there is an explicitly identified scaling-up and indexical relationship between the vintage teacup 'made in Britain', the hallway in one's home that might be identified as Edwardian and an ability to feel or access a sense of national character), and which we might consider feeding back into our rereadings of human character.

Likewise, the techniques of character 'assessment' also are crucial. It has long been noted that the uses of the character concept are tightly interlinked with shifting histories of moral evaluation; indeed, this is the point of much description and analysis across the two special sections. Far less attention, however, has been focused on the act of measurement itself. This is surprising; especially since ethics is clearly only one of the many scales of evaluation at play in the identification and recognition of both human and non-human characters. But again, the point is best made when we shift our attention to the assignment of character beyond the human. The modes of evaluation at play when evolutionary biologists consider behavioural character, for instance, are radically other than with ethico-religious evaluations of the human subject, although both may be said to be concerned with measuring something (for example, Christian subjects or forms of biologically revealing animal activity like cooperative breeding). That difference also highlights another theme across this special section: the issue of what happens to character when it becomes an operational concept in the realm of expertise. As well as the more obvious formulization of technique and procedures of assessment (evolutionary biologists and heritage professionals both have protocols for testing attributes of character), the intervention of the expert links character to diagrammatic and documentary forms of practice that seek to visualize or materialize the non-human character described. While these expert practices may remain human-centered and in an adjectival sense themselves be identified as ethical (Candea tells us that paying attention to cooperative breeding activity among meerkats leads scientists to evaluate animals as good or bad depending on how effectively they fulfil a behavioural role, and that the ultimate point of this attention is to allow them to tell a story about human evolution; just as Yarrow highlights that making recommendations about how to alter or maintain historic buildings in order to retain their character can be viewed as an ethical or virtuous action on behalf of the nation or society), what is being overtly measured is not adjudged to be moral being or the capacity for ethical choice.

The same can pertain when the evaluative schema of experts are more directly targeted at the human subject; for instance, in the common uses of character as a concept in the pre-hire testing programmes of North American employment agencies (see Gershon in press). Such examples return us to the question of how character evaluates. To what extent are the instruments or criteria for assessing different human or non-human characters equivalent? Finally, we might explore whether the recognition of character always draws out acts of calculation or evaluation, or whether it is possible to identify scales of human or non-human character that evade measurement.

The difference that character makes, and the differences that are made through character

The question of how character differentiates across the human and the non-human spectrum raises the issue of whether or not character always functions to separate and individualize. This also returns us to the terms of much of the discussion in the introduction to our first special section on Anthropology and Character. As already noted there, the concept of human character seems to simultaneously make claims to identify sets of actions and intentions as essential to the person or individual human being- what we might call 'true character'- and to identify aspects that are non-essential and hence detachable from the person. Indeed, much of the labour around human character is extractive in quality, devoted to removing or excusing what doesn't or need not belong (one prototypical example being the formal role of character in criminal judgement and legal notions of mitigation [See Tadros 2005]). On immediate inspection, the same seems to be very often the case when we speak of non-human characters. As both Candea and Yarrow illustrate, elements of built environment or landscape and of animal behaviour can regularly be adjudged 'out of character' or even be accused of 'lacking character'; statements that are regularly a cue for literal or figurative acts of detachment (i.e. sanctioning the removal of architectural features from a historic building or assessing an animal response as atypical or non-representative of a behavioral type). Contributors were invited to explore the dynamism of human and non-human character action, to reflect on the mutual work of stabilization and purification that enables individualization, which includes monitoring how the shifting relationship between those moves operates. But paying attention to the ways in which character renders subjects or objects distinctive also necessarily problematizes individualization; or makes us aware of the action of division or difference as much as the action of unification. This is rendered obvious in new and compellingly tangible ways when the element recognised as out of character can be materialized. The possibility of digging Norwegian pine trees up on a Scottish hillside or of knocking out certain bricks or stones in a historic building individualizes the work of detachment or extraction itself, even as it perhaps renders the more figurative work of removing what

is out of character in the person on trial and subject of criminal judgement less coherent or more ambiguous. After criminal judgement uncertainty can remain about the true character of the accused; it may also remain for those judging the character of building or landscape but they at least have the reassurance of being able to point to or touch what has been cut out in the name of character.

Conclusion: Writing Character, here and elsewhere

To a limited extent, anthropologists have examined the role of characterization in anthropological writing. In large degree, these reflections have emerged as part of wider disciplinary concerns about the literary strategies that are adjudged to inform or constrain acts of representation or to make anthropological texts persuasive (see Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988). Indeed, the Writing Culture debates through which much of this analysis took place led to positive attempts to more knowingly co-opt literary strategies into anthropological writing. Embracing a quality of writing that is deliberately imagistic, for instance, or deploying an episodic narrative form enabled anthropologists to feel they were capturing an aspect of cultural or social reality previously obscured and simultaneously to challenge explanatory frameworks. A sometimes-uncomfortable tension developed here between a hyper-awareness of the literary strategies that could be read as structuring anthropology and a desire to claim that these strategies were of value precisely because they replicated the narrative strategies of the peoples described (for instance, their preference for imagistic modalities of thought or talk). However, with notable exceptions (see Stewart 1996), characterization rarely got attached to the narrative practice of those depicted through the strategy. In fact, its use as a literary strategy in anthropological writing has tended to receive less explicit attention; in part this is because it remains almost universally deployed and hence under-theorised.

While the two special sections that form our volume on Anthropology and Character make no special call for anthropology to embrace a literary theorization of character- in fact quite the opposite, we want to encourage anthropological reflections on characterization- nevertheless we would like to see character more knowingly deployed on the page. What should the consequences be for the use of characterization as a largely unthinking strategy in anthropological writing once we begin to more closely observe the dimensions and scales of character as a concept in the world? Can we productively experiment with trying to reproduce character as we find it into our strategies of writing? Might this be something that anthropology can feed back into literary theorizations of character? And what of lack of character? If part of the point of paying more attention to character is to highlight where it fails to register or to adequately translate then what is the rationale for anthropologists persisting with characterization in ethnography? We might want to resist the reduction of our

understanding of character to a strategic form of narrative, but the knowledge that we enact and can perform characterization ourselves is part of what makes the exploration of character exciting.

While it's fair to say that our contributors do not exactly turn their observations on character into new strategies for characterization, we believe that the essays as a whole are suggestive of possible directions for textual experimentation. Take for example the observation of interdependencies or oscillations between scales or modalities of character that might be conceived of as incommensurate but which occupy a single field. How might one conceive of an anthropological text that in the same manner performs strategies of characterization twice or in more than one register, or that makes one strategy of characterization displace another? Or if we take the example of the common action of extraction in the stabilization of both human and non-human characters, the question might be: how can the anthropological text reveal characterization as a strategy on the page that operates by detaching something from what it distinguishes or renders characterful?

As well as offering hints for anthropologizing the notion of characterization as literary strategy, several contributors seek to explore characterization as a quality of action performed by those they describe. Building on an essay by Reed (2019) that seeks to re-appropriate a literary theory of characterization to describe how a group of English fiction readers engage with minor characters in the novels that they love, Candea suggests taking up the strategy as 'the general social form of a self-conscious fiction which points to a real and richer entity beyond.' Indeed, it is precisely the obviously fictive register in the characterization of both individual meerkats and units of animal activity or behaviour that makes them comparable kinds of attribution, a fictiveness that in both instances emerges through an awareness of a reality manufactured as part of the action. Acute awareness of a gap also surfaces in the ethnographic account offered by Tinius, but this time between characters in a play and the character of the actors that perform those roles; here the 'real' beyond the fictive status of character is itself another form of characterization. Finally, in Wardle we get a very different parallel invoked between characterization enacted in the world and characterization on the page. Much of the description in his essay is devoted to the importance attached to the overt performance of reputation. What is particularly interesting for our purposes is the central role Wardle assigns to the everyday audiences of these characterizations. Indeed, he stresses that Moussu- the Jamaican woman whose self-conscious enactment of character he most closely observes - absolutely needs others to 'witness' or register her distinctiveness in the world. And it is this same act of witnessing that Wardle wishes to suggest should also become the imaginative burden of his readers; through his characterization on the page, which is an attempt to reproduce the characterization that he witnessed, Wardle invites us too to be witnesses

to the reputation or 'charactering' of Moussu.

This invitation is apposite because it helps shift our attention back from characterization as an act or strategy of textual composition and towards characterizing as interactive and situational. Indeed, it is possible to read such a move as a starting point for developing another genealogy for *Anthropology and Character*, this time drawing upon the dramaturgical tradition left us by Goffman (1959, 1974, 1981). Whether through his original metaphors of performance or his later metaphors of animation, Goffman regularly invoked character, including the interactional context for acts of characterization. This inheritance has in recent years encouraged a small number of anthropologists to develop a semiotic analysis of characterization (see Nozawa 2013, Gershon & Manning 2013, Silvio 2010). The point returns us to the cited essay by Reed (2019). For the English fiction readers he describes could also be conceived as witnesses of the distinctiveness of characters on the page; they sometimes make that metaphor explicitly, for instance when collectively assessing or debating the actions of favourite characters. In fact, part of the rationale for appropriating a literary theory of characterization- for instance, one that might present a systemic analysis of major and minor characters in codependent functional relationships- was to figure these readers as persons who assign themselves the principal role of giving or throwing attention on others (not just upon character on the page but upon the author they admire and whose reputation they wish to collectively promote). Almost in complete inversion to Moussu and the charactering in Jamaica described by Wardle, these human subjects seem occupied or energised by the prospect of spotlighting the distinctiveness of others, claiming as it were their very own minor character status.

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