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Narrative, Volume 30, Number 2, May 2022, pp. 152-168 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2022.0008>



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# Historicizing and Theorizing Pre-Narrative Figures—Who is Uncle Sam?

**ABSTRACT:** This contribution examines Uncle Sam's development during the nineteenth century as an interesting case study for transmedial character theory, an increasingly common approach to the study of fictional characters. However, as Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman have argued, "older forms of transmedia franchises were constructed on character sharing rather than on the logics of a particular world" (17). Characters were and still are in many cases the nodal points and intersections of various processes discussed as media convergence, yet the distinctions between "actual" characters and related terms such as "cultural icons" (Brooker) or "serial figures" (Denson and Mayer) remain somewhat contested and often hard to draw in practice. This contribution addresses these issues by investigating the nineteenth-century emergence and transformation of Uncle Sam as a recognizable figure within political cartoons. Without any overarching creative authority *or* any consistent "storyworld" to speak of, these cartoons lend themselves to recontextualizations by any artist able to uphold a recognizable iconography. In media-historical terms, political cartoons that did not merely comment upon actually existing public persons but instead developed their own inventory of allegorical figures are an important link between earlier, more "static" pictorial personifications of—and symbols for—countries and ideas and the later emergence of serial characters within comic books and other narrative media.

**KEYWORDS:** *American popular culture, caricature, cartoons, iconography, political symbols, political cartoons, symbolism, Thomas Nast, transmedial characters, seriality, Uncle Sam*

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NARRATIVE, Vol. 30, No. 2 (May 2022)

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## Who is Uncle Sam? 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pre-Narrative Figures and the Emergence of Transmedia Character Culture

Lukas R. A. Wilde

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OVER 150 YEARS OLD, the figure known as “Uncle Sam” is very much alive today. When two planes hit the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, dozens of cartoonists immediately turned to the old symbolic personification of the United States Government to express their sadness, confusion, or anger (see Lamb; McWilliams). When George W. Bush called for justice in his televised speech on September 17, earlier pictorial cyphers of a weeping Lady Liberty had already given way to the masculine Uncle Sam whose gleaming eyes were as much a reflection of the burning towers as of the blazing fury within his vengeful mind (see Wilde, “Falling,” for more detail). Who *is* Uncle Sam, however, and what is he represented to be? Are there any stable character traits throughout his countless portrayals? Even in the nineteenth century he was depicted as Shakespeare’s Oberon and Hamlet, as Samson, Santa Claus, Quixote, Moses, Wotan, and Hercules—as well as in countless other roles and functions fitting the depicted context respectively (Ketchum 133). There were female versions employed as icons for the suffrage movement in 1909 (Palczewski). Artists from other countries changed his appearances and traits even further by replacing the stars with dollar signs or by putting a slaveholder’s whip in his hands (Fischer 323). His “core identity” seems to impose boundaries and limitations for artists merely on a thematic or symbolic level: Uncle Sam will never be a “common man,” but always some figure of authority, and he will never be a symbol for Russia or other countries, but always for the United States—or, more precisely, the US government. Using James Phelan’s influential character model comprised of a “synthetic” level (the materials and structures of representation), a “mimetic” level (an actual or imagined individual), and a “thematic” level (characters as representations of larger groups or of ideas or concepts), the last dimension is strongly foregrounded for Sam, while the mimetic remains undeveloped and can be entirely inconsistent from one depiction to the next. Pictures of Uncle Sam, in other words, are more ideographs than icons, denoting not any fictional or non-fictional individual, but abstract ideas that vary across contexts.

For these reasons, Uncle Sam is an early example of a “pre-narrative character” or a figure without a story. Taking up a terminological distinction by Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, it might be more appropriate to speak of “serial figures” (*serielle Figuren*) instead of “series characters” (*Serienfiguren*), the former circulating (and “existing”) outside of specific narrative contexts (Denson and Mayer). In the last couple of years such *pre-narrative characters* or *figures without stories* have been discussed extensively from the intersection of Japanese studies and media studies. They allude to personal agency, but circulate across texts, worlds, and fictions mutually exclusive to

each other, or not sufficiently characterized as narrative at all (Wilde, “Transmedia Character Studies”). In Japanese, the usage of terms such as “pre- or proto-narrative” instead of “extra-narrative” indicates that such a decontextualized figure is thought to be a more fundamental phenomenon than a contextualized one (see Wilde, “Kyara” and “Recontextualizing”). Their “pre-narrative” state is not so much based on a *lack* of narrative information (which can and must always be supplemented by recipients to varying degrees), but on the (over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information. They are recognizable only through recurring iconographies to which certain character dispositions and associations are connected, but their identity is in no way committed to specific diegetic contexts. As such, they can fit into a wide range of contradictory narratives and storyworlds and retain multiple fictional biographies.

To put these points another way, since these figures are “pre-narrative,” they are also “pre-authorial intention,” that is, they are raw material that particular artists can shape in the service of multiple and often contradicting narrative intentions. They are especially suited for transmedial circulation and appropriation, as their authorship rests entirely within the participatory communities, within the networks of communication, in which their medial “life of their own,” their continuous recontextualization, occurs and happens. Uncle Sam emerged “right out of the grass roots” (Ketchum, “The Search for Uncle Sam”). While specific artists such as Thomas Nast or James Montgomery Flagg created the most salient pictorial representations, the figure was and is used by thousands of cartoonists around the world. This is what makes it an interesting test case for a practice-based approach to character studies and for a historical perspective on transmediality. The present contribution is primarily built on Alton Ketchum’s comprehensive history of Uncle Sam from 1959 (see also Ketchum, “The Search”), as well as on the works of historian E. McClung Fleming, and on Donald Dewey’s recent monograph *The Art of Ill Will* (2007), re-reading them against current discussions within transmedial character theory. First, I am going to briefly contextualize the figure in relation to other symbols and cyphers for the United States that were commonly used in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century. I will especially focus on the development of a recognizable transmedial iconography in the nineteenth century influenced by a range of fictional as well as non-fictional sources. I will then take a look at the works of Thomas Nast who turned Uncle Sam into a recurring fictional protagonist within his oeuvre before other artists developed their own iterations. I’d like to show how this multiplication of identity can be seen as a catalyst to transform Uncle Sam into a transfictional character typical for the rapidly developing character culture at the end of the nineteenth century, and into an important link between earlier pictorial symbols and later comic book characters/figures such as the Yellow Kid.

### A Short Pre-History of Uncle Sam

Uncle Sam was not initially the symbol of the new nation, but only gradually emerged over the first century of its history. By the end of the Civil War, however, he was the pre-eminent symbol of the United States. Here’s the main outline of that pre-his-

tory. The first personification of (and symbol for) the “New World” developed in the seventeenth century was Pocahontas, a muscular young Native American woman (Fleming, “The American Image”). Many other symbols came and went in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, such as Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, adopted from the British Britannia. After the nation had won its independence, the female symbol was more and more referred to as “Columbia,” the personification of the purer and more idealistic aspects of the “American Dream” (Fleming, “From Indian Princess”). Often, these symbols were also fused together: In a French painting from 1786 by Jean Duplessis-Bertaux, for instance, we see a Pocahontas with her established Native American costume and a liberty pole in one hand, towering over the vanquished British Lion, this time completely “whitewashed” as she assumed the iconography of Columbia.

The first male figure that had a similar status as a national personification was the protagonist of the eponymous song “Yankee Doodle,” dating back to Andrew Barton’s comic opera *The Disappointment* (1767). Yankee Doodle was not a pictorial character, however, mostly referred to verbally. He soon developed into “Brother Jonathan,” a stereotypical New England country boy and common man (Morgan 18–21). At first, he was also only used in verbal references and idioms. In articles from the 1770s, “Yankee Doodle” and “Brother Jonathan” were in fact employed interchangeably (Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 27–33). A first visual description of Brother Jonathan is given in James K. Paulding’s book *The Diverting History of John Bull and Brother Jonathan* from 1812 which also featured illustrations (in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition from 1827). From then on, Brother Jonathan appeared in broadside cartoons where he came to stand for the “American everyman” (Morgan 63–118). Throughout, however, Brother Jonathan’s appearance was far from uniform and there was no fixed iconography. Most illustrations would thus contain the written mention of his name somewhere.

How and when did Uncle Sam take over the mantle of Brother Jonathan? The first written reference in which “Uncle Sam” is used as a synonym for the United States government can be found in spring 1813 in a caption accompanying a caricature of Napoleon on a broadside: “If uncle [sic] Sam needs, I’ll be glad to assist him / For it makes my heart bleed we live at such a distance / If he calls me to Quebec, I’ll lead on the van / And for Johnny Bull we’ll not leave him a man” (qtd. in Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 40). From then on, written references to the name multiplied in newspapers and sheets. The origin to the figure would only be revealed 17 years later to a general public when an anonymous “eyewitness” published an article in the *New York Gazette* on May 12, 1930 in which he linked the name to a Samuel Wilson working as a contractor for the American military in the War of 1812 (Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 38–44). Sam Wilson and his brother butchered and packed cattle and produced the salt casks for the troops stationed at the city of Troy in Northern New York. Each of the large casks and packages was marked with the letters “U. S.” Since the acronym for “United States” was not in wide circulation yet, people referred to “Uncle Sam providing for the troops” (Fischer 230). The first unsigned lithograph depicting Uncle Sam is probably from 1832 (“Uncle Sam in Danger”), commenting on Andrew Jackson’s efforts to destroy the Bank of the United States (see figure 1). In the illustration there is a seated Sam, smooth-shaven and young, stout and round-faced, but already covered in an American flag. One cartoon from 1837, Edward Williams Clay’s hand-colored



Figure 1. Unsigned lithograph: “Uncle Sam in Danger” (1832). Retrieved from *Presidential Campaigns: A Cartoon History, 1789–1976*, <http://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/presidentialcartoons/items/show/48>, accessed January 29, 2021. Probably the first lithograph depicting Uncle Sam, in an iconography that would soon appear unfamiliar.

lithograph “Uncle Sam sick with La Grippe,” is one of the few showing Uncle Sam and Brother Jonathan *together*, with the former standing for the people and the latter for the government.

In the 1830s cartoons developed rapidly due to new printing technologies, especially lithography. It made the production and reproduction of pictorial materials much cheaper and easier. Before, cartoons had not reached the public press and were mainly distributed as broadsides for hand-to-hand circulation or posting. Uncle Sam figures circulated prominently in cartoons from 1830–1850. He was not yet cast in a single mold, however, as each artist (probably none of whom had actually met Samuel Wilson) created their own version or used local models for individual appearances. Some dressed him exactly like Brother Jonathan before, as in one sketch by H. Bucholzer from 1844, “Uncle Sam and his Servants” (Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 67). There was also the opposite development: Brother Jonathan was often presented with whiskers or stars and stripes on his clothing, the first time in a *Punch*-cartoon by John Leech from 1856 (73). After the Civil War Brother Jonathan disappeared almost completely in the United States (but not so in Europe), a development Ketchum connects to the new power of the central government that Uncle Sam personifies above all else. The figure gradually assumed the iconography and appearance we know him by today.

The influences on this iconography are interesting to trace. The British *Punch* magazine was probably the first to show Brother Jonathan with a beard, which was quickly adopted elsewhere. Responsible for the new prominence of the beard was most certainly Abraham Lincoln who was also used as a stand-in for the US govern-

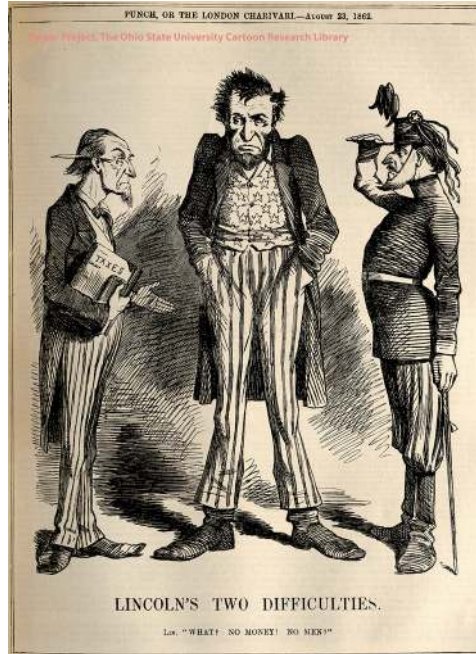


Figure 2. John Tenniel: “Lincoln’s Two Difficulties” (August 23, 1862), *Punch*. Retrieved from *History Teaching Institute*, <https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/lincoln/images/lincolns-two-difficulties>, accessed January 29, 2021. Abraham Lincoln depicted in Stars and Stripes that were later reused for Uncle Sam.

ment. Lincoln was increasingly presented wearing the stars and stripes transferred to Uncle Sam later (see figure 2). There are even many “hybrid entities” between both. An 1861 cartoon by T. W. Strong, “The Schoolmaster Abroad,” shows a beardless Lincoln in stars and stripes, whereas an unsigned lithograph of the same year (titled “Uncle Sam Protecting his Property against the Encroachments of His Cousin John”) features an Uncle Sam dressed as a Union officer with Lincoln’s face (83). Another sort of real-world inspiration was Dan Rice, one of the first famous American clowns whose appearance likely inspired Thomas Nast (and later James Montgomery Flagg) as he also impersonated Uncle Sam in his shows when the five Ringling Brothers started their circus in 1870. All these sources—some fictional such as Yankee Doodle or Brother Jonathan, some non-fictional like Lincoln or Rice—merged into a trans-medial iconography. In 1865 we can find one of the last appearances of a *beardless* Uncle Sam, strongly reminiscent of the Brother Jonathan he had replaced (figure 3). The bearded image of Lincoln as the champion of the Union had been etched so deeply in Americans’ minds that it was retained in journals such as *Harper’s* and *Leslie’s Weekly*, *Vanity Fair* and *Punchinello*. From now on, the medial format of the



Figure 3. G. Querner: “Uncle Sam’s Menagerie” (1865). Retrieved from *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661691>, <https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/lincoln/images/lincolns-two-difficulties>, accessed January 29, 2021. One of the last appearances of a beardless Uncle Sam, strongly reminiscent of the Brother Jonathan he had replaced.

cartoon was part of newspaper culture and the times of autonomous lithographs or broadsides were gone. The decades immediately afterwards are now considered the “Golden Age of American Political Cartoons” (Culbertson 277).

### Uncle Sam after the Civil War

Early newspaper and cartoon culture was the era of Thomas Nast, “America’s foremost pictorial journalist” (Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 87). His influence on American popular and political culture can hardly be overestimated (see Justice; Halloran; and especially Vinson 29). Nast was famous enough to feature as a character in his drawings himself,

and he invented many of the tropes and techniques of modern political cartoons. Importantly, he also experimented with a new form of running gags, “a recurrent theme or personality that serves to knit together a series of cartoons on the same general subject” (Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 94). By doing so, his stock of characters turned into recognizable serial figures, and he invented a whole repertoire of recurring protagonists. Many of those were re-used by other artists and became part of the cultural vocabulary, such as the Tweed Ring, the Tammany Tiger, the Rag Baby of Inflation, or the Republican Elephant. Nast finally redefined Uncle Sam by solidifying his character traits and appearances (figure 4).

The fame of Uncle Sam as a serial figure could not be overlooked in the 1870s,

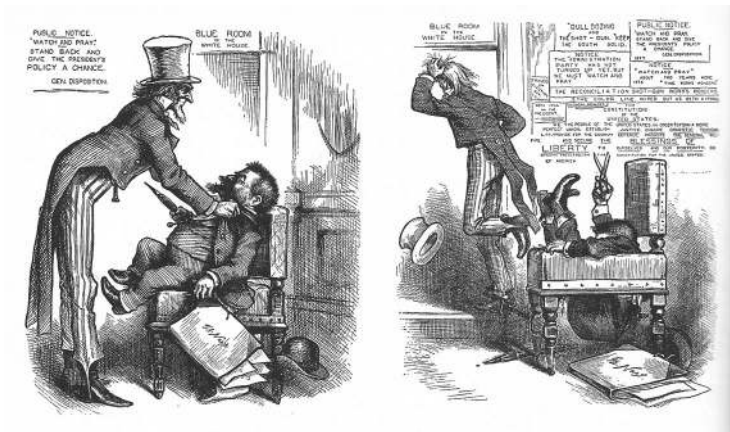


Figure 4. Thomas Nast: “Nay Patience or We Break the Sinews” (May 5, 1877) and “Our Patient Artist” (July 10, 1878) *Harper’s Weekly*. Retrieved from *Harp Week: Explore History*, <https://thomasnast.com/Activities/NastandShakespeare/HubPages/CommentaryPage.asp?Commentary=03Indexes-04Topic>, accessed January 29, 2021. Uncle Sam as a recurring protagonist in Thomas Nast’s “running gags.”

as many other cartoonists developed their own, personally branded iterations. The Austrian immigrant Joseph Keppler, founder and lead cartoonist of *Puck*, created a pot-bellied Uncle Sam who looked rather like a German music hall comedian of that era. In contrast, W. A. Rogers developed a serious, no-nonsense iteration. Homer Davenport, the leading cartoonist of the Hearst newspapers during the 1890s, created many serialized strips featuring Uncle Sam that were later re-published in separate collections (Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 95–110). Uncle Sam became so prominent in the 1880s that he could increasingly be recognized *without* his regular clothing and take on different costumes since his facial iconography was salient enough for a general audience to recognize. In a cartoon by Frederic Opper (who would later become the creator of the *Happy Hooligan* comic strips), we find Sam garbed as a New York policeman (figure 5). As a truly transfictional character, “he” could now sustain various versions of himself with a different age, gender, or social status, as the iconography

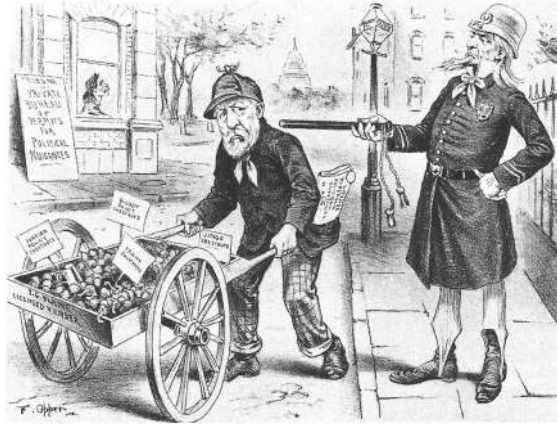


Figure 5. Frederic Opper: “Obstructing the Public Highway” (1886), *Puck*. Retrieved from Ketchum 1959, 98. Sam garbed as a New York policeman, as his facial iconography was now salient enough for a general audience to recognize.

is not bound to any storyworld or other requirements of semantic consistency (see Ketchum, *Uncle Sam* 133; Palczewski).

What does this tell us about our initial questions regarding the affordances and limitations for character traits of such pre-narrative characters? It is certainly possible to apply Jan-Noël Thon’s *network model* of transmedia character instances to Uncle Sam: Some iterations of “local work-specific characters” would accordingly coalesce into a “glocal transmedia character” (187–88), such as all “Uncle Sams” within the individual cartoons of Thomas Nast. Other iterations, however, can clearly be distinguished from *that* version. Uncle Sam as a “cultural icon” might be better addressed accordingly in terms of a “global transmedia character *network*” (188, emphasis mine). The network model certainly works well for later occurrences of the figure *as a character* within narrative comic books such as Quality Comics’ (later DC) *National Comics* #1 (1940) for which Will Eisner reimagined Sam as a generic superhero (to be integrated within DC’s complex comic book “multiverse” later), the two-issue Vertigo comic *U. S.—Uncle Sam* (2007) by Steve Darnall and Alex Ross, or the ongoing Image series *Undiscovered Country* (2019–present) by Scott Snyder and Charles Soule. In all these works, a fictional being of the name and iconography is presented as a contextualized diegetic character, distinguished from other “network nodes” through mutually closed textual worlds (*Undiscovered Country* multiplies his identity once again, as there seem to exist many different versions of Sam even within Snyder’s and Soule’s storyworld).

The editorial cartoon as a medial format generally follows different logics: Carlos A. Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman have convincingly argued that “older forms of transmedia franchises were constructed on character sharing rather than on the logics of a particular world” (17). As I hope I have indicated, individual

cartoons of specific artists, as well as the figures appearing within them, were never bound to the requirements of storyworld consistency. The respective pre-narrative figure could more properly be understood a kind of *reified* “transmedia character *template*” consisting *only* of “physical, mental, and social characteristics [. . .] that any work-specific character sharing the same name may or may not exhibit” (Thon 184, emphasis mine). There are additional symbolic meanings applied to this reified template, but not any “narrative facts” concerned with continuity, existence, or consistency. Like other pictorial symbols (such as flags or logos), pre-narrative figures such as Uncle Sam—more specifically their verbal denominators and/or their iconographies—seem to possess a range of relatively stable, signified symbolic *meanings* (the United States Government, Freedom, Hope—different ones for artists from other countries) *without* any consistent “storyworld entity” through which they are mediated. Due to their anthropomorphic shape and their implied personal agency within represented contexts, however, these pre-narrative figures afford individual expressions within (very local) “storyworld situations” which are far from stable from any picture to the next. To the contrary, pre-narrative figures can be used to generate an infinite number of pictorial expressions.

This perspective is not even limited to the analysis of texts (including cartoons and other pictorial artifacts). It also entails performances and practices. Just like Brother Jonathan before him, Uncle Sam, too, could be found on the stage (Morgan 37–62). By the 1890s he was impersonated at festivals, parades, and fairs, and he was long a standard fixture of the circus. A few years later he even made an appearance in George M. Cohan’s Broadway musical show “Little Johnny Jones” (1903, adapted to film as *Yankee Doodle Dandy* in 1942).

Uncle Sam has thus become a transmedial nodal point of practices and performances, connecting the works of countless authors and artists, amateurs, and professionals alike, without any story, storyworld, or author (collective) to “fixate” or guarantee his identity. Not even is any clear-cut distinction to the earlier Brother Jonathan possible, and neither to Yankee Doodle preceding both. As scholars such as Roger Sabin (2009) or Christina Meyer (2019) have pointed out, 19th century characters/figures like Ally Sloper or the Yellow Kid were intentionally designed to transcend their origins in print to become cultural resources for the general public in a variety of media. In media historical terms, political cartoons that did not merely comment upon existing public persons but instead developed their own inventory of symbolic, pre-narrative figures can then be seen as an important link between earlier, more “static” pictorial personifications of—and symbols for—countries and ideas on the one hand and the emergence of serial characters within comic books and other narrative media on the other.

## Acknowledgments

This research was first presented on the International Symposium of British and American Studies “Nineteenth-Century Transmedia Practices” at the University of

Vienna, January 30–February 2, 2020. I am grateful to the organizers Christina Meyer and Monika Pietrzak-Franger for many valuable observation and suggestions.

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## The Politics of Pre-Narrative Seriality

Shane Denson

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LOOKING AT THE EMERGENCE AND TRANSFORMATION of Uncle Sam in political cartoons of the nineteenth century, Lukas R. A. Wilde argues that the figure serves as a historical and/or conceptual link between more or less static allegorizations or stock characters and the more fully fleshed out characters of today's transmedia storyworlds. Existing in this in-between space and subject to constant repetition and variation without respect for the integrity or coherence of diegetic boundaries, Uncle Sam is close in spirit to the "serial figures" that Ruth Mayer and I have theorized from a media-theoretical perspective ("Grenzgänger"; "Border Crossings"). Figures like Dracula, Tarzan, and Frankenstein's monster also serve as historical links or nodes, connecting a variety of media and thus historicizing transformations of the larger media ecologies in which they participate (see Denson; Denson and Mayer, "Bildstörung," "Spectral Seriality"; Mayer). Shifts in literary culture as occasioned by the rise of the steam press, the proliferation of film and comics in the late nineteenth century, the cinema's transition to sound and the addition of color, the rise of radio and television, and the advent of the digital—all of these changes are tracked, serially and self-reflexively, by figures that exceed their instantiation in any one particular medium and thus serve as indices of the material-technological infrastructures of social-discursive communication and interrelation. A similar argument could surely be constructed around Uncle Sam's various appearances in newspaper comics, animated cartoons, cinematic and televisual representations, and so on, but since we are dealing with shifting personifications of a real-world nation state rather than various retellings of a fictional story, the stakes of the figure's seriality are even more clearly political, as it mediates domestic and international perceptions of a country's military, trade, and diplomatic powers. Moreover, Wilde's quasi-narratological framing of the figure as a "pre-narrative character" shifts attention from serial figures' engagements with technological substrates to the serial conditions of discursive identification and difference, participatory sociality, and politics.

These differences of emphasis or of focus should not, however, be taken as signs of substantive disagreement or incompatibility. Rather, the two approaches are, I believe, complementary, and when placed in conversation they may together illuminate the interplay between medial substrates and sociopolitical formations. In order to further this dialogue, I would like to take up Wilde's concept of the "pre-narrative character" and to subject it to a kind of conceptual figure/ground reversal: whereas Wilde asks about the pre-narrativity of a particular type of character, I would like to ask, conversely, "What is the character of pre-narrativity itself?" Accordingly, I aim to shift our focus from the "character," as the locus of fictional biography or subjectivity, to a characteristic (or set of characteristics) pertaining to a pre-narrative level of mediation. Is the pre-narrative character, in its proximity to the serial figure, itself

a figuration of the pre-narrative or even pre-discursive aspects of media and the role they play in the serialized articulation of political agency?

Wilde points to the primacy accorded in the Japanese context to “pre- or proto-narrative” agency, such that “a decontextualized figure is thought to be a more fundamental phenomenon than a contextualized one.” Wilde implies that this marks a significant difference both from the conventional privileging of coherently narrativized (or psychologized) characters, as well as from an “extra-narrative” focus that identifies such characters’ intertextual or self-reflexive excess. Whereas the latter marks a surplus *in addition to* the fictional subject’s diegetic biography and agency (the primacy of which is therefore presupposed and left intact), the “pre- or proto-narrative” subtends such agency *as its precondition*. It is an indeterminate or subtractive force, a set of relations out of which more determinate subjectivities and object-worlds may emerge.

Though Wilde is concerned with the construction and circulation of fictional characters, his assertion of pre-subjective conditions of possibility suggests interesting parallels with the phenomenology of human agency that might hold the key to the political efficacy of serial mediation more generally. Indeed, seriality has been theorized as vacillating between sequential production/reception practices (such as characterize serialized novels or television series) and the social formations that emerge around various media and material infrastructures (Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” organized around newspapers, novels, and the census [see Anderson], or Jean-Paul Sartre’s theorization of the seriality as a loose, anonymous collective that gathers randomly at a city bus stop or that is “alone together” in its shared reception of a radio broadcast [see Sartre]). The primacy of the pre-narrative, for Wilde, mirrors the primacy that Sartre accords to the social seriality over the more organized (or, as Wilde puts it, “contextualized”) agency of the group-in-formation. Whereas the group is defined by shared goals and objectives that condition its members’ subjective and collective perceptions and actions, the seriality is constituted passively in relation to commodities, media, and built structures—what Sartre calls the “practico-inert” in light of the way that “worked matter” transmits the praxis of past living labor into the present, exerting an inertial force that shapes or sets the parameters for agency. In life as in media, we are dealing here with a pre-narrative or pre-personal ground for subjective and collective agency, which serialized media simultaneously figure (in the guise of the pre-narrative character) and of which they are a material part.

Clearly, the “life” of a pre-narrative character/serial figure is not the same as the life of a real human subject, but its diffuse agency, which for Wilde “is not so much based on a *lack* of narrative information [. . .] but on the (over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information,” is *a part* of this practico-inert reality that forms the common, shared substrate of collective human existence. It is a pre-condition of political agency itself, not merely as an ideological reflection but as a self-reflexive component of the pre-narratively serialized materiality against which more determinate social formations may emerge. Wilde writes that pre-narrative characters “are especially suited for transmedial circulation and appropriation, as their authorship rests entirely within the participatory communities, within the networks of communication, in which their medial ‘life of their own,’ their continuous

recontextualization, occurs and happens.” Importantly, their political agency resides within “the networks of communication” rather than determinate communications themselves; they phatically probe the channels within which “participatory communities” may discover or affirm themselves, but which they do not pre-exist. Such figures are therefore serial in both of the senses referenced above: on the one hand, their existence depends upon sequences of repetition and variation, while on the other hand such sequences provide the substance of a serial (social) formation in Sartre’s sense—the glue that binds communities in their basic, mostly anonymous relations, but that serves also as the pre-narrative condition of possibility for the formation of more robust political ties.

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## Material Practices and Semiotic Objects: A Response to Shane Denson

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THE THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS addressed in Shane Denson's "The Politics of Pre-Narrative Seriality" bring together and open up various lines of reflection not taken up in my article on Uncle Sam. I see my proposed notion of "pre- or proto-narrative figures" indeed complementary to Denson's and Mayer's groundbreaking concept of "serial figures" to which many of my ideas are owed. As Denson remarks aptly, my approach could be characterized as broadly narratological, at least insofar as I highlight the *limits* of comprehending an anthropomorphic being as belonging to a (specific) course of events situated within a (specific) possible world. The concept of the serial figure allows that as well, although with one difference that I find illuminating: distinguished from actual "series characters" (which are unequivocally constrained to "the more or less closed fictional universe of a serially-ongoing narrative" [Denson and Mayer 67]), the serial figure is conceptualized as *either* too contradictory (exhibiting a "palimpsest-like biography" and "branching genealogies" [68]) *or* as too "flat and unchanging" (67) to afford any linear progression (or, possibly, as both). For the former (contradictory versions), a number of conceptual lenses have been proposed by various authors (see Wilde, "Kyara") to capture the fact that under *certain* historical, medial, and generic conditions, distinctions *are* continuously drawn in terms of continuity and canonicity (and often negotiated and contested)—which consequently *do* amount to different characters by the same name, or as a network of character versions in Thon's model. What makes the concept of the "serial figure" more original, in my view, is the fact that it can also be applied to entirely "flat and unchanging" cases where continuity or canonicity—one of the backbones of the network-model—are never strong expectations to begin with. Serial figures in that specific sense are then close to what Thon addresses as the "transmedia character template" of prototypical properties shared by many or most nodes within the network.

That not many alternative descriptions are available in "Western" literature (in clear contrast to Japanese investigations) seems mainly owed to the fact that characters are usually talked about by literary, film, or theater scholars—interested in narrative media, once again. Denson and Mayer, however, approach their subjects from the perspective of material and social practices, a seriality not merely (or not even primarily) in terms of represented content, but especially related to materiality, sociality, economy, politics, or identity formation. I would agree that the most pressing lines of inquiry into characters and figures should concern "the substance of a serial (social) formation [. . .]—the glue that binds communities in their basic, mostly anonymous relations" beyond or prior to any intersubjective construction of stories or storyworlds. I would like to emphasize, however, that the social formation of collective subjectivity has a semiotic side as well, especially where it is focused on characters or

figures appearing in heterogeneous material contexts that have otherwise not much in common to each other (such as Hello Kitty products). As a dynamic semiotic object (in the sense of Peirce, see Wilde, “Kyara”) “they” can only be experienced as social resistance to, agreement with, or a playful (re)appropriation of existing characters/figures in different settings, worlds, ages, genders, or ethnicities—not only when canonicity and continuity is managed and/or contested (often against the authority of actual intellectual property rights holders) but especially when such matters are irrelevant to begin with. Pre-narrative figures such as Uncle Sam—in their striking difference not only to actual persons as well as to coherent “series characters,” *but also* to networks of strongly differentiated character-versions—might thus, for better or worse, facilitate especially “durable” imagined communities.