

## **Obama's Tears: Politics, Performance and the Crisis of Belief**

By Julia Peetz

### **Abstract**

This article explores a striking performance of crisis by U.S. President Barack Obama in a speech on gun control delivered at the White House in January 2016. I begin by contextualising the speech within Obama's presidency and the polarized political landscape of the United States. By performing his own ineffectiveness, I argue, the President shrewdly deployed anti-establishment rhetoric to paint himself as an incorruptible outsider to America's corrupt political system. Seen in this light, the tears he shed during the speech performatively underscored a range of rhetorical gestures, with which Obama sought to align himself with the American public and against a conspiratorial political culture dominated by lobbyists. The second section engages with Obama's tears on a more conceptual level, asking whether they can be said to authenticate Obama's professed emotional investment. I consider the reception of the tears in the American news media alongside questions surrounding the nature of acting, authenticity, staging, and reality in my argument that the tears are unreliable indicators of emotion. As such, they can be said to perform a crisis of authenticity in twenty-first century political discourse, which demands highly polished performances of politicians and seeks to discredit any performance that betrays its staged nature.

### **Introduction: Executive Power and Executive Impotence**

It is 5 January 2016. U.S. President Barack Obama gives a speech calling for stricter gun control regulation in front of a

group of journalists at the White House. Towards the end of the speech, Obama pauses, blinks repeatedly and then wipes the corner of his eye with a finger. He continues to pause, his eyes cast down, then looks up and says, “Every time I think about those kids, it gets me mad”, as tears roll down his cheeks. With “those kids” Obama is referring to the primary school students killed in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut on 14 December 2012. The incident is one of several examples the then-President has given during his speech of what the media have dubbed “an epidemic” of mass shootings in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Obama wipes one of his tears away and says, “And by the way, it happens on the streets of Chicago every day”, a rhetorical gesture that connects the Newtown shooting to the city in which the President cut his political teeth as a community organiser. Chicago, of course, is known for its gang violence. Obama wipes away a tear from his other cheek, while the audience can be heard applauding. He then appears to emotionally recover, though when he ends his speech by forcefully stressing the need for voters to be passionate about the reform of gun laws because “all of us need to demand a Congress brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby’s lies”, the President’s cheeks are still streaked with tears.

At the time of this speech, Obama was entering the last year of his presidency and his intention to enact stricter gun control legislation had so far been foiled by powerful gun lobbyists. The purpose of the speech was to announce four executive actions, the goal of which was to reduce gun violence by expanding background checks on those purchasing guns, enforcing existing gun safety laws, ensuring that mental health records are includ-

---

<sup>1</sup> A Google search for the exact phrase “epidemic of mass shootings” returned approximately 16,500 results in February 2016, the top page of which included articles by National Public Radio (NPR), the *Wall Street Journal*, the *LA Times* and CNN.

ed in background checks and boosting gun safety technology to prevent accidental shootings. Unlike executive orders, however, executive actions are legally non-binding and constitute presidential statements of intent, a detail that was largely ignored in the media coverage of Obama's speech (Farley; Murse). Even more than to outline new legal measures, therefore, the speech was designed to make an impassioned plea for the American public to hold gun lobbyists accountable. "So the gun lobby may be holding Congress hostage right now", Obama says, "but they cannot hold America hostage". As the widely televised speech reveals, Obama has the power to make himself the subject of national debate, but not to prevent gun violence by forcing the enactment of stricter legislation. In this light, the perhaps most straightforward explanation for Obama's tears is that they are an expression of the President's frustration with his own impotence on an issue in which he shows himself to be personally invested.

This article proceeds from the assumption that there is something less straightforward and rather more interesting going on when the most powerful man in the world bursts into tears while giving a clearly well thought out, structured and widely recorded speech in front of a crowd of journalists and television cameras at the White House. This assumption does not necessarily take away from Obama's investment in the issue of gun control, nor does it require me to posit that Obama's tears were somehow premeditated and acted out. I will argue, rather, that the question of whether Obama intended to cry, cried spontaneously or merely did not suppress the tears that were threatening to fall is ultimately less interesting — not least because the truth is impossible to know — than how the tears, as a theatrical gesture, underlined or undermined the rhetoric of crisis that the speech employs.

To understand how the tears amplified or modified Obama's rhetoric, I begin by examining the gun control speech both in the context of Obama's professional crisis near the end of his presidency and in the context of a perceived crisis within America's polarized political landscape. With reference to the work on presidential performances by political sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander and studies of political polarisation, I analyse how Obama's speech mobilizes narratives of personal and political crisis to rhetorically position the President as an outsider to the very political system at the apex of which he would quite naturally be perceived to stand.

In the second section I turn more specifically to the tears, reading these as a creative intervention within a political system in crisis and an attempt to construct Obama as an authentic person and a contrast to the majority of Washington politicians. Drawing on theorisations of the relationship between acting and "the real" from Denis Diderot and Joseph Roach to Erin Hurley and Andy Lavender, I argue that the authenticity, or lack thereof, of Obama's tears is a complex matter. Though they were a striking focal point that assured that the speech received a great deal of press attention, the mediatized tug of war over whether the tears were "real" and "authentic" meant that the tears themselves ultimately performed a crisis of authenticity rather than providing a definitive authentication of genuine emotion.

### **From Collective Representation to Personal and Political Crisis**

In this section I draw on the media-ethnographical work of Jeffrey C. Alexander to trace how Obama's presidential journey and the accompanying rhetoric have shifted between his 2008 presidential campaign, which is the focus of Alexander's 2010

book, *The Performance of Politics*, and the tearful speech on gun control given in January 2016 that is the focus of this article. Alongside this, I examine Obama's speech in the context of America's political polarization, arguing that Obama mobilizes this issue in his deployment of anti-establishment rhetoric to position himself as an outsider who is working on behalf of ordinary American people against a corrupt political elite.

Alexander's work on the power and effectiveness of politicians' performances proceeds from the premise that neither demographic statistics nor financial means nor even political issues can definitively determine the outcome of elections (8, 40, 284). Rather, electoral success depends on politicians' ability to harness and project performative power.<sup>2</sup> In Alexander's view, therefore, citizens experience presidential candidates as performers involved in a theatrical struggle for symbolic power (xii). While politicians seek to project an advantageous image of themselves to the public, their opponents and the mass media attempt to destabilize the intended image (9). Alexander argues that successful presidential candidates are able to make a reductively binary discourse work for themselves: "In real life, political actors are not *either* rational *or* impulsive, honest *or* deceitful but more than a little bit of each", Alexander writes. But "[i]nside the moral rhetoric of democratic politics", where "[t]he nuance and ambiguity of empirical actions does not often make an appearance", politicians are constructed and must construct themselves as being fully rational and honest and in no way impulsive or deceitful (10-11, emphasis in original). For Alexander, "[s]uccess in a campaign depends on making the civil sphere's binary language walk and talk" in such a way that, even though they employ a large staff of spin doctors, speech

<sup>2</sup> Similar points on the centrality of performance to our understanding of how politics functions in the twenty-first century have been made by Janelle Reinelt and Shirin Rai (2, 4) as well as by Laura Levin and Barry Freeman (5).

writers, press secretaries and so forth, politicians “appear authentic and sincere” (11, 14). Politicians who manage to successfully align themselves with the “good” side of this binary in the public perception attract campaign donations and ultimately get elected because they succeed in turning themselves into “a collective representation – a symbolic vessel filled with what citizens hold most dear” (18, 41).

According to Alexander’s analysis of the 2008 presidential race, Obama, with his campaign focused on the motifs of “hope” and “change”, was successful in positioning himself as a democratic hero, one who could lead the American nation from a troubled past into a hopeful future (67-71). Once elected, the performative challenges of being president required Obama “to be seen as working the moral binaries that define civil society in a nonpartisan manner”, to continue to make the binaries work for himself while also disavowing his own partisanship (272). This is why, Alexander observes, “[a]fter a bruising and heated electoral struggle, Obama called for the restoration of solidarity” in his victory speech at Grant Park in Chicago on 4 November 2008 (268), where the President-Elect famously spoke of “Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the *United States of America*” (qtd. in Alexander 268, my emphasis).

The rhetoric of Obama’s 2016 White House speech on gun control is remarkably different to the unifying rhetoric of the Grant Park speech in a number of ways. Instead of emphasising “heroic might” and “utopian possibilities for transformation” while presenting himself as “the changer rather than the changed” (Alexander 272), Obama’s tears speak of the President’s impotence in the face of Washington’s powerful gun lob-

bysts, who, he remarks, “hold America hostage”. In underscoring the powerlessness of the most powerful man in the world, the tears perform the President’s personal crisis and highlight a moment, late in the second term of his presidency, at which much remains unaccomplished.

According to the Pulitzer Prize-winning website *PolitiFact.com*, Obama compromised on or broke 51.6 per cent of his campaign promises (compared to 48.4 per cent of kept promises) over the course of his presidency. Significantly in light of the gun control speech’s focus on the influence of lobbyists, this includes a broken promise to establish “tougher rules on revolving door lobbyists and former officials” (“The Obameter”). Gallup’s continuous Obama Job Approval Poll at the time of the speech painted a similarly ambiguous picture: It plots that Obama started his presidential career with 69 per cent of Americans approving of him versus only 12 per cent who disapproved. In January 2016, the figures had roughly equalized, with 47 per cent of Americans approving of Obama’s job performance on 4 January, 2016, and 48 per cent disapproving (“Gallup Daily”).<sup>3</sup> A LexisNexis News search for the phrase “Obama is a failed president” performed on 29 September 2016, returned 262 results,<sup>4</sup> including one for a debate on whether Obama is a failed president organised by the debating forum Intelligence Squared on 20 June 2016 that was also scheduled to be broadcast on BBC World (“Yes, He Can!”). These figures reflect Obama’s fall from an inspiring hero and collective representation to a more ambig-

---

<sup>3</sup> These January 2016 figures preceded a late boost to Obama’s approval ratings, which meant that for almost the entire period between March 2016 and the end of his presidency in January 2017, the percentage of those approving of Obama was higher than the percentage of those who disapproved (“Gallup Daily”). According to *Politico*, Obama’s soaring approval ratings during the last year of his presidency were at least in part due to the unusual unpopularity of both of the major parties’ presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Wheaton).

<sup>4</sup> By contrast, a search for “Clinton is a failed president” returned only 15 results. Search performed in all news in all languages.

uous figure, one whose efforts to inspire hope and realise change have all too often been thwarted. This point of personal crisis in Obama's presidential journey is eloquently performed by the President's tears.

However, while Obama's speech might therefore appear to be a relatively straightforward expression of a point of crisis, my argument in the remainder of this section is that, on a deeper level, the speech constitutes an assertion of strength rather than weakness. I argue that the rhetoric of Obama's speech, underscored most startlingly by the tears and the emotional charge they carry, functions to position Obama as a trustworthy outsider infiltrating a broken political system characterised by partisan squabbles with the intention of purifying this system on behalf of the people. I am not claiming that this a radical departure for Obama, who, as John Heilemann and Mark Halperin describe in their account of the 2008 presidential race, was advised that he could capitalize on his status as an "un-Washington" candidate by not waiting to complete his first term in the Senate before running for president (70, see also 33-34, 64). Nor is anti-Congress rhetoric unique to Obama's presidency; as Michael Foley (671) and Erwin Jaffe (77) observe, it is a relatively common rhetorical device with which U.S. presidents try to boost their popular support. Rather than arguing that the speech marks any kind of radical break, then, my analysis seeks to elucidate how Obama mobilizes a given anti-establishment sensibility in an emotionally charged way.

During his speech Obama repeatedly refers to the fact that gun control has become a partisan issue, while stressing that this is not in the American people's interest. Early on in the 35-minute speech, for example, he says, "instead of thinking about how to solve the problem [of gun violence], this has be-

come one of our most polarized, partisan debates — despite the fact that there’s a general consensus in America about what needs to be done”. He then emphasizes that his speech is not motivated by personal gain because he will not stand for another election in his lifetime, saying, “I am not on the ballot again”. As the speech continues, this invitation to the audience to see Obama as standing outside of the political system becomes much more explicit. Obama asserts, for example, that “the vast majority of Americans, even if *our* voices aren’t always the loudest or most extreme” care about reducing gun violence — thereby including himself in “the vast majority of Americans” (my emphasis).

Most strikingly, in his references to Congress Obama leaves no doubt that though he, as President, might be expected to have some influence on the U.S. legislature, this is not so. Instead, he stresses that Congress is out of line with the thinking of “the majority of Americans” and that this is so because “the gun lobby may be holding Congress hostage right now”, which means that “all of us need to demand a Congress brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby’s lies”.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the speech, Obama thus continually positions himself as a concerned outsider who sides with “the vast majority of Americans” against a corrupt political system in need of reform. Obama even goes as far as to claim that a “general consensus exists” on the issue of gun control, but that this consensus can find no political expression in a legislature dominated by partisan squabbles. Rather than speaking to his audience as a representative of the system willing and able to take decisive action, then, the President pres-

---

<sup>5</sup> Obama’s assertion that Congress is out of touch with the American people is born out by the public approval ratings of Congress. According to Gallup, Congressional Job Approval Ratings have not climbed higher than 20 per cent since October 2012, whereas disapproval percentages have hovered around a minimum of 70 and a maximum of 86 per cent during the same period, November 2012-January 2017 (“Congress and the Public.”).

ents himself as a lone wolf who sees through the system's lies and weeps with the American people over his own powerlessness.

Leading political scientists have provided evidence of increasing polarization, but there is far less consensus as to the nature and origin of this polarization than Obama's speech implies. Obama's assertion that politicians are largely disconnected from the public's concerns, and that the political system does not adequately serve voters, is backed up most notably by Morris Fiorina and his collaborators (Fiorina *et al.*; Fiorina and Levendusky). However, a different side to this argument is presented by Alan Abramowitz, who attests that it is the American public at large that is increasingly polarized, rather than just the party elites ("Disconnected"; *The Disappearing Center*; "Transformation and Polarization").

Fiorina and Levendusky argue that there is "a disconnect between the American people and those who purport to represent them", because while there has been an increase in polarisation at the elite level of American politics, this does not reflect an equivalent change within the much more moderate electorate ("Disconnected" 51-2). Instead, since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, a widening gulf has emerged between the more polarized political elite and an "increasing number of ordinary Americans [who] appear to be walking away from the conflicts that characterize the party elite", so that opinions in the general public appear to converge while they diverge between the two major parties ("Disconnected" 55, 69; see also Baldasari and Gelman 441).

Abramowitz offers a rebuttal to Fiorina et al., arguing that, "while it is indisputable that partisan polarization is greater among political elites than among the American public", there is

evidence that the American public, and not just party elites, have become more polarized (“Disconnected” 80). In Abramowitz’s view, there has been a “dramatic increase” in the number of people engaged in political activities and all of these people are increasingly polarized, so that Fiorina’s argument that polarization is significant only within a small and unrepresentative political elite is no longer valid (“Disconnected” 75-7).<sup>6</sup>

The dispute between Fiorina and Abramowitz sketched above shows that leading political scientists do not agree on where polarization originates and what forces are driving it forward.<sup>7</sup> Obama’s speech, however, clearly picks a side. When the President asserts that partisan squabbles are radically divorced from the general consensus that exists among the “vast majority of Americans”, he rehearses Fiorina’s argument. In the picture Obama paints the “vast majority of Americans” are therefore right to be suspicious of political functionaries who are supposed to represent them but in fact are preoccupied by their own partisan battles, in which their positions are, furthermore, influenced by lobbyists who make an illegitimate oligarchy out of a system that is meant to be democratic. Obama is following a rhetorical strategy identified by Alexander: He flatters his audience by describing it in positive terms and projecting voters as “rational, honest, independent, and capable of decisions that are wise” (91).

In addition, as he paints a picture of the legislature as disconnected from and largely uninterested in the people, Obama is feeding into anti-establishment sentiment. He is there-

---

<sup>6</sup> Fiorina and Levendusky as well as Abramowitz argue on the basis of National Election Studies and General Social Survey data.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobson, in a 2012 article based on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, finds that this is a far from straightforward issue, as his data could be used to add to either Fiorina’s or Abramowitz’s argument. In light of this, Jacobson reasons, “[Fiorina’s and Abramowitz’s] dispute is actually much more over the interpretation of the evidence than the evidence itself” (1626).

by arguably contributing further to a culture of suspicion, which, according to conspiracy scholar Peter Knight has permeated the American political landscape to the extent that “the natural order itself [is seen as] present[ing] a pervasive threat to its citizens” (34). Paradoxically, then, by painting himself as a relatively powerless outsider to the polarized and corrupt political establishment, Obama is able to turn his confession of powerlessness into a creative intervention within a political system perceived as being in crisis. Through the assertion that he is one of the people, and despite acknowledging a moment of vulnerability and ineffectiveness, Obama’s speech actually performs a strength that consists in resisting the pull of the broken system and feeling empathetically with the rational majority of citizens rather than the detached and self-absorbed politicians.

### **Undecidability and the Crisis of Authenticity**

In the previous section I argued that Obama’s deployment of anti-establishment rhetoric serves to construct him as an authentic outsider by anticipating and averting the default perception of politicians as functionaries of a corrupt system. In this section, I expand on this analysis by questioning whether and how Obama’s tears work with the anti-establishment rhetoric in constructing the President’s authenticity.

To someone intent on disavowing the validity of another’s emotional investment in something, tears are problematic. They are problematic because they are difficult to fake. They are difficult to fake because they are usually uncontrolled. Theatre scholar Erin Hurley explains that “affect” is an “uncontrollable, embodied, individual experience” to an “environmental change” which may result in an “emotional expression”, which “displays the subjective, affective response in a socially readable way”

(17). Insofar as tears are usually the emotional expression of an uncontrollable feeling of sadness, they may be a result of affect. However, tears are also more complicated than the simple affects that result in the autonomic responses of a person breaking a sweat or blushing, because tears *can* still be faked, even if it does require considerable acting skill to convincingly cry on cue. As such, tears are usually a trustworthy sign of someone genuinely feeling deeply upset, but not always. Tears are suspect because they can be faked, but only under certain circumstances and only by certain people. As literary critic Tom Lutz reasons, “the meaning of tears is rarely pure and never simple” because the sincerity of tears remains “in the moist eye of the beholder” (23, 60).

Obama’s status as President of the United States compounds the problem at this stage. Obama’s rhetoric may stress that he is one of “the vast majority of Americans”, but Obama is unlike most Americans in that most Americans will never have direct access to him. Instead, the public’s access to Obama is restricted to media representations of him. In the case of Obama’s tears, this is problematic not just because such representations are “pushed this way and that by journalists”, as Alexander observes (9). Rather, it is problematic because personal knowledge of Obama would be what would allow citizens to decide, or at least make an educated guess, whether the President is the kind of skilful actor who would be able to cry on cue. Both Lutz and Thomas Dixon, who writes about the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s tears, seem to agree that a central problem surrounding the public perception of tears lies in determining whether the tears are authentic or artificial (Lutz 66; Dixon 291-2). On politicians’ tears, Lutz’s analysis in *Crying: A Natural and Cultural History of Tears* concludes, “[i]n public life, [tears] are

frequently forms of emotional blackmail” (225). In the absence of personal knowledge of Obama, the tears, and what prompted them, become a matter of intense speculation and controversy that, in Obama’s case, plays itself out along predictable party political lines.

One’s interpretation of Obama’s tears is thus ultimately indicative of where on the political spectrum one finds oneself: According to left-leaning commentators for the *Washington Post* and CNN, Obama’s tears were “a good thing” and “revolutionary”, respectively (Cillizza; Blake), since the tears indicated the President’s passion for the gun control issue. Mary Rhodan of *Time* magazine similarly interpreted the tears as an expression of Obama’s emotional investment in gun control and his frustration at being unable to force stricter legislation. On the right-wing television network Fox News, on the other hand, detractors accused Obama of having rubbed raw onion on his fingers, which he was then supposed to have rubbed on his eyes during the speech to make himself cry. Meghan McCain, the daughter of Arizona Senator (and Obama’s Republican opponent in the 2008 presidential election) John McCain, called the speech “bad political theatre” (Raw Story). The reception was thus split between those who believed that Obama’s tears were real, heartfelt, and indicative of the President’s emotional investment in the issue and those who felt the tears were deliberately planned and perhaps even intentionally brought about through the use of tear-inducing substances — a position that not only undermines Obama’s authenticity but any acting skill he might be credited with having.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore the undecidability of whether the tears were spontaneous or planned, heartfelt or fabricated, that is the

---

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Dixon notes that a similar accusation of resorting to the not particularly emotionally charged act of rubbing raw onion on her eyes was levied against Margaret Thatcher (292).

most salient point. What does it mean, in this context, to ask if Obama is acting authentically? Suppose the President had felt the sincere desire to weep, but could have stopped the tears from falling in this public setting and chose not to, then to what extent could Obama still be said to be acting authentically? While these questions lie, in their most literal sense, at the heart of the pundits' questioning of the authenticity of Obama's tears, they also open up rather more complex questions on the relation between authenticity and performance.

In *The Paradox of Acting*, Denis Diderot famously argued that an actor's successful performance depends not on feeling the emotions performed but "upon rendering so exactly the outward signs of feeling, that you fall into the trap" (16). "The player's tears", if skilfully performed on cue, therefore, "come from his brain", not his heart — and for the French philosopher this was true "[i]n tribunals, in assemblies", in the political sphere, as much as on the theatre stage (17, 108). For the theatre historian Joseph Roach, Diderot's acting theory is not just the historically most persuasive theory of acting (226); it also explains the historic distrust and marginalisation of professions like "begging, seduction, prostitution, and apostasy" whose practitioners, like the actor, are "professional illusionists" (138). The widespread distrust of politicians, I suggest, may be due to the same suspicion that the efficacy of a performance on the political stage depends on the opposite of being overcome by true, spontaneous emotion.

In our twenty-first century performance culture the ambiguous nature of acting is further compounded by the complex relationship between what is staged and what counts as reality. Carol Martin argues, not uncontroversially, that today's culture of suspicion stands in contrast to the conspiracy culture of

the 1960s and '70s, which was rooted in the belief that the real could be uncovered under a façade of conspiratorial power (23-4). Today, by contrast, Martin reasons, "the 'really real' has its own continuum that includes [...] the staged" (15). In his recent book, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, Andy Lavender sharpens this point by asserting that, "Reality incurs not as reality but as it is *performed* (presented) and *perceived*" (24, emphasis in original). In this, Lavender echoes an argument posited by Erika Fischer-Lichte, who contends that it is increasingly through the process of the *mise-en-scène* that truth and authenticity can be perceived at all (89). While this argument needs the qualification that it does not follow that *everything* that is staged is therefore somehow also 'true',<sup>9</sup> Fischer-Lichte and Lavender make the intriguing observation that, as far as our mediatised performance culture is concerned, reality may need to be staged in some way in order to become perceptible.

For political rhetoric this complex layering of relationships between experienced and performed emotion and between the perception of reality and its staging is problematic. In the political realm, as Maggie Inchley proposes, "the 'anti-theatrical prejudice' is easily triggered" (14). This means that a politician's performance is only effective if it does not reveal its own theatrical nature and successfully manages to conceal the fact that it has been staged at all (see also Alexander 14; Fischer-Lichte 87; Levin and Freeman 6). Although a politician's performance may have been painstakingly rehearsed to produce a desired effect and although it is carefully staged in front of cameras, the politician must, ideally, sound as though he is speaking off the cuff and not shying away from displaying the emotions that are

---

<sup>9</sup> As NBC's Chuck Todd argued in a recent interview with Counselor to President Trump Kellyanne Conway, for example, disproven statements that exist in clear contradiction to evidence-based empirical reality are not "alternative facts" — they are falsehoods ("Conway").

coursing through him at the moment of speaking. Obama's tears thus stand in a complex relation not just to Obama's unknowable feelings, but to the nature of how emotion can be most effectively acted out on stage and the need to stage that which is to become perceptible as "real", yet conceal the staged nature of political rhetoric. In this light, the tears are anything but simple authenticators of emotion.

Instead, I submit, one should read the tears as drawing attention to a crisis of belief in the authenticity of politicians. The tears throw this crisis into sharp relief because they highlight the complex interrelationship between the staged and the real, concepts that, in the twenty-first century, are perceived as standing in a more complex relationship to each other than simple opposition. Positing that the concept of authenticity has "begun to come into crisis" because authenticity is increasingly questioned and obsessed about, the social semiotician Theo van Leeuwen contends that authenticity is "concerned more with the moral and artistic authority of the representation than with its truth or reality", so that one might more fruitfully ask not how authentic something is but: "Who takes this as authentic and who does not?", and on what basis (396-7). In this light, Obama's tears might be interpretable as authentic only insofar as it serves someone's political interests to posit that they are. The crisis of authenticity might then manifest itself in someone badly wanting to believe that the tears were real and in someone else wanting just as badly to believe that they were not — and yet neither being able to make a definitive determination because, in the mediatized culture of the twenty-first century, reality and stage, and person and performance, have become a complexly tangled blend.

## **Conclusion**

At an event hosted by the *Wall Street Journal* in late 2008 Obama's then newly appointed Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, remarked, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." Few images speak as eloquently of crisis as the leader of a country in tears. Obama used his tearful speech to draw attention to America's crisis of mass shootings in a way that simultaneously drew attention to a perceived crisis in the U.S. political system and the Obama presidency. Obama's speech deployed anti-establishment rhetoric, now a dominant trope in political discourse, to paint the U.S. Congress as corrupt, self-interested, and infested with parasitic lobbyists, in order to then present Obama as a rational, benevolent, and clear-sighted outsider whose desire was to help the American people help themselves. By constructing himself as an outsider to the tainted political sphere, Obama was able to show what might be perceived as his ineffectiveness in reforming the gun laws in a more positive light: the President might have been ineffective, but this was preferable to his having been persuaded by the gun lobby and turned into just one more functionary of the broken system. As part of his rhetoric, Obama's tears eloquently underscored his outsider position and his frustration at his own ineffectiveness.

On a more conceptual level, however, the tears fail to authenticate Obama's emotional avowal in the issue of gun control. Because an effectively acted performance does not necessarily depend on real emotion felt at the time of performing — and indeed might depend on its opposite, carefully observed and rehearsed emotion — Obama's tearful performance must remain suspect. Despite this, pundits regarded the truth value of Obama's tears as the essential discussion point generated by the speech. This points to an incongruity between the way in

which reality is increasingly being perceived in the twenty-first century — i.e., through being staged — and the anti-theatrical prejudice operating in the realm of political discourse, where performances are easily discredited if they reveal their theatrical construction. As such, the tears expose a double crisis of belief in political culture: they underline Obama's assertion of the falsity within the American political system, yet they also undermine his own believability by drawing attention to the gulf between a politician's mediatized performance and the people it strives to convince.

### Works Cited

- Abramowitz, Alan I. "Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?"  
Nivola and Brady 72-85.
- . *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Print.
- . "Transformation and Polarization: The 2008 Presidential Election and the New American Electorate." *Electoral Studies* 29 (2010): 594-603. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.
- Baldassarri, Delia and Andrew Gelman. "Partisans Without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion." *American Journal of Sociology* 114.2 (2008): 408-446. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Blake, John. "Why Obama's Tears Are So Revolutionary." *CNN.com*. Cable News Network, 9 January 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Cillizza, Chris. "President Obama Cried in Public Today. That's

- a Good Thing.” *WashingtonPost.com*. The Washington Post, 5 January 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- “Congress and the Public.” *Gallup.com*. Gallup, 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- “Conway: Press Secretary Gave ‘Alternative Facts’.” *Meet the Press With Chuck Todd*. NBC News, 22 January 2017. Television.
- Diderot, Denis. *The Paradox of Acting*. Trans. Walter Herries Pollock. London: Chatto & Windus, 1883. Print.
- Dixon, Thomas. *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015. Print.
- Emanuel, Rahm. “Rahm Emanuel on the Opportunities of Crisis.” *Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, 18 November 2008. Online video clip. 23 January 2017.
- Farley, Robert. “Sorting Out Obama’s Gun Proposal.” *Fact-Check.org*. Annenberg Public Policy Center, 8 January 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Fiorina, Morris, et al. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Longman, 2011. Print.
- Fiorina, Morris, and Matthew Levendusky. “Disconnected: The Political Class versus the People.” Nivola and Brady 49-71.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. “Inszenierung und Theatralität.” *Inszenierungsgesellschaft: Ein einführendes Handbuch*. Ed. Herbert Willems and Martin Jurga. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998. Print. 81-90.
- Foley, Michael. “President Bush, the War on Terror, and the Populist Tradition.” *International Politics* 44 (2007): 666-691. Web. 23 January 2017.
- “Gallup Daily: Obama Job Approval.” *Gallup.com*. Gallup, 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.

- Heilemann, John, and Mark Halperin. *Race of a Lifetime*. London: Penguin Books, 2010. Print. UK edition of *Game Change*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.
- Hurley, Erin. *Theatre & Feeling*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Inchley, Maggie. *Voice and New Writing, 1997-2007: Articulating the Demos*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.
- Jacobson, Gary C. "The Electoral Origins of Polarized Politics: Evidence From the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study." *American Behavioral Scientist* 56.12 (2012): 1612–1630. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Jaffe, Erwin. "Our Own Invisible Hand: Antipolitics as an American Given." *The End of Politics? Explorations into Modern Antipolitics*. Ed. Andreas Schedler. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997. Print. 57-90.
- Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X-Files*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Lavender, Andy. *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*. Abingdon, Routledge, 2016. Print.
- Levin, Laura and Barry Freeman. "Performing Politicians: A CTR Wrecking Ball." *Canadian Theatre Review* 166 (2016): 5-9. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Lutz, Tom. *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. Print.
- Martin, Carol. *Theatre of the Real*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Murse, Tom. "Executive Actions Versus Executive Orders." *About News*. About, Inc., 29 January 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Nivola, Pietro S. and David W. Brady, eds. *Characteristics and*

- Causes of America's Polarized Politics*. Baltimore: Brookings Institution Press, 2006. Print.
- Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President on Common-Sense Gun Safety Reform." The White House. Washington, D.C., 5 January 2016. Speech.
- "The Obameter: Tracking Obama's Campaign Promises." *PolitiFact.com*. Tampa Bay Times, n.d. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Raw Story. "Andrea Tantaros: Obama Used 'Raw Onion' to Cry for Gun Victims." *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 January 2016. Online video clip. 23 January 2017.
- Rai, Shirin M., and Janelle Reinelt. Introduction. *The Grammar of Politics and Performance*. Ed. Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Rhodan, Maya. "Why Obama Cries Over Gun Control." *Time.com*. Time, 5 January 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Roach, Joseph. *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*. 1985. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1993. Print.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. "What Is Authenticity?" *Discourse Studies* 3.4 (2001): 392-397. Web. 23 January 2017.
- Wheaton, Sarah. "Obama's Popularity Soars Thanks to Trump." *Politico*. Politico LLC, 6 October 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.
- "Yes, He Can! No, He Couldn't. Obama Is a Failed President." Event Announcement. *Intelligence<sup>2</sup>*. Intelligence Squared, n.d. Web. 23 January 2017.