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## Introduction

In “World of Wrestling,” the literary theorist Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]) describes how professional wrestling communicates its stories to audiences through dense symbolic clusters that define an event’s protagonists and their relationships to one another, and render obvious a bout’s plot. “The physique of the wrestlers,” Barthes comments, “constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight. But this seed proliferates, for it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestler casts to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament which finds its natural expression in a gesture. The different strata of meaning throw light on each other, and form the most intelligible of spectacles” (18). When thinking about the politics of 1998, the year of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, it is difficult not to imagine the president on television, wagging his finger at the national audience and denying the affair, or the heavily circulated image of Kenneth Starr confronting reporters while carrying a bag of garbage to the curb of his street (see Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2). These images helped define the year’s events, and while the political battle was of a more contingent dramatic structure than those displayed in the wrestling ring, the characters’ meanings nonetheless played a critical role in determining the outcome.

A pattern emerged when I watched television in 1998. Sitting with friends, family, or in a public space, I would routinely overhear people saying, “I hate that guy,” when President Clinton, Ken Starr, or Newt Gingrich appeared on screen. Monica Lewinsky’s image would shade the atmosphere with blue humor, while Hillary Clinton’s image seemed to produce more complex reactions, headshakes of skepticism and disbelief being the foremost expressed. Admiration, respect, hope, fondness, pride – feelings not commonly associated with politics today except,

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Excerpt

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Figure 1.1 With a gesture that mixed signs of forceful conviction and the assignment of shame, President Clinton stabbed his pointed finger in the air while denying having a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky, January 26, 1998.

perhaps, following a national election – were entirely absent, or only voiced with irony. The people onscreen were recognized by everyone – they seemed to be on the television all the time – and their appearances stirred passions. Viewers seemed to know a lot about these characters, as if written all over their suits and skin were stories telling us who they were. And yet one viewer could read Clinton’s image and express disgust, while sitting next to him another person would grimace at Starr’s image. The reading metaphor, in fact, is too cumbersome; a briefly televised image alone communicated a density of meaning, instantly. Reading takes time; these people’s images communicated at a rate that would defy measurement by a hummingbird’s watch. What viewers knew was not entirely clear, but their knowledge was clearly not simply based on political policy and legal precedents. The knowledge was not merely cognitive; rather, it was thicker, suggesting something more akin to an understanding. And the emotional registers these images struck, though

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Figure 1.2 In an image that combines in one frame the private sphere of his personal home and the garbage he is handling at work, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr talks to reporters while taking out the trash at his house in Virginia, April 2, 1998.

not always hate or love, were not always shallow either. Like a social fact, one could love it or hate it, follow it closely or try to ignore it, be captivated by it or simply want it to go away. But there it was, the national political drama, on the news, in late night television comedy monologues, in newspapers, and on the expanding internet, and it forced a way into everyone's attention, regardless of whether or not it inspired outrage or boredom, awe or indignation. It was an event.

These people on screen clearly meant something greater than their simple human selves. They were characters with complex, multifold meanings, and the simple, quick projection of their images onto the television would lift these meanings into the awareness like dust fleeing a beaten rug. What we saw in these clouds of debris were constellations of characters and relationships: Clinton and Starr had an obviously adversarial relationship, as did Clinton and Gingrich, but the latter one seemed to have more dimensions, and, in some ways, the two who

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appeared to spar on the playground seemed like they could just as easily have been buddies of some sort. The mystery of Bill and Hillary's relationship, so obviously under great stress and in flux, was reduced to a handful of possibilities: a political and career agreement, a nontraditional romantic partnership, or a deeply flawed marriage struggling with the ideals of love and loyalty. All of these people and their relationships developed meaning in relation to one another; take one away, and the remaining characters' meanings would change to some degree. Their characters had developed over the years in the public spotlight, and their relations to one another had galvanized into a story with a particular structure. What the public experienced, however, was not the unfolding of one singular plot, but competition between multiple plots, developing stories that aspired and pretended to tell us who each of these people really was, what their motives were, and what was actually, really going on in the nation's center. Their images on the television screen reflected neither chaos nor a perfectly stable order, but coherent characters with discernable relationships, whose futures remained uncertain.

Every time these actors appeared on screen their images were accompanied by a news reporter, anchorperson, media critic, or entertainer who would reduce and simplify the story, and move it forward, however incrementally. I was lucky enough to see David Brinkley, the longtime newsman and recently retired host of the ABC Sunday morning news program *This Week*, exiting a plane one summer during Clinton's second term. Brinkley had left the news business by this time, but it was still through his prior years on *This Week* that I had developed a sense of who these current political actors, the ones still living the drama, were. Brinkley had been an important part of my Sunday morning ritual. I trusted him, and enjoyed his commentary and onscreen presence, even though by the time I began to identify with his show he had largely adopted the posture of a bemused elder statesman or father figure, who would listen patiently to Cokie Roberts, George Will, and Sam Donaldson joust about the meaning of the week's latest developments. A year or two priorly, commenting on Clinton's re-election while on air, Brinkley had proclaimed Clinton a "bore" and declared that the forthcoming four years would be filled with "pretty words" and a lot of "goddamn nonsense!" I laughed out loud at Brinkley's candor; it did not matter if I agreed with him or not, I simply enjoyed seeing him express himself thus, and I felt closer to him for having witnessed it.

Standing in the luggage retrieval area of Jackson Hole, Wyoming's airport, I wanted to express to Mr. Brinkley my fondness for him. My taken-for-granted assumptions quickly unraveled: "Hey, I know this

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guy!” turned into, “Well, I know this guy’s on-air persona,” which was followed by perhaps the most obvious realization, “This man does not know me at all.” It produced an unsatisfying feeling that signaled no clear norms of how to proceed. It is this odd paradoxical sense of knowing and not knowing, of having an understanding about someone based on a thoroughly mediated relationship, and of the emotional attachments I felt that, in part, this book seeks to explore. The experience of politics in America is a lot like this encounter: we develop understandings, feelings of certainty, about political actors and media critics from political actors and media critics, but at a step removed. These understandings feel intuitive, have emotional components, and just like my memory of this chance meeting with Brinkley, they present themselves and then disappear, only to be recalled in future analogous moments. Where do these understandings and feelings come from, how do they take form, and create feelings of certainty, and passions of hatred and affection? A structure is certainly erected through this dynamic relationship between state actors, media critics, and publics, but nothing is known in any concrete terms. Collective life makes something from nothing, and then we get up and make a near replica again the next day. The nothing has a structure: namely, culture. We are born into it, and we think and feel through it. It is the structure and flow of American political culture that this book seeks to illuminate.

This project began as an attempt to explain the events of 1998 through the metaphorical lens of Watergate, as representing a national ritual in which a counter-democratic element had been identified in the nation’s center, thus sparking a redemptive, purifying process through which the normative ideal would be restored. Watergate morphed from representing a bungled break-in into a widely shared understanding that Nixon had abused the power of the office and obstructed justice. The House hearings and Senate proceedings forced Nixon to resign. As a symbol, Watergate came to connote presidential power run amuck. Monicagate erupted with an intensity that resembled the heights of the Watergate hearings proceedings, and it had an initial symbol – an affair with a White House intern – that had the potential to morph into far more dangerous and polluting understandings. Yet for the majority of the American public, Monicagate failed to mature symbolically, or to suggest that far more seriously threatening meanings lurked beneath the originating charge. Between initiating event and impeachment, Monicagate became enmeshed and mired in enervating details, and due to the long-standing, unfulfilled charges of corruption against Clinton, its symbolic boundaries appeared opaque and fuzzy.

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A ritual is a ceremonial process with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. It invites its participants to join in the celebration and reaffirmation of shared meanings. While the eruption of Monicagate in January 1998 signified a beginning, Clinton's impeachment by the House of Representatives in December later that year represented a false and sputtering ending to the event. The Senate's acquittal in the spring of 1999 was already a foregone conclusion, an anemic coda to a failed performance. While the ritual model illuminates the event in many respects, it fails to successfully capture the deep divisions and combativeness on display throughout the year. Like experts offering authoritative yet contradicting testimonies at a trial, some media critics and political actors said that Clinton's actions were the same as Nixon's, while others argued that they had absolutely nothing in common. Understandings had developed and hardened into consensuses, but they were staunchly opposed to one another, and the understanding that no purifying ritual was needed came to dominate. While the impeachment process moved forward, it failed to bring national publics into sympathetic participation. The impeachment was a ritual, but it was in many ways a mechanical process rather than an organic event generating emotional attachments and reinvigorating senses of collective identification. Given these conditions, it is little wonder that Clinton was able to remain in office to finish his second term. In sum, Monicagate and Clinton's impeachment were ritual-like; they represent a ritual process, but they demarcate a ritual within a larger social dramatic context. They were the culmination of events – of character development and plot formation – six years in the making. They were spectacles capping years of spectacle, and, in retrospect, a fitting if unfortunate crystallization of the decade's ongoing drama through which the nation's political fabric was continually rewoven.

Marx famously paraphrased Hegel to suggest that these types of grand historical events seem to happen twice, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. As tantalizing as the formulation is, invoking it to interpret Monicagate in relation to Watergate would obscure critical, fascinating processes. The point of the following pages is to take this formulation not as a statement of historical law, but to understand these results as contingent, interpretive outcomes, and to investigate how these understandings are achieved through the constant interactions between political actors, media institutions and critics, and a nation's publics. Late-modern politics occurs in highly differentiated and complex social and cultural conditions. Powers that used to reside naturally in positions and personages no longer inhere so effortlessly in the social statuses, like the presidency, that simply assumed them in the past.

Public understandings of the boundaries separating the real and the artificial, the public and the private, and the notions of authenticity have shifted, as the people's emotional reactions to the televised images of national figures I described above, and my experience of meeting Mr. Brinkley, suggest. Under these fluctuating cultural conditions, in which power has become more "defused" and diffuse, national politics unfolds as cultural performances, with actors, mediating critics, and audiences working through symbolic means to narrate, define, and interpret the nation's current status and future trajectory.

Clinton's presidency and the mystery of his impeachment amid high public approval ratings compel the generation of a new explanatory framework, a macro-sociological approach based on a dramaturgical sensibility. Recently a new kind of sociology has emerged from the cultural turn in the social sciences. Called cultural pragmatics (Alexander 2004), the framework identifies how social and political processes in highly differentiated societies are the product of the complex interplay of six elements of cultural performance: actors, audiences, collective representations, means of symbolic production, *mise-en-scène*, and power. While continuously narrated by media critics through various news outlets, politics today often takes place through televised performances, in which these elements of performance are brought together and used to stage communicative moments. Embedded in deeply structured collective representations that define what is democratic and what is counter-democratic, what is right and wrong, and sacred and profane, political actors craft scripts, and use means of symbolic production, like props and signifying objects, to communicate with their audiences and to shape public understandings. Such a televised moment is the *mise-en-scène*, the actual performance before a camera, which is broadcast in real time to Americans, who, as audiences, are themselves skeptical and critical, and pulled in multiple directions by the demands of contemporary everyday life. Media critics interpret and critique these performances, and subsidiary political actors spin them to sharpen talking points, and to either reiterate or oppose the presidential narrative. Political power operates through the interplay of these dramatic elements. It is performative in its exercise, and it is always shaped by the other elements of cultural performance. Power – institutional, material, and social – can be exercised in ways that allow or disallow such performances, that enhance or detract from them. But the usage of power always contains a performative dimension, and its usage is interpreted by audiences in important and highly consequential ways. Political power operates through performative power. As such, power is always held in check and shaped by the other elements of social performance.



I approached Mr. Brinkley, offered him my hand, and said, “I’ve really enjoyed your work.” He accepted my hand, smiled a warm, crooked smile, and said, “Thank you.” We carved a script out of the cultural milieu, performed it, and it worked.

What follows is a sustained social scientific investigation of a presidential tenure. Many presidential historians, political scientists, sociologists, and even scholars from the humanities have analyzed the sources of social power, and the exercise of presidential power in particular. However, none have offered a systematic, detailed sociological history of how a president, media institutions, and publics interact to shape the everyday processes by which we sustain, contest, and remake democratic life. Policy choices, political careers, and the public’s fortunes are structured by the cultural dimensions and performative processes detailed in the pages that follow. Without embedding the practice of presidential power within the complexities and flows of performance, we fail to see that the office is more than a mere state institution, and its incumbent embodies more than a biography of the person is able to capture.

### **The cultural pragmatics of the Clinton years**

In January of 1998, President Clinton appeared on live television to deny having an affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. In August, after testifying about his relationship with Lewinsky via video-link to a Grand Jury, Clinton appeared on television again to admit to an inappropriate relationship with the former intern. In September, nearly 500 pages of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr’s investigative report were released to the public on the internet, radically increasing web traffic to sites offering the report for public downloading.<sup>1</sup> A little over a week later, Clinton appeared on television again, as Congress released his taped testimony before the Grand Jury for public airing. In December, Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives, whose hearings were broadcast live on television. In February 1999, after being acquitted of the charges of impeachment by the Senate, Clinton said to his close advisors: “Thank God for public opinion” (Woodward 1999: 513).

American publics learned an incredible amount of detail about Clinton’s public and private lives throughout 1998 and the congressional impeachment processes. Over the prior six years, political actors had developed character structures, and plots had formed, eroded, and formed again. These symbolic structures would be activated again during 1998: Clinton had been framed as “Slick Willie” on the one hand, and as an intelligent, compassionate, Horatio Alger-like character on the other; Newt Gingrich



and Kenneth Starr had become vessels for restoring dignity to the White House as well as corrupt investigators bent on enacting a political coup. Plots about the “politics of personal destruction” and “vast right-wing conspiracies” battled against plots detailing personal and political corruption of such severity that socialist schemes, complicity in murder, and real-estate and banking boondoggling had been constructed. Political battles were waged daily, and in 1996, when FOX News and MSNBC joined CNN and CSPAN as available cable news channels, and as the internet became present in a rapidly increasing number of American homes, a complex symbolic distribution network formed an available and eager mediating environment prepared to narrate and critique, and in many ways sustain, an explosive political storm.

What follows is not just an explanation of the Clinton presidency, and indeed one of the few sustained social science investigations ever attempted of an eight-year presidential term itself. It is also a decidedly new and different kind of approach. It is an explanation of power shifts that is rooted in culture. Over recent decades, social science has undergone a cultural turn, but this seems hardly to have disturbed studies of power, and has intervened only sparsely in studies of the president. What would it mean to make meaning central to power struggles in general, and to the Clinton presidency in particular?

To answer this question, I introduce a cultural sociological understanding. This will be a new kind of cultural sociology, however, one that offers a clear break with both classical (Van Gennep 1960 [1908]; Durkheim 1995 [1915]) and modern approaches (Shils and Young 1953; Warner 1959; Bellah 1967; Douglas 1966; Turner 1974, 1977 [1969], 1982; Alexander 1988; Smith 1991; Roth 1995; Edles 1998; Marvin and Ingle 1999). At the core of cultural sociology is the insistence that social action is neither interest based nor contingently calculated in an interest-based way, but that action is meaningful and that, to be meaningful, is carried out in relation to structures of understanding that are social, collective, and extra-individual in nature (Alexander and Smith 1993, 2001). In classical and modern forms of cultural sociology, however, the understanding of cultural structures and meaningful action focused on ritual behavior, highly stylized moments that created parallels with actions in primitive societies. Except for Clinton’s impeachment, the Iran-Contra Affair (1986) that occurred during Reagan’s second term is the closest America has come to revisiting the ritual dynamics so vividly displayed in the Watergate proceedings. Yet even when the Administration was revealed to have engaged in profoundly counter-democratic activities, the proceedings failed to rise to a level of crisis

that could foster widespread ritualization. Social conditions were defused to the extent that even when the polluting symbolic framework of a soldier “just following orders” was so readily available a sizeable portion of the proceeding’s audience reacted to Oliver North’s performance by interpreting him as representing a hero as opposed to a villain.

Concluding his analysis of Watergate, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (1988) observes that “achieving the form of modern ritual is contingent . . . for modern rituals are not nearly so automatically coded as earlier ones” (190). Indeed, the problems with applying the ritual framework to the Clinton case are clear: (1) it imposes too rigid a structure on the event’s processual flow, (2) it tends to assume a unidirectional relationship between ritual producers and their intended audiences, (3) it presupposes that rituals either succeed or fail to achieve their theorized social functions, (4) it does not allow for exploring ambiguous, complex, or multifaceted outcomes, and (5) it suggests that only big events have meaning. Recently there has developed a radically new form of cultural sociology that promises to maintain the emphasis on meaning while avoiding the drawbacks of ritual theory. This is cultural pragmatics, which has initiated the performative turn in sociology (Alexander 2004; Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006).

Cultural pragmatics pays attention to background structures of meaning, but takes a pragmatic understanding of whether actors can effectively embody them (e.g. Turner 1982, 1986; Carlson 1984, 2001; Schechner 1985, 1990, 1993, 2003 [1988]; Aston and Savona 1991; Taylor 1995; Roach 1996, 2000). Scripts have to be forged out of these background representations, and this requires creativity, and in modern politics this occurs in teams. Even when scripts are developed, however, they must walk and talk – actors need a place to stand, a stage, and access to means of symbolic production. Actors must create a scene, compel media attention, and communicate their messages in real time. Put another way, teams must create an event’s *mise-en-scène*. Finally, teams need a sense of audience, which in performative terms is filled with agency of its own.

In this way cultural pragmatics draws attention to six elements of cultural performance: actors, audiences, systems of collective representation, means of symbolic production, *mise-en-scène*, and social power.

*Actors:* Symbols and plots are given life and communicated to publics by men and women inhabiting their political roles, striding the stage. In and through the symbolic contestation, actors make choices that vary from prescient to poor, and embody or speak their symbolic intentions with varying degrees of deftness. Actors control their own meanings through their speech and comportment, but they are never fully in control