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From the book:

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Suspending disbelief:

Obama and the role of emotions in political communication

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By January 2009, Barack Obama had become the most popular leader in the world, restoring the USA’s global image and crystallising a wave of European fascination that remains unchanged (Pew Research Center, 2009; Harris 2009a, 2009b; Transatlantic Trends, 2008, 2009). Two years earlier, he was virtually unknown in his own country, let alone Europe. How did the Obama phenomenon flourish in an era of political cynicism? How can we interpret Obama’s success in terms of communication and emotional appeal? In order to suggest some answers, I have studied audiovisual materials up to January 2009 -many of which can be accessed by

following the links provided- and drawn on cross-disciplinary literature to flesh out my interpretation of the findings from a small-scale qualitative research project¹.

Obama's campaign managed to embody American history in a personal story, and turned a personal story into American history. This was achieved by effectively blending old and new communication strategies. Accordingly, the campaign was embedded in a multilayered architecture of meanings, as well as underpinned by carefully crafted communication, and the synergetic use of grassroots mobilization, media technologies and symbol-building master narratives. My main focus is to reflect on the emotional and communicative fabric of Obama's transatlantic appeal. I will argue that a key component of this phenomenon was Obama's steady transformation into the kind of symbol that many were longing for.

¹ I am deeply indebted to everyone who took part in the conversations, interviews and focus groups that have broadened the scope of my own experience and interpretation of the Obama phenomenon. There were 24 participants from 8 countries: UK (10), USA (5), Poland (4), Bahrain, Canada, Ireland, Germany and Spain. They currently live in Scotland, and vary in ages and backgrounds. Of course, the sample is not intended to be representative in any way, but to add flesh to the bones of statistics and arguments from secondary sources. The purpose was to underpin the essay with qualitative data regarding perceptions, meanings and self-reported feelings. The research took place between December 2009 and March 2010.