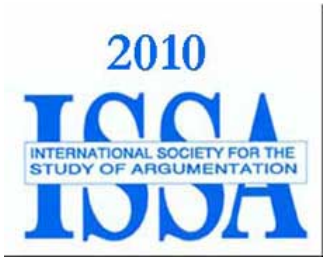
ISSA Proceedings 2010 – Arguments About 'Rhetoric' In The 2008 US Presidential Election Campaign



Barack Obama's prowess in the art of rhetoric, for which he had gained a national reputation with a stirring keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, was much commented upon during the 2008 US presidential election campaign and became a stimulus for public debate on the necessity, value, and danger of rhetoric as a political-communicative practice. Extending work by Craig (1996, 1999, 2008; Craig & Tracy 2005) on normative concepts and arguments in ordinary metadiscourse (practically-oriented discourse about discourse), this paper presents an initial survey of arguments about rhetoric that appeared in public metadiscourse of the 2008 campaign. Issues that emerged in this debate engaged classic lines of argument between rhetorical and critical traditions of thought concerning the legitimacy of rhetoric, thus showing the continuing relevance of those traditions and their capacity to illuminate essential tensions in democratic public discourse.

1. "Rhetoric" in the 2008 campaign

US presidential election campaigns follow an extended course in which candidacies for major party nominations are usually announced more than a year in advance of the national election. Candidates campaign to raise money and compete in a long series of intra-party state contests (primary elections and caucuses) that stretch through the early months of the election year and determine the selection of delegates to national party nominating conventions held in the summer. Party candidates are formally designated at those conventions and then campaign as standard bearers of their parties until the early November presidential election. The national discourse that surrounds the campaign is punctuated by the rhythms and contingencies of this long process. Thus, the debate about *"rhetoric",* both leading up to and following the 2008 election, ebbed and flowed through a series of key news events, which it will be

useful to chronicle briefly as background to the following analysis.

February 2007 – the John Howard flap. Shortly after Barack Obama formally announced his candidacy on February 10, 2007, the conservative Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, was quoted as saying that terrorists would rejoice if Obama (who had opposed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq) were to win the presidency. Although his remarks were almost universally condemned, Howard stood by them. Ironically, it was Obama himself who raised the question of rhetoric in this situation:
(1) "We have close to 140,000 troops in Iraq, Mr Howard has deployed 1400. I would suggest he calls up another 20,000 Australians and sends them to Iraq, otherwise it's just a bunch of empty rhetoric." (quoted by Packham & Balogh 2007)

February 2008 – Obama accused of plagiarism. In a February 16, 2008 speech in Wisconsin, Obama was defending himself against persistent charges by the Hillary Clinton campaign that Obama spouted "empty rhetoric." Arguing that words have inspirational power, he quoted famous American examples:
(2) "'I have a dream' – just words? 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' – just words? 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself' – just words? Just speeches?" (quoted by Spillius 2008)

The passage closely resembled one in a speech given two years before by Obama's friend, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. Framing the incident as a serious case of plagiarism, a Clinton campaign spokesman was reported to have said:
(3) "Senator Obama's campaign is largely premised on the strength of his rhetoric and his promises, because he doesn't have a long record in public life. When the origin of his oratory is called into question, it raises questions about his overall candidacy." (quoted by Spillius 2008)

In response, while Obama admitted he should have attributed his words to Patrick, Obama and Patrick both made light of the incident, and Obama defended his rhetoric's essential authenticity:
(4) "It's fair to say that everything that we've been doing and generating excitement and the interest that people have had in the elections is based on the core belief in me that we need change in America," he said. "And that's been heartfelt and that's why I think it's been so effective" (quoted by DeFrank & Saul

2008).

February-March 2008 – "NAFTA-gate." Although the name, "NAFTA-gate," didn't stick, Obama's campaign was briefly on the defensive after allegations that an Obama advisor had privately assured Canadian officials that Obama's criticism of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was merely campaign rhetoric directed at labor union voters in Ohio.
(5) … [S]enior Clinton campaign officials repeatedly stressed the importance of the contradiction between Mr. Obama's anti-NAFTA rhetoric and the private assurances of one of his advisers … "Because it's just flat-out wrong to tell the people of Ohio one thing in public about NAFTA and say something quite different to the government of Canada behind closed doors."

Ms. Clinton said yesterday that she believed the Obama campaign had given the Canadian government "the old wink-wink."
"I think that's the kind of difference between talk and action that I've been talking about," she went on. "It raises questions about Senator Obama coming to Ohio and giving speeches against NAFTA." (Ibbitson 2008)

March 2008 – the "race speech." On March 18, 2008 Obama delivered a major speech in Philadelphia on the subject of race in America. The speech responded to a crescendo of criticism concerning a long history of racially inflammatory sermons by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of the Chicago church Obama had attended for 20 years. Obama's speech disavowed Wright's most extreme statements while acknowledging the complexity of race as an issue in American society, the reality of racial injustice, and the anger felt by whites as well as blacks. Reactions to the speech ranged from predictable charges of empty rhetoric to effusive praise for its eloquence and unprecedented candor, which was said to have cleared the air for a more open national discourse on race (Alexovich 2008). Journalists Amanda Paulson and Alexandra Marx summarized some of the extensive commentary on the speech that offered reasons for its importance:
(6) … "I appreciate that he's taking the platform he's on to say things no politician has said before," says Keith Gilmore, a black man who works at the University of Chicago's business school. "Now politicians know to speak to people directly and honestly. We're looking at race in a different way now."

In Manhattan, Doug Mohrmann, an older white man, was less certain. "I think he adequately divorced himself from some of the more controversial statements," he

says. “But I think 20 years of being with that pastor and 20 years of being with that church, and totally committing to that guy and to not have addressed that kind of rhetoric before…. It’s just unacceptable.”
[…]
On the rhetoric itself, writers lauded the speech’s direct, conversational language as well as its nuance and complexity. “It was a sophisticated and honest analysis of the problem,” says Terry Edmonds, former director of speechwriting for President Clinton, who called it “one of the best speeches on race in the last 20 years.”

Whether American voters agree is still an open question. Even those who believe the address is destined for the annals of great American oratory are unsure.

“As a speech, it was bold, clear, well organized, eloquent in its description of history and current issues and future dreams and ideals that people of good will all share,” says Sorensen. “Whether the political strategy was brilliant we’ll find out later.” (Paulson & Marx 2008)

Example 6 illustrates contrasting modes of commentary on oratory, one emphasizing how the candor and sheer eloquence of the speech can serve as precedents for subsequent discourse, the other emphasizing that rhetorical statements establish political alignments that can be assessed apart from the speech’s rhetorical qualities but can also be heightened, for better or worse, by the rhetorical power of the speech.

June 2008 – Father’s Day speech. Another speech on racially sensitive matters that elicited commentary was one Obama delivered in a Chicago church on the occasion of Father’s Day (June 15, 2008), in which he criticized African American men who abandon responsibility for their children. Illustrative of one line of commentary on the speech is the following example (7), in which a newspaper commentator and fatherhood activist acknowledges the power of words and, while drawing a contrast between words and actions, emphasizes in this case that Obama’s personal behavior as a committed father increases the power of his oratory.

(7) This is not the first time Mr. Obama has spoken about the fatherhood crisis in our nation, but these were probably some of his strongest and most direct remarks. No doubt, I am delighted when someone of his stature and influence

speaks out about this important issue in such a forceful way. I have been in Washington long enough to know the power of words and the importance of rhetoric.
However, I tend to be more impressed by reality than rhetoric. In this case, the real story – the underemphasized one – is not Mr. Obama's rhetoric, but rather the reality of his example. Unlike most black fathers, Mr. Obama is married to the mother of his children. No "baby mama" for Mr. Obama. His real "Obama girl" is his wife. (Warren 2008)

July 2008 – Berlin speech. On July 24, Obama delivered a speech before a huge crowd at the Victory Column in Berlin, Germany. The enthusiastic reception was cited either as evidence for Obama's potential to transform international relations or for the emptiness of his rhetoric and his vacuous "rock star" celebrity status.

August 2008 – nomination acceptance speech. Another event that stimulated a flurry of commentaries about rhetoric was Obama's August 28, 2008 speech accepting the nomination of the Democratic Party, which he delivered in a large stadium in Denver, Colorado before a live crowd of more than 70,000 as well as a national television audience. Somewhat contrary to expectations based on Obama's reputation for soaring eloquence, commentators noted, the speech was relatively straightforward and consisted largely of specific policy positions; as one British observer put it, the speech was:
(8) … short on the high falutin' rhetoric and long on specifics. (Harnden 2008)

2009 – health care debate & election results. Public comments about Obama's rhetoric did not, of course, come to an end with the 2008 election campaign but continued after his election. His inauguration as president on January 20, 2009 was a major event, and the speech he delivered on that occasion was widely praised. Increasingly common, however, as the year went on were commentaries that contrasted Obama's successful campaign rhetoric with qualities of his speech that evolved as he faced the realities of governing. While economic problems mounted during 2009, CNN noted:
(9) … with the economy in a recession and people afraid for their financial future, Obama's soaring campaign rhetoric has given way to grim reality. (Acosta 2009)

Moreover, the political difficulties he faced, for example, in persuading the nation to support his health care reform plan, led some to conclude that Obama's rhetoric was becoming less effective. As illustrated by the following excerpts from

an analysis by Peter Baker in *The New York Times*, a variety of reasons were advanced to argue that the normal conditions of governing reduce the capacity for even a great orator like Obama consistently to produce great or effective rhetoric.

(10) But the limits of rhetoric were on display last week when the president could not rescue two foundering candidates in governor's races in New Jersey and Virginia. Has Mr. Obama lost his oratorical touch? Is the magic finally beginning to fade? Does the White House rely too heavily on his skills on the stump to advance his priorities?

It may be too soon to reach such conclusions. The Democrats who lost last week, after all, had fatal flaws all their own. But the results do suggest that Mr. Obama's addresses these days may not resonate quite the way they did. Speeches that once set pulses racing now feel more familiar. And if that remains the case heading into next year, it could make it more difficult for the Democrats' own Great Communicator to promote his program and carry along allies in crucial midterm elections. (Baker 2009).

2. Analysis

Data for this study consisted of 89 short texts selected from search results obtained by searching the Internet via Google and the Lexis-Nexis database of major newspapers, using the keyword combination of "Obama" and "rhetoric." Searches focused primarily on the election year of 2008 but with some attention to 2007 and 2009 (3 texts were selected from 2007, 80 from 2008, and 6 from 2009). Texts that presented arguments about Obama's rhetoric or about rhetoric in general with reference to Obama were selected so as to represent a range of themes that were prominent in the discourse of the period.**[i]**

The analysis found that arguments about Obama's rhetoric in the 2008 campaign clustered around three broad issues having to do with the relation of rhetoric and reality, grounds for judging a speaker's sincerity or authenticity, and the danger to democracy posed by a cult of celebrity. These issues are examined in detail in the following sections.

2.1. Rhetoric and reality

Commonplace denunciations of "empty rhetoric" or "mere rhetoric" were, of course, frequently used to dismiss the value of Obama's speech. Detractors

claimed that “words are cheap,” and that they aren’t as credible as actions or experience. Flowery words cannot be trusted. “Solutions” require “reality,” “policy,” and “pragmatism,” all positioned as rhetoric’s opposites. Even Obama himself used this line of argument and did not hesitate to denounce the “empty rhetoric” of his opponents, as his criticism of John Howard illustrates (example 1). Yet, counter-themes also emerged in public discourse that asserted the necessity of rhetoric for inspiring collective visions of the future and for mobilizing people to action: rhetoric as an indispensible element of leadership and a producer of public reality, not merely as fine words divorced from reality.

Several examples introduced above present arguments unfavorably contrasting words to experience or actions (see examples 1, 3, 5, 7). A common assumption of these arguments is that words may be (or are, in a given case) inconsistent with actions and, therefore, should not be trusted. In example 7, however, the fact that Obama’s words are backed up by actions (he practices what he preaches) lends credibility to his words.

Example 11, an editorial published in *USA Today* early in the campaign, represents a relatively mild questioning of what Obama’s rhetoric meant for the type of president he would become.

(11) Most of what voters do know about Obama involves style more than substance. He’s a charismatic speaker who promises to change the nation’s divisive and often dysfunctional politics … But the presidency is obviously about more than inspiration … [V]oters would do well to look beyond the unmistakable appeal of Obama’s rhetoric and examine his record for clues as to what kind of president he would be. (Obama’s Rhetoric 2008, excerpts)

Many judgments of Obama’s rhetoric were considerably harsher. In a piece for the *Weekly Standard*, for example, David Barnett asserted:
(12) There’s a hollowness to Obama’s rhetoric. When Obama delivered his famous (and effective) “just words” rejoinder to Hillary Clinton’s barbs, the speech inadvertently revealed the emptiness of Obama’s rhetoric. (Barnett 2008)

They were just words, Barnett argued, because Obama wasn’t planning on acting at all.

In a critique of a major speech Obama had given in Berlin, Germany, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks argued that rhetoric is more powerful when

grounded in reality. Using an interesting (and not uncommon) distinction between rhetoric and argument, Brooks unfavorably compared Obama's to previous speeches in Berlin by two American presidents:

(13) When John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan went to Berlin, their rhetoric soared, but their optimism was grounded in the reality of politics, conflict and hard choices … In Berlin, Obama made exactly one point with which it was possible to disagree. In the best paragraph of the speech, Obama called on Germans to send more troops to Afghanistan.

The argument will probably fall on deaf ears … But at least Obama made an argument. Much of the rest of the speech fed the illusion that we could solve our problems if only people mystically come together … But he has grown accustomed to putting on this sort of saccharine show for the rock concert masses … His words drift far from reality … Obama has benefited from a week of good images. But substantively, optimism without reality isn't eloquence. It's just Disney. (Brooks 2008, excerpts; see also Fields 2008)

While claiming like Barnett and Brooks that Obama's rhetoric was too often hollow rather than genuinely inspiring, *Financial Times* blogger Gideon Rachman drew an opposite conclusion for Obama's presidential prospects. Obama, he argued, was actually quite capable of engaging with substantive policy issues, and his vacuous rhetoric was merely a smart political strategy, not indicative of how he would act as president. Here the disconnection between words and actions, rhetoric and reality, works in Obama's favor:

(14) And while Mr Obama's most "inspirational" phrases are vague to the point of vacuity, he has shown in a series of television debates that he is more than capable of serious discussion. You do not get to be president of the Harvard Law Review if you cannot cope with detail.

So Mr Obama is not relying on empty exhortation because that is all he is capable of. It is a deliberate political strategy. And it makes sense. The more a candidate gets stuck into the detail, the more likely he is to bore or antagonise voters. Appealing to people's emotions is less dangerous and more effective.

Bill Clinton has said sniffily of Mr Obama that "I think action counts more than rhetoric". The argument of Hillary Clinton's campaign is that just because Mr Obama gives great speeches, it does not mean that he will be a great president.

I would reverse that. Just because Mr Obama gives lousy, empty speeches, it does

not mean that he will be a lousy, empty president. (Rachman 2008)

In contrast to assessments that Obama's rhetoric was vacuous even though strategically effective, others maintained that his speeches were genuinely inspiring and argued that the ability to inspire and give a great speech is part of the job description: How can action be taken unless leaders mobilize the masses with rhetoric? This was the point Obama (and Deval Patrick) had implied by mentioning the inspiring words of past leaders such as Martin Luther King (example 2). King's "I have a dream" speech was more than just words; it crafted an inspiring vision that energized a great social movement and changed the world. Citing similar examples in a *Washington Post* commentary, Michael Gerson argued that artful rhetoric (contrasted to "thoughtless spontaneity") is an indispensible element of leadership:
(15) The construction of serious speeches forces candidates (or presidents) to grapple with their own beliefs, even when they don't write every word themselves. If those convictions cannot be marshaled in the orderly battalions of formal rhetoric, they are probably incoherent.

The triumph of shoddy, thoughtless spontaneity is the death of rhetorical ambition. A memorable, well-crafted speech includes historical references that cultivate national memory and unity – "Four score and seven years ago." It makes use of rhythm and repetition to build enthusiasm and commitment – "I have a dream." And a great speech finds some way to rephrase the American creed, describing an absolute human equality not always evident to the human eye.

Civil rights leaders possessed few weapons but eloquence – and their words hardly came cheap. Every president eventually needs the tools of rhetoric, to stiffen national resolve in difficult times or to honor the dead unfairly taken.

It is not a failure for Obama to understand and exercise this element of leadership; it is an advantage. (Gerson 2008)
Some writers pointed out the inherent hypocrisy in Hillary Clinton's attacks on Obama's rhetoric, which, of course, employed rhetoric. Obama's defenders argued that the hope he embodied and the excitement he generated were both real and much needed by the millions who wanted political change. Moreover, some argued, the dichotomy between rhetoric and reality is false; there is no contradiction between soaring rhetoric and policy detail:
(16) The fact is that while Obama's rhetoric has garnered a great deal of attention

– as it should – he has always had detailed policy proposals as well, both on his Web site and in many of his speeches, some of which have been richer in policy detail than in soaring rhetoric.

Just because Obama knows how to make a spellbinding speech does not mean that he is incapable of framing a policy. (Pajerek 2008)

Other lines of argument about the power of rhetoric to produce reality are suggested by quoted remarks of Keith Gilmore and Doug Morhmann in example 6 (above): Rhetoric generates models for ways of speaking that enable more or less productive discourse, and rhetoric commits speakers in ways that can create or dissolve political alignments.

Ironically, in light of Obama's reputation for poetic speech, he was criticized a year after the election for being too enmeshed in technocratic policy details and failing to craft a compelling narrative to build public support for his policies. "More poetry, please" was the plea voiced by columnist Thomas L. Friedman in *The New York Times*:

(17) He has not tied all his programs into a single narrative that shows the links between his health care, banking, economic, climate, energy, education and foreign policies. Such a narrative would enable each issue and each constituency to reinforce the other and evoke the kind of popular excitement that got him elected.

Without it, though, the president's eloquence, his unique ability to inspire people to get out of their seats and work for him, has been muted or lost in a thicket of technocratic details. His daring but discrete policies are starting to feel like a work plan that we have to slog through, and endlessly compromise over, just to finish for finishing's sake – not because they are all building blocks of a great national project. (Friedman 2009)

Also interesting in this connection is a story that appeared a few months earlier in *The Onion*, a satirical fake newspaper, under the title "Nation Descends into Chaos as Throat Infection Throws off Obama's Cadence." When "a mild throat infection threw off President Barack Obama's normally reassuring and confident speech cadence," according to this fictional story, "[w]ithout the president's fluid, almost poetic tone to reassure them, the American people have abandoned all semblance of law and order and descended into a nationwide panic" (Nation Descends 2009). The assumption satirized in this piece was that the nation was

literally held together by Obama's rhetoric.

To summarize, the public debate on Obama's rhetoric reveals complexities in the discourse of rhetoric and reality. If words are not always consistent with actions, if rhetoric can deceive audiences or lose touch with reality, it is also the case that rhetoric has an indispensible role in producing the real conditions of discourse, political solidarity, collective action, and social change. Rhetoric not only reflects reality or fails to do so; it also constitutes reality.

2.2. Eloquence and authenticity

The problematic relation between rhetoric and reality is due in part to the equally problematic matter of a speaker's sincerity. Obama's "smoothness" with words was taken by some as a sign of inauthenticity; he was merely a clever salesman, a huckster. Yet the sometimes bumbling speech of Obama's opponent in the general election, John McCain, was taken by others as a sign that McCain was inauthentically pandering to voters rather than addressing the issues he really cared about. Given the power of eloquence to create false impressions of sincerity, how can audiences assess the authenticity of words they are hearing? Does the very question rely on a false dichotomy?

Obama and his opponents agreed that the effectiveness of his rhetoric depended on the impression of his sincere belief in what he was saying but disagreed about the reliability of that impression (compare examples 3, 4, 5, and 13 above). A contradiction between words and actions was frequently cited as a sign to argue that the words were insincere. But artfully crafted eloquence is inherently suspect for its capacity to hide character flaws, as the following assessment of Obama's rhetoric suggests, citing the authority of John Milton:

(18) Mr. Obama's rhetoric is refreshing after George W. Bush's tangled syntax and mangled sentences. His word comfort contrasts favorably with Mr. McCain's bluntness in the awkward cadences of an old soldier. But speeches are not spontaneous; they are carefully crafted and can hide a multitude of sins. The poet John Milton, the most educated man of his time, intentionally wrote dull speeches unenlivened with simile and metaphor when delivered by the character of God in "Paradise Lost." He gave Satan the florid eloquence to persuade and beguile, expecting his readers to see how words can deceive. (Fields 2008)

If by one logic authentic speech is dull and plainspoken while eloquence is not to be trusted, a different logic warrants exactly opposite inferences. In this

alternative view, genuine passion for what one is saying inspires eloquence, while inauthentic speech tends to be inarticulate and lackluster. Democrats used this logic to criticize McCain for his "obvious inauthenticity," claiming that all his bumbling came from the fact that he wasn't talking about issues he cared about, only pandering to voters:

(19) John McCain's inauthenticity could not be masked. McCain had no choice but to change his stripes to appeal to the right wing of the Republican base, embracing ultra-conservative religious views and tax-cutting that he had previously opposed. The true believers on the right didn't buy it and neither did McCain, and it showed. He found himself having to talk about things he didn't care about. Last night, in his concession speech, the real John McCain was free of those constraints, and it was stunning. His authentic personality came shining through. If THAT John McCain had been running for President, he would have given Obama a much closer fight. (Greer 2008)

Obama's March 18, 2008 speech on race occasioned much commentary about his authenticity or lack thereof (see example 6, above; see also Alexovich 2008). Supporters described the speech as open, frank, and very eloquent. They championed Obama's effort to talk about an issue that no politicians ever do. His nuanced position and his sympathetic acknowledgment of controversial views with which he did not necessarily agree were taken as signs of his courageous honesty. On the other side, some critics (mostly conservative bloggers; few in the mainstream media) found the speech itself offensive, racist, and contrived, and some accused Obama of outright lying to obscure his relationship to his African American pastor, Jeremiah Wright, whose inflammatory sermons had occasioned the public outcry to which Obama was responding. One of the most common arguments was that Obama claimed to be able to transcend race, and this was a reminder that that was not really the case. The situation that caused Obama to deliver the speech was another sign of its inauthenticity, because he only made the speech to protect himself from criticism, not of his own volition. Since it was made under duress, it could not be believed.

An entirely different line of argument about eloquence and authenticity rejected the underlying dichotomy between artifice and sincerity and argued instead for the higher authenticity of rhetorical art. Gerson (2008) reflected something of this reasoning in his defense of "formal rhetoric" as opposed to "shoddy, thoughtless spontaneity" (example 15). An editorial in *The Irish Times* was more explicit in its

preference for unabashed political drama over illusory attempts to convey sincerity:
(20) [Obama] has replaced the 20th-century politics of sincerity (however fake) and intimacy (however illusory) with older, more linguistic and dramatic, forms of political communication.

The leap is so large that it may not succeed at one go. But it seems part of a larger cultural shift, echoing, for example the relative decline of recorded music and the resurgence of live concerts. Maybe, in a post-modern era when culture is ubiquitous, we want our political leaders to be artists again. Maybe we may yet live to see a parliament swayed by the force of oratory rather than a party whip. (Refining of Rhythmic Rhetoric 2008)

2.3. Cult of celebrity
Finally, there was debate on the "cult of celebrity" that developed around Obama and the danger (or not) to democracy that might result. Two sorts of arguments were made about Obama as demagogue. The first wrote him off as silly, using words like "celebrity" and "rockstar." It made him appear insignificant, like a teen idol. McCain's campaign attempted to exploit this theme with a series of ads mocking Obama as "The One." The other argument made him seem more calculating, power hungry, and malevolent. "Emperor Obama," for example, or the common implication that his followers were blind minions like Hitler's or Stalin's:
(21) The Great One's performance tonight harkens back to Hitler's autocratic speeches in front of the throngs of adoring (mindless) followers.

Humility is certainly not a word that one should ever use to describe this ego-maniac. (durtyharry 2008)

In these arguments the emptiness of Obama's rhetoric, its lack of substance, is not criticized for being divorced from actions or truth but instead is taken as a sign that Obama's followers were not listening to what he actually said and were following him blindly, in the manner of a cult. A conservative blogger had the following to say:
(22) A cult of Celebrity has followed Obama around since his elevation to the higher echelons of the Democrat Party. His parade appears dripped in rhetoric with nothing of substance and this election has turned more into a grass roots social movement than a political race.

The danger is people are simply not listening to what Obama is saying, they have been swept away in the moment of this cult of Obama, his words don't actually matter just the fact he is talking is good enough for them (Rt. Hon. E.B. 2008)

Even some commentators who were generally favorable to Obama offered friendly warnings about the danger to democracy of allowing a cult following to develop. Comparisons to fascism seemed unavoidable, as in the following excerpt from an article by Dominic Lawson for *The Independent*, in which Obama's religious imagery was traced, and he was cautioned to steer clear of this strategy before it was too late and his supporters became uncontrollable:

(23) Obama, of course, is a democrat as well as a Democrat; but there is something in this form of rhetoric that has echoes of fascism, with its idea that the squabbling of mere politicians should be overthrown in favour of one man's uniquely wise interpretation of the National Will. Phrases such as "everything must be changed" were also the stock-in-trade of fascist orators, raising hopes which ended in the most dreadful disillusionment – and worse. (Lawson, 2008)

These arguments do not appeal to premises about rhetoric's relation to truth or signs of Obama's authenticity or lack of it; instead, they appeal to premises about the undemocratic, and therefore wrong, character of rhetoric that becomes too powerful regardless of its truth or the speaker's sincerity. Arguments in response invested the audience with greater agency. In those counter-arguments, people were inspired by Obama not blindly but because they understood that his rhetoric addressed an urgent need for change, producing not a cult following but a genuine social movement.

3. Concluding reflections

In conclusion, I offer three reflective comments on this study of arguments about rhetoric in the 2008 US presidential campaign.

First, the campaign stimulated some interesting journalistic discussions of rhetoric, of course along with much that was nothing more than cliché. In addition to several thoughtful commentaries cited earlier (Brooks 2008; Friedman 2009; Gerson 2008; Lawson 2008; Refining of Rhythmic Rhetoric 2008), also worthy of mention are a *Washington Post* article by Alex MacGillis (2008) that overviewed Obama's complex relationship with rhetoric, a piece by Charlotte Higgins (2008) in *The Guardian* that discussed the affinities of Obama's style to principles of classical Roman rhetoric, and a *New Yorker* commentary (Victory Speech 2008) that analyzed the style of Obama's election night victory speech and

described it as “a good night for the English language” (p. 42). Several of these articles made reference to the history of rhetoric as a context for understanding Obama and political rhetoric generally.

Second, as a result of the public interest in rhetoric that arose from Obama’s campaign, academic discourse on rhetoric entered the public sphere (e.g., through blogs and journalistic quotation in articles such as those just cited). Academic rhetoricians were quoted in several articles. Sinclair’s (2008) “Obama’s Simulacra” blog post is interesting, because the author made the claim that Obama was inauthentic using Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra. Academic rhetorical critics participated directly in the public debate through blogs (e.g. jose 2009) and other publications (e.g. Frentz 2008). In such ways, the public argumentation about rhetoric that surrounded the 2008 campaign became a site of interaction between theoretical and practical metadiscourse as envisioned by Craig (1996, 1999).

Third, arguments about rhetoric in the presidential campaign discourse of 2008 echoed classic philosophical critiques of rhetoric going back to Plato (rhetoric as mere appearances versus truth) as well as critiques from contemporary critical theory. My thematic analysis of the arguments revealed three broad issues that interestingly correspond to the three validity claims of truth, sincerity and rightness posited by Habermas’s (1984) theory of communicative action. According to Habermas, genuine communicative action seeks unforced mutual understanding and rational consensus rather than strategic advantage. As such, genuine communication requires the possibility of freely questioning the truth, truthfulness (sincerity) and rightness (normative acceptability) of any communicative act. In my analysis, arguments about rhetoric in the 2008 campaign clustered around questions of the relation of rhetoric to reality (truth), the relation of eloquence to authenticity (truthfulness or sincerity), and the threat to democracy arising from a cult of celebrity (rightness or normative acceptability). The fundamental question about rhetoric from the point of view of critical communication theory is whether rhetoric is, or under what conditions rhetoric can be, genuine communication. Insofar as rhetoric is a form of strategic action oriented to instrumental success it is inherently suspect in the critical tradition.**[ii]**

In the campaign discourse that I examined, popular arguments resembling these classic critiques of rhetoric were answered by popular versions of equally classic

defenses from the tradition of rhetorical theory. Rhetoric is not only logos but also ethos and pathos. It not only represents reality but also produces reality in forms such as commitments, values, motivating passions, and inspiring visions of a collective future. It is a necessary dimension of democratic political discourse in a world marked by conflict and practical contingency – the only real world we will ever know. Rhetoric *is* genuine communication in this perspective. And yet, defenders of rhetoric must acknowledge that the potential of rhetoric to produce reality can be abused in ways that mislead, deceive, and manipulate audiences. Rhetoric is both productive and dangerous, and in any case, unavoidable. The tensions involving rhetoric in the dimensions of truth, sincerity and rightness are essential tensions of democratic political life.

What we finally gain by examining the 2008 discourse about rhetoric in a theoretical frame is the insight that the arguments were, in a sense, no accident. Rather, they reflected ambiguities and dilemmas inherent to a political practice that inescapably relies on rhetoric and yet also aspires, in principle at least, to the legitimacy of genuine communication.

Notes

i Katherine Cruger's assistance in research and analysis is gratefully acknowledged.

ii Compare the legitimate but carefully limited role allowed for "strategic manoeuvering" in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 1999).

REFERENCES

Acosta, J. (2009, January 12). Obama's rhetoric meets reality. *CNNPolitics.com*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/01/12/obama.reality/index.html

Alexovich, A. (2008, March 18). Blogtalk: Obama's race speech. *Caucus: The Politics and Government Blog of the Times*. Retrieved from http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/blogtalk-obamas-race-speech/

Baker, P. (2009, November 8). The president whose words once soared. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/weekinreview/08baker.html?_r=1&hpw

Barnett, D. (2008, March 26). The hollowness behind Obama's rhetoric. *The Weekly Standard*. Retrieved from http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/03/26/opinion/main3968984.shtml

Brooks, D. (2008, July 25). Playing innocent abroad. *The New York Times*, p. A21.
Craig, R. T. (2008). The rhetoric of "dialogue" in metadiscourse: Possibility-impossibility arguments and critical events. In E. Weigand (Ed.), *Dialogue and Rhetoric* (pp. 55-67). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins (Dialogue Studies 2).
Craig, R. T. (1996). Practical-theoretical argumentation. *Argumentation, 10*, 461-474.
Craig, R. T. (1999). Metadiscourse, theory, and practice. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 32, 21-29.
Craig, R. T., & Tracy, K. (2005). "The issue" in argumentation practice and theory. In F. H. van Eemeren & P. Houtlosser (Eds.), *The Practice of Argumentation* (pp. 11-28). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
DeFrank, T. M., & Saul, M. (2008, February 19). YOU BIG COPYCAT. Hillary cries plagiarism – & Barack sez she has borrowed words from him. *Daily News* (New York), News, p. 14.
Durtyharry. (2008, August 28). Barack Obama's Invesco Field speech [comments]. *Telegraph.co.uk; Tony Harnden*. Retrieved from http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyharnden/5095395/Barack_Obamas_Invesco_Field_speech/
Eemeren, F. H. v., & Houtlosser, P. (1999). Strategic manoeuvring in argumentative discourse. *Discourse Studies, 1*, 479-497.
Fields, S. (2008, July 28). Distractions for Obama in Berlin. *Jewish World Review*. Retrieved from http://www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/fields072808.php3
Frentz, T. (2008, December). Ravaged by rhetoric. *Communication Currents*. Retrieved from http://www.communicationcurrents.com/index.asp?bid=15&issuepage=126&False
Friedman, T. L. (2009, October 31). More poetry, please. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/opinion/01friedman.html
Gerson, M. (2008, February 29). Words aren't cheap. *The Washington Post*, p. A19.
Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action; Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.
Greer, J. (2008, November 5). Obama's eloquence, McCain's lack of authenticity, and other lessons from election 2008. *Catching Flack: Smart Ways to Win the Public Relations Game*. Retrieved from http://blogs.bnet.com/pr/?p=356
Harnden, T. (2008, July 21). Obama's Invesco Field speech. Retrieved from

http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyharnden/5095395/Barack_Obamas_Invesco_Field_speech/
Higgins, C. (2008, November 26). G2: The new Cicero: Barack Obama's speeches are much admired and endlessly analysed, but, says Charlotte Higgins, one of their most interesting aspects is the enormous debt they owe to the oratory of the Romans. *The Guardian*, p. 10.
Ibbitson, J. (2008, March 4). Will Obama's 'wink wink' on free trade help Clinton win precious votes in Ohio? *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), p. A1.
Jose (2009, January 21). Obama's rhetoric. *thinkculture*. Retrieved from http://contexts.org/thickculture/2009/01/21/obamas-rhetoric/
Lawson, D. (2008, February 26). Obama must beware of turning into a cult, *The Independent* (London), p. 30.
MacGillis, A. (2008, February 26). Finding political strength in the power of words; Oratory has helped drive Obama's career – and critics' questions. *The Washington Post*, p. A01.
Nation descends into chaos as throat infection throws off Obama's cadence. (2009, July 14).*The Onion*, *45*(1). Retrieved from http://www.theonion.com/articles/nation-descends-into-chaos-as-throat-infection-thr,2767/
Obama's rhetoric soars, but what does his record suggest? (2008, January 28). *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20080128/edit28.art.htm
Packham, B., & Balogh, S. (2007, February 13). Howard cops Barack-lash; US anger at 'empty rhetoric'. *Herald Sun* (Australia), News, p. 2.
Pajerek, C. (2008, August 27). Letter to the editor; Obama's policy position. *The International Herald Tribune*, p. 7.
Paulson, A., & Marks, A. (2008, March 21). Obama speech opens up race dialogue. *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), USA, p. 1.
Rachman, G. (2008, February 26). Column: Obama and the art of empty rhetoric. *Financial Times: Gideon Rachman's Blog*. Retrieved from http://blogs.ft.com/rachmanblog/2008/02/column-obama-and-the-art-of-empty-rhetoric/
Refining of rhythmic rhetoric, The. (2008, February 9). *The Irish Times*; Weekend; Arts; p. 6.
Rt. Hon. E.B. (2008, October 31). I hope all sides see Obama not as Black, but as empty, devoid of any real change and above all a dawn of false hope. *The Ghost of Edmund Burke*. Retrieved from

http://ghostofedmundburke.blogspot.com/2008/10/i-hope-all-sides-see-obama-not-as-black.html
Sinclair, M. (2008, July 25). Obama's simulacra. *Creative Review: Advertising, Design and Visual Culture; CR Blog*. Retrieved from http://www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2008/july/obamas-simulacra
Spillius, A. (2008, February 19). Clinton camp accuses Obama of plagiarism; Campaign rhetoric; Used passage from speech by governor. *National Post* (Canada), News, p. A14.
Victory speech. (2008, November 17). *The New Yorker*, *84*(37), p. 42.
Warren, R. C. (2008, August 3). Obama practices what he preaches. *The Washington Times*, p. M19.