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WORDS THAT MATTER: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “STORIES” IN OBAMA’S 2008 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

1. Introduction

On November 4, 2008 people all over the world could celebrate the advent of a new era. The election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th American President was a historic event of immense significance. For the first time in the history of American democracy, an African American was elected President of the United States.

After eight years of policies that had increased military expenditure and broadened the gap between what Obama likes to call “Main Street” and “Wall Street”, the time of the Republican administration was eventually over. Obama was welcomed as the president promising renewal. He was seen as the leader who would move the country ahead and bring about real change in the lives of ordinary Americans. Being young for a person in that role and charismatic, he was capable of awaking American people’s subliminal needs for hope at a time of great uncertainty and economic instability.

Obama’s unprecedented victory was not just embraced with enthusiasm, it caused a wave of interest in his persona. The media soon transformed the president into a world celebrity and emphasized the role of race in his election. Indeed, race was possibly one of the most debated issues in relation to Obama’s success (Bobo and Dawson; Hunt and Wilson; Smith and King; Walters). Depending on the “racial” lens through which he was described, Obama would appear as either too black, or not black enough. More compromising scholars supportive of theories on hybridity suggested a post-racial era was about to come (Pettigrew).

In addition to Obama’s problematic racial identification, the fact remains that he embodies different cultural traditions (Remnick). In a way, Obama is the man of three continents: Africa (the land of his Kenyan father), America (the country where he was raised and educated) and Asia (he spent part of his youth in Indonesia). Also his language is able to engage different kinds of audience. A master of public performance, Obama is skilful in addressing the Black community using African American Vernacular English. By the same token, he has been recognized as one the most gifted rhetoricians in his use of Standard American (Alim and Smitherman).

Obama’s capacity to evoke multiculturalism, multilingualism and racial mixing is probably what made him into a citizen of the world and, at the same time, a tangible example of the American sense of historical development. In the run for presidency, he was the ideal candidate to impersonate the American credo that “out of many we are one,” the strongly held patriotic belief in unity out of diversity.

Thus, while Obama’s genealogical background (an African father and an American mother from the Midwest) and life experiences give him a cosmopolitan flair, his public voice echoes a truly American rootedness. Significantly, Kloppenberg claims that Obama’s cultural sensibility and his political outlook have been substantially influenced by the tradition of American philosophical pragmatism that was heralded by William James and John Dewey. In his view, Obama is also the product of the intellectual turmoil that excited US campuses in the 1980s and 1990s when he first studied at Occidental College, Columbia University and Harvard Law School, and later taught at the University of Chicago Law School. According to the historian, Obama’s intellectual formation and his commitment to the grounding ideals of the American Left pervade all his writings. In particular, Obama’s eloquent memoir *Dreams from my Father* (1995) and his ambitious book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) seem to disclose the influences that have shaped his distinctive worldview.

Many factors, indeed, can have contributed to raise Senator Obama to the highest rank in US politics. On the one hand, we can expect that Obama’s expression of certain values and ideals was decisive for his victory. His intellectual formation and educational development have imbued his voice with the ideas about democracy that many of his country fellows share. On the other hand, we cannot underestimate the impact of Obama’s figure and all that it evokes. His presence enacts a kind of subconscious reconciliation of the social, ethnic and racial tensions with which the United States still have to cope. Furthermore, he appears as an authentic embodiment of one of America’s most deeply held beliefs, the idea that everyone can make it if they work hard.

All these observations make us curious about the way Obama actually decided to present himself as the future President of the United States in the speeches he made during his first election campaign. Which aspects of his personal story did he decide to share with his potential voters? Which reasons might have guided the selection of personal facets to be brought to the fore? Answering these questions is expected to give recognition to some of the elements that may have been crucial for Obama's success.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore these and other related issues so as to shed some light on how Obama uses aspects of his personal background and experience in the formal context of his electoral speeches. In particular, the paper will investigate the rhetorical strategy of story-telling by focusing on the different types of "stories" that inhabit Obama's electoral speeches and by explaining their significance for the campaign.

2. Corpus and methodology

This study is based on the analysis of a selection of 30 representative speeches made by Obama during his election campaign in 2008. The corpus was originally compiled for a much larger investigation of Obama's use of language on the occasion of his first crucial presidential race (Degani forthc.). The time span that was considered for the selection of speeches reaches from February 5, 2008 (Super Tuesday, the day when Obama was elected as the candidate for the Democrats) to November 3, 2008 (the day before the presidential election). The criteria adopted for choosing the significant 30 speeches include: a) presence of the much acclaimed primary night speeches, b) coverage of different topics, c) coverage of different States, and d) exclusion of the shortest speeches. In detail, the corpus consists of the speeches shown below in chronological order:

1. February 5, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Super Tuesday"
2. February 12, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Potomac Primary Night"
3. March 4, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: March 4th Primary Night"
4. March 18, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: A More Perfect Union"
5. March 20, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: The Cost of War"
6. April 14, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: AP Annual Luncheon"
7. April 15, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Town Hall Meeting with Veterans and Military Families"
8. April 22, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Pennsylvania Primary Night"
9. May 3, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Plan to Fight for Working families and Take on Special Interests in Washington"
10. May 6, 08 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Primary Night"
11. May 20, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Forging a New Future for America"
12. June 3, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Final Primary Night"
13. June 21, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: a Metropolitan Strategy for America's Future"
14. June 28, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: National Association Of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials"
15. June 30, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: the America we Love"
16. July 1, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships"
17. July 10, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Women's Economic Security Town Hall"
18. July 13, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: 80th Convention of the American Federation of Teachers"
19. July 16, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Summit on Confronting New Threats"
20. August 1, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Town Hall on the Economy"
21. August 5, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Energy Town Hall"
22. August 23, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Vice President Announcement"
23. September 9, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: A 21st Century Education"

24. September 12, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: On taxes"
25. September 20, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama (Daytona Beach, FL)"
26. September 27, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama (Greensboro, NC)"
27. October 10, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama (Chillicothe, OH)"
28. October 15, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama (Londonderry, NH)"
29. October 20, 2008 "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama (Tampa Bay, FL)"
30. October 27, 2008 "Senator Barack Obama's Closing argument Speech: One Week"

This selection of speeches is expected to be relevant for the expression of Obama's political message to the American electorate.[1]

Initially, the speeches were collected for the purpose of exploring Obama's words on the background of Lakoff's predictions about American politicians' framing of issues (Degani forthc.). In line with Lakoff's theory, Republicans are expected to frame political reality according to a Strict Father (SF) model, while Democrats are assumed to think and talk about politics relying on a Nurturant Parent (NP) worldview. In a nutshell, SF morality emphasizes the values of strength and authority. To the contrary, NP morality places empathy and nurturance at the core of political thought and action. The investigation covered a range of different aspects related to the significance of Obama's words as the expression of American Democratic ideas. As part of that, the strategic use of certain rhetorical strategies aimed at gaining consensus was also taken into consideration. In particular, the use of story-telling emerged as a distinctive feature characterizing Obama's oratory. While this previous work focused on the question of Obama's appeal to Democratic values and unveiled many of its facets, the present paper picks up the use of story-telling which was not explored further.

Even though the term *story-telling* has been used in the diverse fields of linguistics, literary studies, psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology, it remains a rather fuzzy concept and one for which it is not easy to provide a clear definition (Hatavara, Hydén, and Hyvärinen). In this study, the notion of "story" is not used in the Labovian sense to indicate a fully-fledged type of narrative (Labov 1972, 1997), nor is it employed to indicate a form of dialogic co-constructed narration as defined in more recent narrative research (Georgakopoulou 2006, 2007). More simply, the presence of "stories" in Obama's electoral message refers to the occurrence of brief personal accounts or anecdotes interwoven in the texture of his political speeches.

These personal "narratives" can be grouped into three major categories. There are "stories" that revolve around the upbringing, education and professional achievements of Obama himself. These stories crucially contribute to defining the public image of the future president in relation to his pedigree and past accomplishments. Then, there are stories that have as their protagonists Obama's parents, grandparents and his closer family (his wife Michelle and his daughters Sasha and Malia). Here, he talks mostly about the hardships they were able to cope with in their lives as well as the courage and determination with which they faced highly demanding circumstances. Lastly, there are "stories" of ordinary Americans who are taken as examples to talk about their sufferance. This last category is particularly suited for expressing Obama's concern with the lives of ordinary American citizens and it is instrumental to his political message of caring for people.

Having now clarified how the notion of story-telling is intended in this paper and introduced the basic narrative categories established for the analysis of Obama's speeches, the next section will provide examples for each of the three types of "stories" and discuss their relevance, function and purpose in the corpus.

3. Analysis

Starting with the first of the three identified narrative categories, the one about the ways Obama presents himself to the electorate, it is significant to observe how he describes his genealogy.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners – an

inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one. (Obama, March 18, 2008)

This passage defines Obama as the embodiment of multiple racial identities in the United States. The story of his life appears to reconcile the historically grounded racial conflicts and the related social tensions between White and Black America. While his dad is an African man and his wife is a Black, American-born woman, Obama was raised with the love and affection of a white family, that of his American mum and grandparents. This story of symbolic racial integration does not stop here. Indeed, it is embellished with a further element. Obama describes his own extended family as being made up of people of different races living in three different continents. The excerpt also conveys another important message. For Obama, telling his story is a way to celebrate the United States as the only place on earth where certain “incredible” things can happen. As his personal story tells us, America is the country where unity can be reached out of diversity. It is also the place where dreams can come true. It was in the United States that Obama had the chance to get the sort of education that opened the doors for his success. His achievements could not but reinforce one of the lessons he learnt from his grandparents: the importance of serving one's beloved country, the significance of being patriotic. The same message is now transmitted by Obama to all American people. Indeed, in other speeches (see for instance Obama, June 30, 2008) Obama makes clear that his patriotism derives from how he was educated by his family. It was built out of the stories he heard from his grandmother about her work on a bomber assembly-line during the Second World War. It came out of the proud stories of his grandfather depicting himself as a brave defender of his country who enlisted after Pearl Harbor and marched in Patton's Army. It was also inspired by the lines of the Declaration of Independence and the words of the United States Constitution that his mother used to read to him as a child during the four years they spent in Indonesia.

Obama does not only use his family background to idealize himself as a good example of a successful American, but he also relies on talking about his past voluntary and professional activities as a way to show his engagement with American Democratic thought and its core values of empathy and nurturance. The following excerpt clarifies this point.

I should not be here today. I was not born into money or status. I was born to a teenage mom in Hawaii, and my dad left us when I was two. But my family gave me love, they gave me education, and most of all they gave me hope – hope that in America, no dream is beyond our grasp if we reach for it, and fight for it, and work for it.

Because hope is not blind optimism. I know how hard it will be to make these changes. I know this because I fought on the streets of Chicago as a community organizer to bring jobs to the jobless in the shadow of a shuttered steel plant. I've fought in the courts as a civil rights lawyer to make sure people weren't denied their rights because of what they looked like or where they came from. I've fought in the legislature to take power away from lobbyists. I've won some of those fights, but I've lost some of them too. I've seen good legislation die because good intentions weren't backed by a mandate for change. (Obama, February 12, 2008)

The words above situate Obama's personal narrative in the tradition of the so-called “from rags-to-riches” stories. These are the type of stories describing an ascent from poverty to fame which in the United States more than anywhere else have the potential to become powerfully inspirational. After all, they actualize the ideal of the American Dream and by doing so they reinforce American people's belief in it. Since Obama is the concrete example of someone who could make it notwithstanding all odds, his message of hope and change – two keywords throughout his campaign – is one people “can believe in.” As he says in other speeches, he is the son of “a young man who grew up herding goats in Kenya” and “a white girl from Kansas whose parents survived war and depression to find opportunity out west” (Obama, March 4, 2008). His own story tells Americans that the United States are the only country where a story like his could have ever happened. This story reinforces American people's pride in their nation as the land of real opportunity.

While the story of Obama's success culminating in the chance to run for the highest office in the United States is coherent with the logic of the American Dream, his social involvement and his work for the community favor the creation of his public image as not just a civic-minded person but a model citizen. Obama takes great pains to convince Americans of the purport of working for one's community. On the one hand, he stresses the importance of caring for others; on the other, he admits that real change can only come "from the bottom-up." His work as a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago is mentioned recurrently in the electoral speeches. The emphasis is always on change that can be brought about working at the local level and helping communities solve their problems of joblessness, poverty and malfunctioning education. Admittedly, Obama's experience in public life lasted for about two decades and it was not limited to "lifting up neighborhoods" in Chicago. His fights had a larger impact. The passage above shows how his law degree was initially used in courtrooms, where he fought as a civil rights attorney to guarantee that everyone's rights were respected. What his words suggest, here and in other speeches, is that his work in the legislature was inspired by a firm conviction in people's equality, by a profound respect for any form of diversity and by an understanding of fairness as the cancellation of unjustified privileges such as those in the hands of lobbyists.

Obama is skilful in building a public image of himself that appeals to some of America's most deep-rooted convictions, relies on a shared belief in America's superiority, and is based on a Democratic interpretation of what the work of democracy should entail. His rhetorical strategy of drawing *ad hoc* portraits is not limited to his persona. Indeed, the members of Obama's extended family also partake in the narrative edifice that he constructs for obtaining American people's support. The role of Obama's parents and grandparents in shaping his personality has already been recognized. In addition to this, his family members are also talked about as inspiring exemplars of US citizens. In this respect, particular attention is paid to provide "pictures" that call for emotional involvement. A couple of paradigmatic examples are given below.

Growing up, I saw my mother struggle to put herself through school and raise me and my sister on her own. She once had to turn to food stamps, but thanks to student loans, scholarships and a lot of hard work, her kids could attend some of the best schools in the country. I think women like her who work hard and pour everything they've got into their kids should be able to pay the bills and get ahead for a change – that's why I'm running for President.

I saw my grandmother, who helped raise me, work her way up from the secretarial pool to middle management at a bank. But I also saw her hit a glass ceiling, as men no more qualified than she were moved up the corporate ladder ahead of her. I think women like her should be paid fairly and have the same chance to succeed as everyone else – that's why I'm running for President.

I've seen my wife, Michelle, the rock of the Obama family, juggling work and parenting with more skill and grace than anyone I know. But I've seen how it's torn at her. How sometimes, when she's with the girls, she's worrying about work – and when she's at work, she's worrying about the girls. It's a feeling I share every day – especially these days, when I'm away so much, out on the campaign trail. And I think it should be a little easier for parents in this country to raise their kids and do their jobs – that's why I'm running for President. (Obama, September 20, 2008)

This passage focuses on three female figures who have been central in Obama's life: his mother Ann, his grandmother Madelyn and his wife Michelle. All of them are depicted as strong women, capable of coping with the least favorable conditions and able to raise their families with the utmost devotion. Their stories speak of lives of hard work, sacrifice and unflagging love for their children. These women appear as Obama's heroes. Ann struggled to get a degree in anthropology while raising her two kids (Obama and his sister) and providing for their sustenance. Madelyn sacrificed for Obama again and again. She also put all of her efforts into getting a well-paying job but had to face with discrimination. Michelle, "the rock" of the Obamas, finds it hard to compromise between work and family duties. The stories of Ann, Madelyn and Michelle are like the stories of many other American women. This is why they are so significant and this is why Obama relies on them to attract the sympathies of his female electorate. By recounting these stories Obama can demonstrate that he is sensitive to the kind of problems women have to face in their lives and, most importantly, he can promise he will do something to make their lives easier. More generally, these stories are pivotal to the expression of gender equality as a basic right to be promoted and they emphasize the fundamental role of the mother in child-raising. There is, however, another facet of these stories which make them

appealing to a larger portion of Obama's electorate. The stories of Ann, Madelyn and Michelle are also well suited for reaffirming certain deeply rooted beliefs in traditional family roles, which assign to mothers all the duties of child-raising. This kind of message can be expected to please more conservative voters.

Besides being evoked for her efforts in supporting her family, Obama's mother is the protagonist of another tragic story, that which explains her premature death.

If I am President, I will finally fix our broken health care system. This issue is personal for me. My mother died of ovarian cancer at the age of 53, and I'll never forget how she spent the final months of her life lying in a hospital bed, fighting with her insurance company because they claimed that her cancer was a pre-existing condition and didn't want to pay for treatment. If I am President, I will make sure those insurance companies can never do that again. (Obama, October 10, 2008)

This story is told so recurrently in the electoral speeches that people are enticed to associate Obama's mother to the problems of US health care system. Here actually lies the purpose of the story itself. Talking of his mum's fierce struggle with cancer means discussing America's failures in the health care system and calling for immediate reforms. The fact that this issue is so "personal" for Obama, makes his political proposals more credible.

In addition to stories involving Obama and his family, electoral speeches also contain anecdotal narrations about the people Obama met during his campaign. Among these accounts, one of the most significant ones deals with a young girl named Ashley Baia.

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat.

She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley." (Obama, March 18, 2008)

As one of Obama's supporters, Ashley Baia helped organizing his campaign targeting the African-American community. Her story is exemplary for different reasons. It shows how love for one's parents and strong determination can help coping with the most difficult situations. It also shows how important it is to put one's own experience at the service of others. Ashley's story makes her into a source of inspiration for other Americans. Furthermore, it turns her into a model of nurturance, one of the Democratic values that is consistently advocated in Obama's electoral speeches. Through Ashley's story Obama can communicate a meaningful message: caring for

one's parents must be a moral priority for everyone.

In his long journey stretching over a number of distant locations, Obama was never alone. The electoral narrative is dotted by the presence of different people and enlivened by the recount of significant encounters. There are indeed many people who inhabit Obama's speeches. Most of them belong to the present of the election campaign, some others are evoked from Obama's memories of his past experiences. The anecdotal narration reported below is a case in point.

Over the course of this campaign, I've had the opportunity to visit schools and talk to teachers and students; paraprofessionals and support staff; college faculty and employees; public employees, nurses and health care workers all across this country. But so much of what informs my visits comes from an experience I had a few years ago at Dodge Elementary School in Chicago, not far from where you're assembled today.

I asked a young teacher there what she saw as the biggest challenge facing her students. She gave me an answer I had never heard before. She talked about what she called "These Kids Syndrome" – the tendency to explain away the shortcomings and failures of our education system by saying "these kids can't learn" or "these kids don't want to learn" or "these kids are just too far behind." And after a while, "these kids" become somebody else's problem.

And she looked at me and said, "When I hear that term, it drives me crazy. They're not 'these kids.' They're our kids. All of them."

She's absolutely right. These children are our children. Their future is our future. And it's time we understood that their education is our responsibility. (Obama, July 13, 2008)

Obama's narration of his experience at Dodge Elementary School is significant in many respects. First of all, it shows that he is close to American people and that he empathizes with them. Being close for him means talking to people, listening to their stories and sharing his own experience with that of others. This is exactly what he communicates through the story of the young teacher working at a suburban school. The fact that he reports stretches of their conversation and even quotes her words is also relevant. It strengthens the impact of this story and emphasizes how he personally treasures this kind of exchanges. The story is also important for other political reasons. Through it Obama can tell his voters that he is aware of the problems affecting the education system and, most significantly, that he cares for future generations and the quality of their education. Furthermore, by recounting this story, Obama can make a point of people's commitment to solve an American problem together. If American people intend to lead their nation in the right direction, they should not foster divisions between "first class" and "second class" children. As Obama suggests, fixing the education system means fixing it so that everyone can benefit from it. All children should be given the opportunity to realize their dreams and succeed in their lives.

Obama's closeness to the problems affecting ordinary US citizens at a time of impending economic crisis is manifest also in other types of stories that have American people as their protagonists. They are the stories of people who cannot afford the rising costs of life. They are the stories of Americans who risk to lose their house and do not know how to pay for their sicknesses. They are the stories of workers who have lost their jobs, pensions and insurances because the companies for which they have worked all their lives closed down or because their jobs were sent overseas. A representative selection of these accounts is reported below.

There's nothing empty about the call for help that came from *the mother in San Antonio* who saw her mortgage double in two weeks and didn't know where her two-year olds would sleep at night when they were kicked out of their home. (Obama, March 4, 2008, my emphasis)

We're here because of *the young man I met in Youngsville*, North Carolina who almost lost his home because he has three children with cystic fibrosis and couldn't pay their medical bills; who still doesn't have health insurance for himself or his wife and lives in fear that a single illness could cost them everything. (Obama, April 22, 2008, my emphasis)

I saw it [what happens when the local steel mill shuts its doors and moves overseas] during my campaign for the Senate in Illinois when I'd talk to *union guys* who had worked at the local Maytag plant for twenty, thirty years before being laid off at fifty-five years old when it picked up and moved to Mexico; and they had no idea what they're going to do without the paycheck or the pension that they counted on.

One man didn't even know if he'd be able to afford the liver transplant his son needed now that his health care was gone. (Obama, April 14, 2008, my emphasis)

So many working women today are living right on the edge. I *met a woman* a few weeks ago in New Mexico who told me she works two jobs – at a restaurant and a hair salon – but the last time she saw a doctor was ten years ago, because she didn't have insurance, and couldn't afford an appointment. She later said, "This is a pretty hard life. I just want to figure out how we get out of this box." (Obama, July 10, 2008, my emphasis)

Through these and many other similar stories, Obama reinforces a message that is crucial for his campaign: the time has finally come for change and American people desperately look for it. In his speeches Obama strongly attacks the Republicans who have led the country for two consecutive turns. In his words, it is because of their policies that people have become poorer and poorer, while multinationals, big corporations, CEOs, and lobbyists have seen their wealth increase day by day. As Obama says, American people do not expect government to solve all of their problems, but they need a hand from Washington to be able to go on. It is therefore the time for the government to assume its moral responsibilities and take care of its people. The government must reduce the distance to US citizens and be ready and willing to listen to their needs. This is what Obama proposes he will do if elected President of the United States.

4. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the use, function and purpose of story-telling in Obama's electoral speeches. As pointed out in the discussion, Obama employs three different types of stories: about himself, about his family members and, more generally, about American people. The stories which revolve around Obama emphasize the kind of work ethics that led to his success. Additionally, they provide an image of the future president in his role of caring for people and looking after their most basic needs. The second category of stories has other important functions. On the one hand, it shows how and to what extent Obama's own personality was influenced by those of his family members. On the other hand, it establishes fundamental similarities between his family (and hence himself) and American people. The last group of stories focuses on a range of different US citizens who are taken as exemplary individuals (Ashley Baia), as representatives of specific social roles (the teacher), or who just stand for a class of people (a mother, a young man, union guys, a woman). Through this last group of stories Obama can communicate that he is aware of the problems which affect people in the country and that his politics is intended to address them.

In the context of Obama's election campaign speeches, story-telling works at the service of a larger political aim. Obama communicates political ideas via personal stories that speak for them. This is a rhetorical strategy that is not unusual in political discourse and that some scholars have referred to as an instance of "personification" (Capone). Stories "personify" in the sense that they stand for specific political issues. The analysis of Obama's speeches has proved how his oratory also relies on carefully crafted stories to convey a message that is imbued with the same ideals that are at the core of American Democratic thought: community, equality, social responsibility, empathy, fairness and justice.

There is yet another component that makes the use of stories particularly suitable to the final objective of an election campaign. Stories reduce the distance between the presidential candidate and his voters by making the electoral message more "personal." Furthermore, since they appeal to pathos more than to logos, they intrinsically call for engagement.

All of this can explain why Obama did not abstain from telling stories during his first hard fought run for the US presidency. Quite to the opposite, he confidently relied on different types of stories to gain consensus from the American electorate. Stories were vital in shaping his public image as the future president of the United States and they played an important role along the way to his presidency.

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[1] The speeches were downloaded from Obama's website (last accessed on 1/8/2010).

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