The Streets of Laredo: Mercurian Rhetoric and the Obama Campaign

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This essay documents one small but intense episode in the historic presidential election of 2008—the primary campaign waged in Hispanic South Texas between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Told from the perspectives of out-of-state volunteer and rhetorically trained participant-observer, it depicts rhetorical scenes on the ground, partly created by the author, and worked out through embodied, Anglo-Hispano interaction. Beyond documenting the campaign at its grassroots, the essay is also a performative criticism of the coproduced rhetorical dramas, an exercise in rhetorical hermeneutics, and a contribution to interpretive rhetorical theory. It introduces the concept of “Mercurian rhetoric” as a category for mobile border-crossers and translators, and uses it as an interpretive pathway for charting the Obama campaign and resistances to it on the ground. Building from Michael McGee and Thomas Benson, the essay links criticism, fieldwork, and rhetorical production, and makes a case for embodied, neo-sophistic Mercurian rhetoric as practice and ideal.

Keywords: Barack Obama; Hermeneutic Rhetoric; Mercurian Rhetoric; Performative Criticism; 2008 Presidential Election; Sophists; Texas Primary

I lean into the sounds of a grainy live broadcast of an Obama rally from Corpus Christi. A Spanish-language station is airing the event, which I listen to in my car on US 281, 90 miles south of San Antonio. The candidate’s lo-fi voice sounds as though it’s been projected backwards through a megaphone, and the crowd frequently interrupts it with their thunderous, distortion-inducing cheers. He pulls into a familiar section of his speech: “I am running because of what Dr. King called ‘the fierce urgency of now.’ I am running because I do believe there’s such a thing as being
too late. And that hour is almost here.” This hour is just past 5:00 on a Friday in late February, and Barack Obama is winding down his first sweep through Hispanic South Texas. The state’s 2008 Democratic presidential primary has kicked into full gear following last night’s televised debate between Obama and Hillary Clinton. He is in the midst of a presidential run that shows how old-style oratory, amplified through grassroots organization and late modern media, can carry crowds and fuel a campaign. A teacher of rhetoric a thousand miles from home, I feel charged by the moment’s electricity.1

I am an Obama supporter on leave from teaching, setting out on an opportunistic, twelve-day participant-observation of the primary along the border in South Texas. My aim is to document the campaign as it plays itself out through the body of a gringo volunteer from the north working the rhetorical grassroots. I will make notes and write up details of rhetorical interactions and sensations, and afterward try to make sense of it in a way that might interest scholars and students. Both participation and observation are essential to the project. Rhetoric is a productive art, but most of our productions as academic rhetoricians are directed toward other academics or students privileged enough to be enrolled in college classes. It’s not hard to find moods that color facts and suggest that, except as vehicles toward professional advancement, the bulk of our academic publishing is utterly inconsequential. It’s also not hard to find moods where that scholarship seems dull and lifeless, dominated as it is by analysis of disembodied texts and armchair theorizing. I am looking for something different, based on making contact with audiences and interlocutors outside the academy, and feeling the force of rhetoric as an embodied activity manifest in particular cultural scenes. I hope to seize opportunities provided by scholarly turns toward rhetorical bodies and places, and toward fieldwork as a method for rhetorical inquiry. Performing as a member of the campaign, I’ll try to learn something of value to critics, theorists, or other observers of rhetoric.

Heading down the highway toward my onrushing participant observation, I think of myself as doing a kind of Michael McGee–inspired “performative criticism.” In classrooms, public lectures, and writings during the 1990s, McGee called on rhetorical critics to take the role of speakers responding to felt needs of a moment and produce rhetorical performances of their own (“Text, Context”; “Performative Criticism”; “Fragments of Winter”). “Although much of our work takes place in cloisters . . . we are all trained first as performers, speech-makers, and we frequently find occasion to practice that art on subjects that require reflection,” McGee observed (“Performative Criticism” 4). He saw performative criticism as a way to serve both public and scholarly ends. It could “motivate people to social action” (3) and do related political work; but it was also a way to “work out the practical unity of hermeneutics and rhetoric,” an intellectual task that he believed “will not be achieved until we understand the identity (or lived persona) of ‘speakers-who-reflect’ and ‘critics-who-speak’” (2, 3–4). Blending rhetorical action with reflective interpretation, performative criticism was for McGee a social practice that crossed institutional boundaries between gown and town, and intellectual boundaries between rhetoric and hermeneutics.
I am committed to attempting both kinds of crossing, aided by a conceptual category derived from the figure of Hermes, messenger god of the Greeks, patron to both rhetoric and hermeneutics (to which he lent his name), among many other activities. Known for his shrewdness and creativity, Hermes was a trickster god who stole cattle from his older brother Apollo, invented and played musical instruments and athletic games, shepherded souls to the underworld, delivered messages, and intervened in disputes in which he displayed acute rhetorical cunning. He was the god of roads, oratory, thieves, athletes, merchants, undertakers, and shepherds (Leadbetter). Stephen Mailloux leans on Hermes to outline his neo-pragmatist “rhetorical hermeneutics” (Mailloux, Reception Histories 3–4, 8–9, 15, 43), but I am guided more by Yuri Slezkine’s magnificent book, The Jewish Century, which derives a resonant sociological category from the Greek god and his Roman successor: Mercurians, “the descendants—or predecessors—of Hermes (Mercury), the god of all those who did not herd animals, till the soil, or live by the sword; the patron of rule breakers, border crossers, and go-betweens; the protector of people who lived by their wit, craft, and art” (Slezkine 7–8). Slezkine introduces the category of “Mercurians” as a grander cultural frame for discussing Jews as one particularly successful example of “groups of permanent strangers who performed tasks that the natives were unable or unwilling to perform,” and who in agricultural societies were “nonprimary producers specializing in the delivery of goods and services” (the rooted agriculturalists being instead the people of Apollo, who at festival time could let their hair down to become Dionysians) (Slezkine 4, 7, 24). Mercurians have often been “professional cultivators of people [who] use words, concepts, money, emotions, and other intangibles as tools of their trade (whatever the particular trade may be)” (28). In the rhetorical tradition, I would add, the sophists are the paradigmatic Mercurians—men from other cities who taught arts of speech and interpretation for money, and who sometimes inverted local beliefs in ways that crossed symbolic boundaries of common sense and propriety.

The Mercurian frame seems potentially productive for making sense of rhetoric at our juncture of history. Slezkine uses it as an entry point into the observation that the Jews were the first and most successful moderns, because modernity is about all of us becoming Mercurians (or Jews). Our world is one of mobility, cultural and geographical border crossing, flows of information and capital, public performance of heterogeneous identities, and the steady “reading” and interpretation of materially changing environments. Old-school Apollonians, agriculturalists rooted to the land, are an ever-dwindling breed, but they have been supplanted by newer-school Apollonians held in place by institutions, political economies, particularistic identifications, social habits, and other border affirming mechanisms that limit Mercurian fluidities and movement. As part of my performative criticism, I will track Mercurian qualities of the rhetorical landscapes I encounter, charting activities, occupations, spaces, and personae and placing them on a continuum running from mobile to rooted, from border-crossing to border-affirming, from Mercurian to Apollonian. I’ll give the concept an interpretive test-drive as a preliminary step toward a fuller account of Mercurian rhetorics, and a hermeneutic cue for others to run with.
The Mercurian framework is fitting for the candidate himself—born to parents of different races and nationalities, raised in the multicultural crossroads of Honolulu, taking up occupations based on rhetoric and textual interpretation (community organizer, legal scholar, lawmaker), electrifying voters with eloquent speech—and for his itinerant campaign workers and volunteers, including this rhetoric teacher on the move.

Though manifestly illuminated by McGee, Slezkine, and Mailloux, the rhetorical pathway I tread had been elegantly blazed three decades earlier by Tom Benson, as I learn after the fact. In November of 1979, while Iranian students were occupying the American embassy in Tehran and Jean-François Lyotard was announcing the arrival of the postmodern era, Benson flew off to help make five television commercials for a conservative Republican running for Congress in Arizona. A rhetorical critic, filmmaker, and teacher of political communication, Benson was dissatisfied with “armchair examination of texts and situations recorded from a distance,” and wanted to risk “a double investment” of himself, as rhetorical practitioner and academic, to gain access to feelings and experience not available to the “mere observer” (387). The result was a remarkable 30,000-word Quarterly Journal of Speech essay, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” written in narrative, journal-like style, and blending elements of documentary, first-person reflection, and criticism into a striking variation on autoethnography before its time, and a signal example of non-paradigmatic rhetorical criticism. Fighting through ambivalences about aiding the other political side, Benson detailed his on-site rhetorical production work with the film crew, the candidate, and the national consultants who helped engineer the Republican electoral landslide of 1980 and the Reagan revolution that followed. Set relatively early in the cynical political era we still live in, “Cowtown” takes shape in a media environment marked by celluloid film, landline telephones, typewriters, and travelers’ checks. In Texas in 2008, I will negotiate a world of digital technologies, cell phones, laptops, and ATM machines instead, and, unlike Benson, have the opportunity to do rhetorical work for a candidate I support. Like him, I will document, probe, and interpret scenes I take part in through representative vignettes that blend ethnographic, journalistic, and critical impulses. Unlike him, I will be doing my work not with higher-end actors in a campaign, but rather at the frontlines and grassroots.

As I drive down the highway listening in to the raucous rally and stump speech, I don’t yet know if 2008 will be a watershed political year like 1980 was, but I have high hopes that it will be. I have come to this moment after volunteering for the Obama campaign in suburban Boulder County, Colorado, signing on to be a caucus precinct captain in December. After his January 3 Iowa victory, I work up a flyer and knock on Democratic doors in my precinct, informing my neighbors when and where to caucus, and making a pitch for Obama. Amidst record turnout on caucus night, I volunteer to give the two-minute testimonial for Obama to six precincts and six hundred or so citizens gathered in the grade school gymnasium—a crowd that would have erupted wildly for armpit farting noises if they ended with the shout, “Obama!” (My kid tells me afterward I didn’t wait for the applause lines. I say I’ve never had applause lines.) Obama carries my precinct more than two-to-one, and I’m elected a
delegate. Later that night, we learn that Obama has carried Colorado, along with twelve of the other twenty-two Super Tuesday contests. Flush with victory and wondering how the campaign looks elsewhere, I talk with my wife and kids and then e-mail the local Obama staffer I've worked with, offering to help in Texas, and mentioning that I speak some Spanish. A week later, I hear I'll be sent to the border, which offers a demographic antipode to my suburban town: overwhelmingly Hispanic instead of overwhelmingly Anglo, median family income $30,000 instead of $80,000, strong Clinton rather than Obama supporters. I fancy myself a sort of sophist, coming from a different city, hoping to invert local preferences and beliefs through speech, and looking to make sense of the experience with other participants as well as distant observers.

In the two-and-a-half weeks between the Colorado caucuses and my twenty-hour drive south, Obama wins nine of ten contests, and Hillary Clinton is on the ropes. I move between citizen and scholarly selves, making notes for rhetorical appeals and mulling Mercurian elements of the campaign. *Mestizo, hombre de Dios, unificadero, todo y más,* I write out in my journal, fishing for *topoi* that might forge lines of identification among South Texas voters, Obama, and the gringo bearing words on their doorstep—Obama comes from mixed ethnic blood (like all of us, I will add), is a man of God, a unifier, and someone who could accomplish everything Hillary Clinton can and more because he’s a less polarizing figure. On the eve of my departure, the partisan in me feels a visceral thrill in *The New York Times* report that even “after a string of defeats, [Clinton’s] advisers are divided over how to proceed as they head toward what could be her last stands, in Ohio and Texas on March 4” (Nagourney A1). She needs to win both states to stay alive, and is doing so by going on the attack, reinventing herself as a working-class populist, and trying to turn one of Obama’s strengths—his rhetorical abilities—into a weakness. She suggests he is “all hat and no horse,” a Texas variation on her longer contrast between her “solutions” and her opponent’s “speeches.” While both Clinton and Obama are in fact Mercurian characters, she is taking up relatively Apollonian symbolic space, making herself out as a fighter standing her ground for locally identified working-class voters over and against his airy, cosmopolitan word-making. I hope to help push energetically back and be part of the state effort that effectively ends the primary campaign.

Here are a few rhetorical scenes from the journey.

Driving Down, Phoning In

I dial the number driving down US 287, a heavily traveled two-lane highway for commerce (lots of semis), workers (Hispanic guys heading pickups toward the oil fields), and seasonal tourists (Texans traveling north to Colorado), in addition to the ranchers and scattered small-town locals who live here on Colorado’s High Plains. A cold February evening and the sun has set on a place most people traverse only on their way somewhere else. I phone in for a pre-arranged 6:00 conference call with the Deputy Regional Field Director for South Texas and other out-of-state volunteers headed there. One by one, voices come onto the line, all of us routed through Freeconferencecall.com, women and men from Iowa, Oregon, Missouri,
Puerto Rico, Colorado, and New York City. We introduce ourselves and make small talk, and it seems a bit surreal to be in the middle of nowhere on a cold winter evening, talking across all these places as we wait for the Deputy Director to dial in as well. When she does, we are filled in on the scene: 90% of the population speaks Spanish at home; it is a politically active community, and has well-organized local races with signs and high visibility; it is an important delegate-rich region, lots of press in the area, but no strong volunteer base for Obama; Hillary is up by forty points. A moment of silence follows this last disclosure. “Excellent,” I say. “It’s a challenge. Let’s do it.” I look out at no one, into the night, speaking across five time zones. I have absolutely no idea what I’m talking about.

I press on through the panhandle of Oklahoma and into Texas, rolling into Lubbock after midnight to stop for the night. I wake up at 6:00, get coffee and gas at the convenience store, and turn on the radio, hitting “positive, encouraging K-Love” on my first push of the search button. The airwaves are sprinkled plentifully with Christian and Spanish-language stations in a ratio that tips from the former toward the latter as I drive deeper into the state. Dead-flat Panhandle agriculture gives way to West Texas scrubland as I head south and east. The radio keeps me company, and I ride with sounds I don’t usually hear—conservative talk shows, Spanish-language announcers, Christian community stations. I hear news of the free Stereo Jesus concert at the Fountaingate Fellowship, learn that a motorcycle cop and father of four was killed in a crash in Hillary’s Dallas motorcade, and listen to an angry white guy pontificate about the fact that Univisión-sponsored last night’s Democratic debate in Austin. South of San Antonio, I catch a Spanish-language station interviewing George López, the Mexican-American comedian who is traveling with Obama and making a pitch for the candidate before the Corpus Christi rally, which will shortly be broadcast live. López alternates Spanish and English, suggests that “a lot of Latinos support Hillary only because they know the Clinton name,” says that Obama will end the war and “bring our brave guerreros and guerreras home,” and notes that “education is important to young kids of all colors.” An Obama “surrogate” playing the role of translator and cultural interpreter, López is a Mercurian figure, bringing the black English-speaker from Hawaii-via-Chicago into the bilingual brown communities of Hispanic South Texas (see López). López mentions he’s forty-six and father of two kids, a demographic profile he and I share with Obama, a triangulation that strikes me as both strange and revealing—a politics of hope for three guys who came of age amidst the cynicism of the late 1970s.

Breaking Ground

My first morning in South Texas, a motel in McAllen, and I’m grabbing a box of Obama brochures and checking out. After rolling in last evening, I immediately found out that I’d been re-assigned to Laredo, 150 miles up the Rio Grande. I have offered to help locally this morning as the office tries to capitalize on the local excitement from the candidate’s appearance yesterday at the University of Texas, Pan-American—more than six thousand people, outdrawing Hillary, says Joy (the only local volunteer the
out-of-state paid staff has managed to bring on board in the office’s first week), and amounting to the biggest gathering ever down here in the Valley. She also tells me that the Valley has a lot of powerful politicians and rich businessmen, including Alonzo Cantú, a McAllen developer who by November had already bundled more than $640,000 in Hidalgo County donations for Hillary (Mosk). All of the local congressmen and state representatives are supporting Hillary, she goes on, though a staffer adds that they’re working on the mayors. Publicly, Joy says, people feel the need to support the local politicians and businessmen, plus this has been Clinton country since Bill’s presidency, when he established strong connections here.

This morning I am driving to Edcouch, a town of 3,300 twenty-five miles northwest of McAllen, in a poorer, rural area known as the Delta. My instructions are sketchy, but I have a contact number, and the general idea that I’ll be distributing literature at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new market, Mercado Delta. Turning off Congressman Rubén Hinojosa Highway, I pull into the parking lot, and find my contact person, a woman in her twenties who has helped organize the event. “You’re welcome to distribute literature,” she tells me, “but don’t give any to the congressman.” She points toward the big white tent blasting mariachi music, where a man in his sixties is surrounded by a small group of people—Congressman Rubén Hinojosa himself. I say I’ll avoid him, make my way toward the other side of the tent, and pass out four-page glossy literature to a few rows of parents watching the youth band before I feel a tap on my shoulder. Two cops, one telling me it’s a private event, and I can’t pass out literature here. I respond that I thought it was public, and the organizer told me it was OK. Plus, I say, not everyone is for Hillary, and the people have a right to know both sides. He agrees, but still tells me I can’t be there, though it seems his heart’s not in it. I go back to the young organizer, who says she knew this would happen when the Obama people asked if they could come to the event.

I phone into the office for instructions on what to do. As I’m talking on my cell, a guy in his late sixties gets out of his car and, seeing my Obama button, tells me, “I like your guy.” I say thanks and then mention that they won’t let me hand out literature at the event. He says it’s a free country, tells me he grew up in Edcouch but has moved around since, and offers to make me his personal guest. I tell the office I’ll call back later. My new friend, Pablo, tells me he’s an activist and a member of the Brown Berets, the Chicano nationalist organization formed in the late 1960s and still active in pockets of California and along the border. He says he was part of a group that faced down the nativist paramilitary Minutemen when they came down to the Valley. We shift between English and Spanish, sometimes in the same sentence, and walk back toward the tent. The main event organizer, a tall muscular man of about fifty, meets us, and Pablo introduces me as his guest. I agree not to pass out literature, and Pablo leads me on, progressively closer to the congressman, who, it turns out, grew up with Pablo in Edcouch, before the two went their separate ways—Rubén working for his family’s successful food processing company and going into elected office; Pablo working the border as an activist. Pablo takes a phone call from his wife, and tells her he is there with an “Americano,” then apologizes to me for people being “a little nationalistic down here.” Twenty feet from the congressman, women and
men come to greet Pablo, among them the mayor of Edcouch. He speaks with me at length about Obama’s strengths, and, like Pablo, signs on to volunteer for the campaign, firmly and in full sight of Hinojosa and his people. Later, I secure another volunteer commitment from a Yale-educated woman in her twenties, head of a successful mentoring and education agency.

Afterwards, I feel buoyed by the results, and pass contact information back to the office for these three apparent opinion leaders and newly signed Obama volunteers. I also feel like I’ve learned something important about the local patronage and loyalty structure that extends up to the Clintons—Bill being the first president since Eisenhower to visit the Valley, as the congressman skillfully reminds the audience in his speech at the groundbreaking. Outsider Mercurians like me need locally connected Mercurians like Pablo to serve as guides and social entry points if we are to have a chance of reaching the Apollonians rooted here.

**Upriver to Laredo (The Office)**

From the Delta region and the Rio Grande Valley I head to Laredo, stopping along the way to make appeals or drop literature to a trio of occupational Mercurians positioned progressively upriver: physician evangelicals and old friends in Mission who came here to serve the border region; a tattoo artist in Rio Grande City who was first in line for the Edinburgh Obama rally; and a father-son team running an independent convenience store in Roma, who want a stack of brochures to pass out to their customers. Just past sundown on Saturday I pull into Laredo, a sprawling city of 230,000 on a dry, windy plateau where the Rio Grande meets the rolling hills and hot, dry winds of West Texas. On the way into town, just across the river, I see the smoking *maquiladoras* of Nuevo Laredo. As Hillary Clinton will remind the nation in a debate from Ohio a few days later, Laredo is the nation’s busiest inland port of entry, funneling nearly half the nation’s trade with Mexico. Though built upon the commerce of border crossing, the city also trails a long history of political bosses and patronage systems, emplaced structures that, along with the area’s cultural conservatism, limit Mercurian fluidities of choice and identity.

After opening its office here a week ago with four paid staff, the Obama campaign, with help from two full-time out-of-state volunteers, organized an event on Wednesday with surrogate Ted Kennedy. At the end of substantive remarks about the candidate, Kennedy broke into an exuberant but awful rendition of Jorge Negrete’s classic Mexican ballad “Jalisco,” a performance that attracted national media attention, and appeared on YouTube, where it generated online commentary. The day I arrive, two more paid staffers and another out-of-state volunteer come to town, bringing the office to ten, two days before the election. Most have found their ways to Texas through campaign efforts in the Upper Midwest: Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Everyone but me is in their twenties. We are all gringos. Two of us speak passable Spanish.

Early in the week a local guy comes in, a former small-town police chief who now produces television and radio ads, Hispanic like 95% of the city, a self-identified Republican supporting Obama. He comes in with his young kids at lunchtime,
dressed in a suit, saying he has an idea he wants us to forward on for the candidate to use at the start of the next televised debate. He’s been trying to reach the Illinois offices by phone, but no one is responding. At the start of the debate, he tells me, Obama should ask for a moment of silence to remember all those fallen or wounded in the war. It will honor the military, call attention to the national tragedy, and remind people of the candidate’s early stand against the war. The man has entered the office with a flourish, looking around and bemusedly observing, “I’ve never seen so many white people in one place in Laredo. You need more Beaners in here.”

His idea for the debate isn’t forwarded on, nor does the office see large numbers of Hispanic locals spending time within its walls, situated in a small commercial strip in upscale North Laredo. The absence of “Beaners” indexes the office’s disembeddedness from the local culture, which—along with the Clintons’ popularity and suspicions about Obama—will hamstring the effort here. We have a core group of about fifteen local volunteers who frequent the office, numbers tilted toward college students and professionals under fifty, with lawyers well represented. They come into the office to chat, pick up literature to distribute, or make telephone calls (Figure 1). On good evenings the office murmurs in quiet tones of Spanish and English. There are a disproportionate number of locally defined cultural “others”—a pair of African-born women; two sensitive nineteen-year-olds with ambiguous sexual identities; several mixed-ethnicity couples and families. These local Mercurians mingle with us out-of-staters, who trail networks of Obama supporters and staffers scattered widely around the country—people like my friend Carrie in Oakland, who, midweek, recruits California Spanish-speakers to make phone calls for Obama, and who donates frequent flyer miles so one young volunteer can join the effort in Brownsville. Early on, the two New York Jewish guys in the office take to calling the local “H-E-B” supermarkets—a chain begun in the 1930s by Texas über-Baptist Howard Edward Butt—“Hēb.” Some of us out-of-state Gentiles cheerfully follow suit.

Figure 1  Evening in North Laredo Office.
Early Voting Sites

With local races fueling public election energies, all of the main thoroughfares are thick with political signs for heated contests for sheriff, district attorney, and county commissioner, materially unavoidable reminders to anyone who moves about the city. Some signs run ten-to-fifteen-feet long, adorned with candidates’ faces, names, and slogans. I see several pickup trucks sporting six-foot-tall candidate signs that fill their back beds. A bus shellacked “Elect Sheriff Rick Flores” transports early voters to the polling sites, some open just a day or two, and others in operation for the entire ten-day early voting period. The busier of the permanent sites have morphed into festive public places, with small crowds of people holding signs and shouting out their candidate’s name while passing cars periodically honk in approval. Sometimes music plays, and people dance on the sidewalks and into the streets. Several of us out-of-staters paint Obama slogans on our car windows to take part in this politics of visual display, and relish a bit of the election’s public fun.

I am introduced to these scenes at a downtown site, a government building on a heavily traveled but narrow one-way street. I stand on a corner with an Obama sign, next to a small group of county commissioner people, and across the street from slightly larger groups assembled at the corners. At the far end of the block is a table operated by four individuals gathering signatures for local referendums (no-kill dog shelter, property tax relief), spatially and culturally removed from the spectacle of the volunteer and paid sign holders. A popular politics of patronage, bodies, and visual display comes near (but does not touch) an independent-minded politics of citizen-taxpayers, signatures, and paper (compare Marvin and Simonson). I make a pitch for volunteers at both ends of the block. One man tells me he’ll hold an Obama sign, but needs money for beer. Another woman, there with her church group, offers to hold a sign, and expresses an interest in tomorrow night’s Women for Obama gathering. Two of the referendum people sign up. At noon, a television crew from the local Univisión affiliate appears. The reporter asks if I will speak, but I have been instructed that no one in the local office is allowed to talk to the media—those requests go through the central office in Austin. “People have been calling me,” the reporter presses. “When is Obama coming down here?”

My favorite early voting site is Cigarroa High School, a big modern building in working-class South Laredo, Precinct 130. It’s the busiest public site in town—multiple tents, supporters, sign holders, and often local candidates themselves, steady car traffic on a street narrow enough to keep both sides within the same social space, music and occasional dancing, television and radio crews descending periodically to interview supporters and reflect the vernacular public scene back to the city at large (compare Hauser) (Figure 2). I regularly spend time here, passing through the groups, stopping to talk and ask people if they’ve made up their minds yet for the presidential race. They come to recognize my car, a black Honda Fit, and when I drive by some shout out “o-BA-MAA!” which sets a much louder cheer in motion: “HE-LA-REE! HE-LA-REE!” Voters sometimes tell me they won’t make up their minds till the last minute, which local volunteers in the office say is not uncommon in the area.
One county commissioner candidate is a regular at Cigarroa, a lively big-boned woman in her thirties who works in real estate and is usually accompanied by her equally lively, taller, and bigger-boned father in his fifties. My Spanish comes and goes a bit, but when I’m on, I’m not bad within a relatively small universe of discourse about Obama and the campaign. My first day at Cigarroa, I’m on my linguistic game. I come up to Mimi, the county commissioner candidate, who is running on the slogan, “Sí, Se Puede,” which appears on her ubiquitous signs around this part of town. Obama is using the same slogan, I say, but she tells me she had it first. As the people at the next tent point out, though, it was originally César Chávez’s slogan. The candidate says she didn’t know that, and came up with it on her own. We are all having a good time, and the tall, big-boned father looks down on me with a grin, telling me in his nearly unaccented English, “My father used to tell me, ‘Never trust a Mexican smoking a cigar, or a gringo speaking Spanish. They both want something out of you.’” I laugh, and tell him it’s true: I want his vote for Obama.

Door-to-door

Volunteers like me do a lot of door-to-door work in Laredo, and it falls into two overlapping categories—canvassing and persuading, different as both rhetorical micro-interactions and appendages of a broader organizational structure. Canvassing means visiting households targeted by the campaign’s data people in Chicago. We are given printed sheets, with names generated through some mix of political affiliation, demographics, marketing data (e.g., records on what cars people drive), and campaign information (e.g., people who have signed up online). Usually working in pairs, we drive around to find a house, walk up (sometimes sporting navy blue LAREDO FOR OBAMA t-shirts that look a little like POLICE wear), ring the doorbell, and if someone answers, begin talking with a stranger. If all goes well, we find out which
candidate the targeted person supports, how strongly, and how likely he or she is to vote in the election. I begin by giving my name, identifying myself as a volunteer for the Obama campaign, and, if in doubt, asking if they prefer Spanish or English. Not completely comfortable with asking strangers how they intend to vote, I usually finesse my way through subjunctive uncertainty: “I don’t know if you’ve decided who you’re going to vote for yet . . .” I feel a little like the political surveillance police. My partner and I, usually working separate houses individually, fill out our data sheets, then return to the office to enter the information into an internal campaign Web site.

Sunday, my first full day in Laredo, Wade and I are sent out to gather the first canvassing data for the city. Wade is a local volunteer, like me originally from Kansas, a former cop who went to law school and moved down here to work in the public defender’s office. We are two very white guys, six-foot-plus, and square-jawed. If we had white button-down shirts and nametags we could pass as aging Mormons doing mission work. We hit two precincts that include the toney neighborhoods around Laredo Country Club, which house professional types of the sort Obama has been attracting around the country. Targeted households are widely scattered, and at each stop we canvass two to four nontargeted houses as well.

After five hours of work, we find that houses targeted by the micromarketing people in Chicago are actually less likely to yield Obama supporters than the untargeted ones. When we return to the office, I enter our data and send an e-mail summary to the staff, who relay the information back up the chain, the first that the regional directors in Austin or Chicago have heard from Laredo. Over the next three days, I canvass four other precincts around town, two middle-class neighborhoods in east-central Laredo, and two working-class ones near Cigarroa High School. Three produce similar results: random houses yield just as many, if not more, Obama supporters, who I am finding in statistically significant numbers when I cold knock on doors. I compose e-mail summaries for the staff, and enter my data into the Web site. It looks like Chicago’s marketing research for Laredo isn’t so good.

If canvassing is fueled by data generated from afar, face-to-face persuasion is fueled by grassroots rhetorical speech backed by campaign literature. Language matters, and ours is far from ideal. Much of our campaign-generated literature doesn’t fit our needs—appeals to “Latinos” when “Hispanos” is the local term of identification, and Spanish-language material limited to short bilingual glossies that lack informational detail and persuasive substance. Volunteers who don’t speak Spanish can leave literature and bear witness through gesture and presence, both of which can leave impressions, but they are basically mute in their abilities to make a spoken case of any kind. Gringos speaking Spanish, especially those like me who do so less than fluently, face our own difficulties. I have neither the vocabulary nor the ear to make rhetorically subtle or resonant appeals, and I have little of the give-and-take dexterity necessary for a faster-moving or higher-level conversation. If I persuade through my speech (logos), it will be speech that communicates general ideas: Obama is a man of the people (family history, community organizing), more likely to win in November (and so carry through health care reform and withdrawal from Iraq), and possessed of “una pureza” (a kind of purity) that makes him a potentially great leader, I usually
say. When I find declared Obama supporters, I switch from persuasion to education, and tell them that Texas has a distinct system with a primary and a caucus (“the Texas two-step”), and they should both vote and attend their Tuesday night caucus. We don’t educate the Clinton voters we find. (We are a campaign doing battle, not a civics outreach movement.)

Canvassing and persuading represent two different kinds of Mercurian activity. Canvassing is driven by distant micromarketers who generate lists and work with numbers on computer screens. The local volunteer is a conduit for data, gathered by requesting personal information from strangers. The canvassing system is what Harold Innis would call a “space-binding” form of communication, which functions to manipulate populations over geographical distance. Persuading, on the other hand, though aided by centrally produced campaign literature, is essentially a grassroots, face-to-face activity. Like other door-to-door Mercurians (e.g., Mormon missionaries, PIRG volunteers, vacuum cleaner salesmen, swindlers), an out-of-state Obama persuader is a stranger on a doorstep, speaking across the spatial and symbolic boundaries dividing the inside and outside of someone’s home. Insofar as that encounter displays norms of civility, which they almost always do, persuading is a kind of “time-binding” activity that reproduces parameters of moral community. Canvassing and persuading coexist in some tension. The one is tied to the logics of social marketing and driven by numbers and evanescent computer mediated activities; the other is embedded in the norms of face-to-face interaction, and driven by singular rhetorical bodies and the material texts they leave behind. Though canvassing takes place through words, texts, and numbers, and is the object of exquisite hermeneutical determinations and arguments by the pollsters and social marketers in Chicago, it is less Mercurian than persuading from the standpoint of a volunteer in the field: The rhetorical pathways of canvassing are structured by predetermined survey questions, not the possibilities of the liminal moment, and live speech between strangers.

In my sophistic door-to-door life, trying to invert local preferences for Clinton, I speak with all sorts of people: churchgoers, gardeners, teachers, mechanics, lawyers, salespeople, health care workers, retirees, the unemployed, sign holders, petitioners, convenience store clerks, young mothers, teenagers, grandparents, Mexicans who can’t vote, Americans who already have, three white people, wealthy parents with daughters at my university, a memorably engaging custodian, and a guy who gives me ideas to pimp my ride. My interlocutors are almost universally polite, especially in the working-class neighborhoods, and I am frequently answered with “yes sir” and “no sir.” Some Clinton supporters are hesitant to tell me so, but more of them are forthcoming. With a few exceptions, even the brush-offs are pleasant (as, for instance, the two guys working on a car who tell me, “We can’t vote. We’re felons”). Out-of-state personalities (ethê) and styles coded locally as impolite face additional obstacles. On at least one occasion, a volunteer’s New York Jewish style (mild by my sensibilities), offends a local, English-speaking professional woman. On the other hand, I get the sense that a baby-faced 25-year-old construction worker from Missouri communicates earnestness of character, even if he can’t speak Spanish. A bear of a man, he
might also unwittingly intimidate with his looming size at the front door, especially with the blue t-shirt on.

Determining how our appeals activate audience emotions is difficult and speculative, but it is fair to say that those *pathé* are refracted through the more or less distinct images of Obama that have already been formed. Those images become particularly evident to me on Wednesday morning, as I stand holding an Obama sign along a busy traffic artery as it draws toward Central Laredo from the south. A man in a pickup truck swings over quickly and pulls up onto the wide sidewalk. He motions me over, visibly agitated: “Why won’t your candidate pledge to our flag?” He is about my age, a bilingual native English speaker, strong with the look of a guy who labors with his body. He goes on to talk to me about being an American, and from there to Obama being a Muslim. I speak back energetically, tell him those are lies circulated on the Internet, give him a copy of the fact sheet we have copied to try to combat those rumors (as yet untranslated into Spanish). “I was for him,” the man tells me, with a sense of betrayal in his voice, “and so were a lot of other people I know.” But then they found out that Obama was Muslim, and that he wouldn’t salute the flag, and other people—the man indicates that he doesn’t believe this—pointed out that the Antichrist was prophesied to be black and... We talk back and forth for fifteen minutes. I suggest that Clinton supporters are circulating the rumors, and tell the man what happened to me in Edcouch. I say it’s powerful local people, elected congressmen and other officials, who want Hillary to win, and whose people are spreading lies to help deliver the vote. We exchange names and phone numbers, and he drives off, probably not convinced. I call the office immediately, recount the story, and say that we are losing votes because of the rumors. We need George López or another Hispanic surrogate to visit and appear on local media outlets to combat them. The number two person in the office kicks the information up the chain. No surrogate will come.

Thursday night I return from a day of persuading to learn that local and out-of-state volunteers will be pulled from the field and used to make phone calls to people outside Laredo. This comes at the end of yet another intense day, a week now since I set off from Colorado and plunged full-bore into sixteen-hour days of movement, rhetorical talk, and focused effort for the campaign—along with field notes, observations, and professorial obligations I can’t leave behind, including today’s defense of a master’s prospectus, which I take part in by cell phone conference call in my car in a parking lot. That morning in my motel room, I had found myself in tears in the shower, a moment that blended physical taxation with a feeling of gratitude for the effort I saw people around me giving, mixed with an anticipatory explosion of relief for something I couldn’t allow myself to say—that Obama, up in the polls in Texas, would win on Tuesday. Before setting out for the morning, I had typed in my journal, with blind, comma-free exuberance born of the moment, “It feels like we’re smoking down here at least with the people we’re targeting and that I’m reaching in face-to-face conversation. Am hopeful of dispersals of receivers and them in turn becoming conversationalists (conversationalistas) who spread the word around their neighborhood.” Caught up in one small but intense corner of the campaign, I
am invested in face-to-face neighborhood work and convinced that we can win votes, bring people to the caucuses, and do our part to hold back the tide of Clinton enough so that Obama can carry the state with big victories in Houston, Austin, and Dallas.

Face-to-face organization has never been a priority for the lead person in the office, which has been a point of contention between him and the number two person, and the two are arguing about it on Thursday when I come back from the field. The lead says he wants any neighborhood supporters we find to come into the office and make phone calls elsewhere, not spend their time going door to door or organizing. The office has had very little luck getting locals to phone banks, however, and calls by out-of-state volunteers have proved unsuccessful—dialed as they are from unfamiliar area codes, and emanating from non-Spanish speakers (at once too Mercurian and not Mercurian enough). Echoing the sentiments of the number two person, I tell the office lead that we need to think about the caucuses, where we can pick up a few delegates, and where precinct organization is crucial, and that the volunteers I’m recruiting at the community college in South Laredo aren’t going to drive all the way up to North Laredo to make phone calls for the campaign. He tells me that we need to trust the data guys in Chicago, who have gotten the campaign this far, and who are telling us that our time is better spent making phone calls to outlying areas, and not knocking on doors and organizing for caucuses in South Laredo. I manage to convince him to let me stay in the field, but office energies get channeled elsewhere.

Up the chain of command in Austin and Chicago, Laredo has been cut loose. There will be no candidate visit—Obama will make a second trip to the Lower Rio Grande Valley instead. There will be no more surrogate visits—no George López to use his celebrity status as an entry point to local media outlets, where he might make statements about Obama’s religion and strengths, at far less opportunity cost to the campaign than a visit by the candidate himself. And there will be no concerted citywide effort to organize for the caucuses or do other face-to-face work, though a few precincts around town do get attention. A campaign that has attracted me partly for its grassroots mobilization and inclusive fifty-state impulses doesn’t seem to be following through with them here. “In a lot of ways, this is a traditional campaign for a nontraditional candidate,” the office lead tells me. In that scheme, Chicago and Austin place Laredo low on the priority list, and focus elsewhere in the state instead—Austin, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and the Rio Grande Valley. We get another carload of plastic signs, glossy literature, and color doorknob reminders—the most material that some of the paid staff see at any of their various state efforts—but we don’t rank high enough to warrant high-level visits that would potentially aid the local cause considerably. The Clintons had showed they cared by visiting town personally, testifying through bodily presence. Obama has not—and locals could fill in the rest of that enthymeme.

Mass Communication (Hockey Night in Laredo)

From the beginning, Hillary Clinton has enjoyed advantages among Laredo’s media of mass communication. The city’s main newspaper, the English-language Laredo
Times, has supported her strongly during the campaign, tracking and amplifying the Clintons’ run-up to the election. In September, the newspaper prominently reported Bill Clinton’s speech and private fundraiser (said later to have raised over $200,000), where he was introduced by Representative Henry Cuellar, an ambitious first-term congressman who had been among Hillary Clinton’s early endorsers, and given the keys to the city by Mayor Raúl Salinas. On February 21, Salinas and Cuellar hosted Hillary Clinton on the steps of City Hall, a day after Ted Kennedy’s appearance in town. Her speech—a 5:45-minute video of which was posted three days later on YouTube, complete with a fade-out to Dolly Parton’s working-class country anthem “9-to-5” (“Hillary Clinton”)—was magnified considerably in two highly favorable one-thousand-word stories in the newspaper, each marked by heroic leads that channeled the mythos of Catholicism and American nationalism. Four days later, the Times published a strongly worded endorsement of Clinton, which portrayed Obama as a candidate with “wonderful ideas for ... a land where milk and honey flow for us all” and explaining support for him in terms of Americans being “a hopeful people who love celebrities.” The paper will go on to suppress news that might help Obama, in particular his visit to the border four days before the election, two hundred miles south in Brownsville, at a time when undecided voters were still making up their minds. El Mañana, a Spanish-language daily published in Mexico but also distributed in Laredo, will run a story of the Brownsville visit, though framed by a large and unflattering photo of the candidate posed to take a bite of “un super taco,” and a second, YouTube-derived image of Obama’s face superimposed cartoon-like on the sombrero-wearing body of Mexican popular culture icon Pedro Infante.

The Laredo Times does cover visits by Obama surrogates Kennedy and Federico Peña, which take part a day on either side of Hillary Clinton’s rally, but those stories include a number of unfavorable characterizations of the candidate and campaign, prominently featuring attacks or local suspicions about Obama’s personal identity, his “empty rhetoric,” and the belief that one might be “betraying the Clinton family by favoring the Illinois senator over Senator Hillary Clinton” (Aguilar, “Peña,” “Sen. Kennedy”). The newspaper portrays Obama as the Mercurian outsider—whose strange identity and ways with rhetoric make him someone to be distrusted, if not actively shunned. Clinton, by contrast, is given a kind of Apollonian symbolic space, a relative insider enmeshed in the region and supported by locals. Hillary the white privileged-class Wellesley graduate and geographical-political itinerant never shines through. In short, local newspaper coverage adds to Clinton’s existing advantages in image and organization.

Beyond the newspapers, paid time is available on the airwaves, and while I work Laredo on the ground, both campaigns run frequent ads. I monitor the Spanish-language radio stations when I drive around town, and hear both candidates’ spots. Obama’s blend clips of the candidate’s oratory with the voice of a young Spanish-speaking man repeating the line, “Me está hablando a mí [He is speaking to me].” The young man offers brief characterizations of Obama’s life (his parents weren’t rich, he won a scholarship to Harvard, then worked with churches and the less fortunate), mentions the candidate’s commitment to college opportunities and
health care, and says he is talking to his family and friends (because politics isn’t just for those who like to fight, but for those who want a better future). Clinton’s ads, meanwhile, are testimonials from Congressman Henry Cuellar, former Texas Secretary of State, longtime state representative, the first Laredoan to serve in the US House of Representatives in 20 years, the son of migrant workers who has made good—and who (unlike Federico Peña) is a high-achieving local who has remained in the region. Cuellar addresses his audience as fellow Laredoans, reminds them of the Clintons’ history in the area, urges them to turn out and vote for Hillary, and provides an 800 number for voters to call for free transportation to the polls and caucuses. The anonymous young man with an aversion to fighting who testifies that Obama is speaking to him isn’t going to win that battle, and the clips of soaring oratory don’t countermand the perception that Obama is all pretty talk.

Meanwhile, the three public spaces in town where Obama might hold a relative communicative advantage—campuses of a large state university and two branches of a local community college—present obstacles of their own. Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) is an early voting site, but allows no campaigners on its sprawling green campus, disallowing even student distribution of literature, so the campaign has no way to reach large cross-sections of students. The head of the College Democrats on campus, a Clinton supporter among those quoted in the Laredo Times story on her rally, isn’t about to activate his network for Obama. Laredo Community College has small public speech zones available to those who secure a permit, though on the south campus near Cigarroa the zone is located in a place that sees relatively little foot traffic. Community college students are often receptive, though hectic work-school schedules make organization and volunteer work difficult, and lessen the value of the schools’ spatial media of public communication.

In this context, mass-public respite comes from an unexpected source—the Laredo Bucks hockey club. Seeing the number of cars and people at the shiny Laredo Entertainment Center arena, I call to ask if we can pass out literature before an upcoming game. The arena official says we cannot, but suggests that I call the hockey club directly, since it controls what goes on inside the arena on game nights. I leave a message, and 10 minutes later the club’s Corporate Partnership Representative gets back to me. We can host an Obama night at the Saturday game, he tells me, and join Texas A&M International. (chief sponsor and source of car flags to be distributed at the door) for what would also be the Bucks’ Armed Services Night, where members of the military, police, firefighters, and Border Patrol will be honored. For $1,500, we can be the third sponsor, set up a table, and hand out literature to the 5,000 or so people who will pass through the turnstiles for the game against the team’s South Texas rivals, the Corpus Christi Rayz. I pitch the idea to the office director, who runs it up to the regional director, who gets back to say we can do it, but only as an operation paid for and organized by volunteers. Deeper-pocketed out-of-state volunteers kick in, I get a commitment from an Obama-supporting friend elsewhere, and we manage to cover the cost.

Here, the logics of capitalism and content-neutral liberalism give the campaign public access not available through local newspapers, social networks, or other local
media of mass communication. In the case of the Bucks, it is Mercurians who have made space for us—the corporate advertising department of a capitalist enterprise that has brought ice and Canadians to Laredo and is run largely by out-of-towners. Markets, money, and marketing are Mercurian entities of their own sorts (Hermes is god of them, too). Though unequally distributed, money is a border-crossing medium, stoked by open markets, and affording opportunities to those with sufficient capital to take part. The hockey club operates in this world. In contrast, local news and opinion structures are controlled by counter-Mercurian forces—rooted belief, patronage, and entrenched machine politics, all of which are fully mobilized for Hillary Clinton. Tuned to different communicative wavelengths, the Laredo Bucks come through.

The game turns out to be one of the highlights of the local campaign. I put together a flyer for it, modeled on the one I passed out to my neighbors in Colorado. A one-page, do-it-yourself-style “Laredo for Obama,” printed on canary yellow paper at OfficeMax, the flyer aims to rebut the Muslim and un-American rumors and present a populist, inclusive Obama who might appeal to the people of Laredo (Appendix A). Local and out-of-state volunteers work the event, passing out the Obama flyers as ticket holders slowly emerge from the metal detectors, turnstiles, and State U. window-flag-handoff that takes place in front of them. The flyer looks like the next giveaway, and it is in people’s hands before they know it, typically accompanied by “Laredo for Obama,” “Thank you,” and “Enjoy the game.” Our table is located next to the beer concession and across the concourse from the Border Patrol display (where it gets less traffic than the former, but well more than the latter). Brady, the Missouri construction worker, who is also a talented artist, has spray-painted two striking “Laredo Por Obama” banners featuring silhouettes of the candidate. They hang on either end of three of the campaign’s red and blue “HOPE” posters with images of the candidate looking visionary (Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image-url) Local and Out-Of-State Volunteers Work the Hockey Game.
Depending on the beholder’s eye, it either looks really cool, or calls up memories of some vaguely Communist cult of personality. As supporters and undecided voters stop by for stickers and literature, local volunteers remind them to vote and caucus. A few Clinton voters stop by as well, including one college student apparently emboldened by beer, who testifies that Obama is really an anti-American Muslim. Late in the game, we hear that people are placing Clinton flyers on cars outside, which we know is against arena rules. I casually pass the information on to our amiable and supportive corporate sales representative, who in turn calls arena security. Legitimate force is on our side tonight, activated through a rhetorical opportunity structure mediated by corporate sales, and materializing itself in the bodies of arena security guards running off the transgressors. The counter-propaganda is nipped in the bud.

**Flyering Bill Clinton**

Tables turn two days later. Election Eve, and polls show Obama up slightly in Texas, but Hillary up more in Ohio. Bill Clinton comes to town, midway into a stone-skipping two-day “Solutions for America” tour that takes him through eleven Texas cities, including six along the border from Brownsville to El Paso. The trip will effectively finish the job of rolling up the region for Team Clinton, aided by Bill’s automated “robo-call” that goes out to registered Democrats rallying them to vote—and caucus—for Hillary on Tuesday. The emotional intensity of the race is coming to a head, and the Clinton campaign is increasingly drawing attention to the caucuses, cutting into any gains Obama caucus organizers had made before then. In the Valley, Congressman Hinojosa’s daughter introduces Bill’s Brownsville appearance with a fiery call to action: “This is definitely not the end!... Do not allow those other candidate’s people to take over those caucuses!” (Brezosky). In all the midsized and smaller cities on Bill’s route, local media announce the former president’s stops, report them afterward, and continue the job of adding advantage to preexisting advantage. The Obama campaign in Laredo has nothing remotely comparable. No surrogate. No rallies. No organized larger-scale excitement. In that context, someone decides the office should flyer the Clinton event. There is talk that undecided voters might attend, curious to see the former president. There is also talk of wanting to remind people that the Obama campaign is alive in the area.

Four volunteers set out to translate the hockey flyer and work up a flipside rebutting the Muslim rumors and providing thumbnail synopses of Obama’s policy stands on select issues (Appendix B). We are two locals and two out-of-staters, two Hispanics and two Anglos, two women and two men, two younger and two older, two Laredoans better with spoken Spanish, two out-of-staters better with written. In a Mercurian collaboration under severe deadline pressure, we produce what is probably the single most useful piece of literature distributed in Laredo. The production would be easy to idealize, and to take as emblematic of the promise of the Obama campaign. Counterbalancing that idealization are the facts that (a) we are composing the flyer a day before the election, and (b) most of those who receive it are committed Clinton
voters, meaning that (c) it is an environmentally unfriendly and late-arriving rhetorical intervention, unlikely to win votes. But perhaps its significance lies closer at hand, among those taking part in making it.

We pile into four cars and descend on the Casa Blanca Convention Center, an Elks Club–like structure suitable for the one thousand people the event has drawn. Passing Secret Service agents dressed like Texas Department of Transportation workers (safety vests and guns), we drive around back and fan out like cockroaches across the grass parking lot. I am near the front of the group, and a television cameraman finds me and takes a close-up shot of my window work. He asks me to stand next to a car with a Hillary poster in its window so he can get the contrast. He is from California and part of a national NBC crew, and we engage in small talk about the howling north winds that have been blowing sand in our ears all day. He gets his shot, and I look up in the camera and say that it’s a great day for the democracy, with two voices at the same public event. The cameraman then goes over to shoot a younger, much better-looking, female volunteer for a similar contrast shot. Meanwhile I run into two twenty-something guys in khakis and pressed white Oxford shirts. Hillary people, I instantly recognize. I introduce myself and shake their hands and then repeat the line that just came to me: “A great day for the democracy, eh boys? Two voices in the same place.” I say it with some pleasure, then move on till I meet two local cops. They stop me and place a call to someone who apparently gives us the go-ahead to continue the event. The eight of us (seven guys and one woman) finish putting flyers on every car in the lot, save the black Suburbans and Texas State Trooper cars lined up by the side of the building. We pile back into our cars, laughing like hyenas, charged with some kind of adolescent thrill. Rhetorical bodies on the move.

**Tuesday Night Caucuses (Cigarroa Revisited)**

If it did anything, flyering the Clinton event on election eve probably backfired, irritating the undecided voters and focusing the energies of the true believers. Fun-spirited guerrilla warfare from one perspective, it no doubt seemed juvenile, classless, and inappropriate from another. The next day, we get smoked in South Laredo, as we do all along the border. I spend the morning putting up Obama signs at Laredo polling stations, the afternoon working the Laredo Community College south campus, making a last pitch for the evening’s caucuses that are set to begin after the polls close at 7:00. I am stationed that evening as an observer at Cigarroa. I get to the school about 5:30, greet a few acquaintances, and assume a spot with my sign on the sidewalk near the gate through which cars drive on their way to vote. A few jeers go up, and then a strong chant beside me, “He-la-ree, He-la-ree.” Someone yells at me to dance, a challenge to the gringo, which carries none of the playfulness heard in the banter earlier in the week. It’s a symbolic line in the sand, and tonight I’m not crossing.

Nearing 6:30, half an hour before the polls close, I make my way back to my car to leave my sign and pick up materials for the caucuses. As I pass by a small group of teenage boys, one speaks up: “Obama, is that like Osama?” Others chime in, “We need an American president,” “He’s going to help his own people,” and “Obama’s
a fag.’’ I’m sleep-deprived and in no mood, and I cut back. ‘‘Where I grew up, there are rednecks who might think ‘Garcia’s’ a funny name,’’ I say, ‘‘What would you think of that? And if you’re going to talk about somebody, at least get your facts right. He’s not a Muslim, and he is an American.’’ It’s lame, and maybe misunderstood, but it’s the best I can do at the moment. Elsewhere around town, out-of-state Clinton volunteers are passing out photocopies of a letter written in a child’s hand, claiming that ‘‘Senator Barack Hussin [sic] Obama said, he does not say The Pledge of Allegiance [sic], because of his religion.’’ I push on and run into three men in their early twenties holding up hand-painted Obama signs to the cars driving by. I met one at the community college a couple hours ago, when he showed me his car decorated with Obama posters, and told me what a big fan he is. They are two students and a social worker, maybe gay, ‘‘fags’’ like Obama himself in the symbolic world of the teenager a few yards away.

A half hour later I am talking with the three young Obama men, who have taken up a place in line outside the high school, waiting to enter for the caucuses. I have already introduced myself, as an observer and Obama volunteer, to the caucus organizer, and then a second time when an important-looking man in his sixties joins the organizer and a woman standing together outside the line, which has by now grown to more than a hundred. The important-looking man stands tall by local standards, has a shock of gray hair, a barrel chest, and, I soon learn, a big baritone voice. When I introduce myself to him, he looks me in the eye and says, ‘‘I know who you are. You don’t look like us.’’ He tells me about his service in the military as a lawyer, and when I start to respond, asks accusingly if I am a conscientious objector. Now, twenty minutes later, I am standing with the young men, and the doors for voting have been locked for ten minutes. The Obama boys ask if they can pass out stickers now, and I say that they can. I have read the caucus rules, and understand that once the doors for voting are locked, buttons and stickers can come out. The three boys glide up through the line, quietly asking if anyone would like an Obama sticker, which no one does. A few people respond with shouts of ‘‘Obama?!!’’ that blend disbelief, derision, and humor. Suddenly, the booming baritone sweeps down upon us. ‘‘I will have you arrested. You cannot campaign while voters are still inside.’’ The line of caucus-goers visibly recoils. The baritone is looking at me and repeats that he will have me arrested. Someone in line defends me by saying I wasn’t passing stickers out, but to my accuser I am the liberal gringo agitator behind this symbolic trespass. I tell him that once the doors are locked, stickers are allowed—how could one influence voters behind locked doors? I have read the rules, and feel sure I am right. The baritone apparently feels sure he is right, too, but when he fumbles through a copy of the caucus regulations, he can’t put his finger on anything that would prove me wrong. He booms that he will report the illegal event, and gets on his cell phone, saying something I can’t hear. I tell the boys not to be intimidated, that they are within their rights, but we all agree it’s probably best to knock off the sticker patrol.

Cell phones take over at that point, and the Cigarroa incident gets reported to both campaigns, who make it part of their election night spin for the broadcast journalists. I call back to the office to report intimidation of Obama voters, and then call
the caucus hotline number in Austin, where attorneys are present for the evening, and phones are ringing off the hook. The hotline tells me to report the incident to the election judge inside, which I do, and she in turn conveys sympathetic disbelief and suggests that I call the legal staff of the Webb County Democratic Party. She doesn’t have the number, but says the important-looking man should. With a mix of magnanimity and arrogance, the man gives me the name and number of the lawyer. He and I exchange full names, and he gives me his card, which identifies him as a member of the Laredo School District Board of Directors. I call the number he gave me and reach the lawyer, and I begin explaining the situation at Cigarroa. I tell her the intimidator’s name. She cuts me off—“I know what you’re doing down there. You’re playing dirty”—and she hangs up. I call the Austin hotline a second time, giving the names of both people. Later that evening, during the caucuses, I see the baritone take a call in the gym, and make eye contact with me in the bleachers. He quickly leaves the building. I assume my second call to Austin has set other communications in motion.

Before departing, however, the baritone presides over the start of the caucus. Like many other caucuses around the country, the scene is chaotic. The doors remain locked for more than an hour before the two hundred or so people remaining in line are let into the gymnasium. Clinton and Obama supporters sit at opposite ends of the bleachers, the former group dwarfing our section of twenty. The baritone—who, we learn later, lives outside the precinct and has no legitimate standing in the caucus—takes control of the meeting, unwinds a civic encomium to the moment at hand, and says a few official-sounding things that can’t quite be heard at the Obama end of the bleachers before relinquishing the floor to the mild-mannered man officially in charge. (I’m beginning to wonder if he is the cigar-smoking Mexican playing opposite my Spanish-speaking gringo in the cast of questionable characters.) Confusion reigns briefly before two tables appear, one for each candidate’s supporters to sign their names to the pledge sheets. The Obama group does its work quickly (they will be outnumbered in signatures 166 to 20), and then sit around, not sure what to do next. The local precinct captain I recruited hasn’t shown up for the caucus, so I help organize the process, figuring from the numbers there might be two Obama delegates awarded. Four people volunteer, and three of them stand in turn to speak—a health-and-supplement distributor in his late thirties, a goatee-and-pony-tailed veteran about ten years younger, and a twenty-year-old college student. All are eloquent, and I get the chills as I listen. The veteran speaks about loss of life in Iraq, wrongdoing by the Bush administration, and the need to make a new start. The fourth volunteer, a woman in her early twenties, says a couple words quietly from her seat. She is perhaps shy or intimidated by the confident displays of the men. Ernesto and Julio, the veteran and the student, are voted first and second.

Julio offers to stay with me to observe the counting of signatures. The crowd has dwindled to about eight, and the organizers are ready to certify the results. Taking up a politics of fair procedure against a politics of partisanship, I point out that the names have not been checked against registration and voting records, which needs to be done before results can be certified. Wearing their Hillary buttons, the
mild-mannered man and the woman assisting him begin checking the names, until we are chased off by school custodians trying to get their cleaning done, and the woman says we can finish our business at her house. We set off into the night, far outside the precinct, and settle into her dining room, where she offers us all sodas, and the two caucus officials check names against rolls, observed by Julio and me and a Clinton supporter from the precinct. Hillary voters are dropping like flies, and reach twenty-six disqualified for being out of the precinct or unregistered. If we can hold onto our twenty, we’ll get one, maybe even two, more delegates from the precinct. It’s close to midnight, and the networks have declared Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas for Hillary. Seized by the microdrama I’ve had a hand in constructing, I hope we might eke out a small victory at Cigarroa.

We fall one vote short. Two Obama signers are disqualified. I immediately think of a guy I saw outside the high school, a solid Obama supporter who spent time in the office, but who didn’t stay around to caucus. I ask to look at the Clinton sheets, and find two people who have failed to write the names of their preferred candidate. I point this out and briefly press the case, but then I back down, giving in to goodwill that has mostly marked the counting. We agree on the final totals and shake hands. The Clinton observer pledges to support Obama in November if he wins the nomination. I say the same about Clinton, though I don’t feel it at this moment. I pull out of the driveway wondering if I have made the right decision. Should I have pressed to get one more delegate for the county convention, winning a spot for the third eloquent citizen who stood up in the grandstands? I feel utterly defeated.

The night ends for me early the next morning, when I help close down the Laredo bar hosting the Laredo for Obama election returns party. By the time I arrive, most of the Obama supporters are long gone, though a core group of about a dozen remains, outnumbered by forty or so regular patrons there. I am spent and despondent. The adrenaline rush is over. I order a beer at the bar, and look back toward CNN, muted on the wide screen. The Texas numbers flash up, and a drunk kid standing next me to starts chanting “He-la-ree, He-la-ree.” I snap that nominating her means November defeat for Democrats. He tells me he doesn’t vote and doesn’t really care.

Hillary Clinton carries the Webb County primary vote, 77% to 21%. Final caucus numbers will take more time to determine.

Heading Home

I pull myself out of bed the next morning, type up and e-mail a report about what I witnessed at Cigarroa, pack, and check out of the extended-stay motel that’s been my home for eleven nights. I drive to the office to say my good-byes, passing rows upon rows of plastic Obama and Clinton yard signs, detritus of the national campaign littering the landscape of Laredo. I find the place nearly cleared out. The office lead and another staffer have already moved on by the time I get there, off to work Mississippi and put Laredo behind them. A few volunteers and staffers finish the job of cleaning up and linger together a while longer, out-of-staters and a couple of the core locals. The Obama office is about to disappear as quickly as it materialized, two-and-a-half
weeks ago. The Mercurians are dispersing, paid and volunteer alike, headed down the road to the next campaign stop or, like me, returning home. We take a photograph in the parking lot to preserve the vanishing moment, and I walk off toward my car, where I run into Wade.

“It looks like we’re going to more than make up at the caucuses the number of delegates lost in the primary,” he tells me.

“You mean we won Texas?” I answer, in some disbelief.

“Yeah, if the numbers hold, we won Texas,” he says.

The news gives me an unexpected boost, and I figure the Obama campaign will start claiming victory—or at least pointing out the facts of the case—in the next news cycles, thereby altering the dominant story line of a big-state Hillary sweep. They do not. The news media have reported that Clinton has won Ohio, Texas, and Rhode Island, and in the process saved her campaign. In fact, Texas will turn out to be an overall victory for Obama, who garners more delegates from the state (ninety-nine to ninety-four, or 51.3% to 48.7%), numbers that can be projected from precinct reports that come in over the next few days. But another story has already been told—that will stick for the duration of the primary campaign—and Clinton has the momentum and popular legitimation to continue her fight. The primary battle has been prolonged at least six more weeks, through Pennsylvania. A landslide along the border has carried the primary for Clinton, and that’s the only part of the Texas Two-Step that matters in the media.

I set off toward home with half a bag of Texas grapefruits and an unused 8’-by-4’ Obama barn sign rolled into the back seat of my car, head upriver to Del Río, and then turn north, passing through my last Border Patrol check point. The campaign has come to possess me physically, and it will take a week before I start to shake loose from it. The drive back brings spontaneous convulsions of emotion and tears, accumulated pathé leaching their way out, sometimes violently. The image of people standing up at the caucuses initially catalyzes the reaction, which is powered by a storehouse of absorbed tensions from conversations with skeptical strangers, capped by the conflicts of election night. The leaching continues through the first full tellings of the week’s tale, behind the wheel as I drive back home. In Colorado, I dream Laredo for a week, lying in bed in some quarter-awake consciousness, making appeals, desperate at times, trying to reach someone not quite reachable, hoping to win another vote.

Driving back, I turn over the campaign compulsively in my head. I feel certain we left votes on the table, and believe mistakes were made on the ground in Laredo. Disappointment fuels a critical edge in me further honed by graduate school and a professor’s life (cf. Pelias). I make notes at the wheel before pulling in for the night in San Angelo, where a cold north wind signals my impending return to late winter. At dinner, I phone the Laredo office lead, tell him I was surprised to find he’d already left by the time I rolled in at 10:30, and ask if he’d be interested in some feedback about what I saw in the office during my time there. A solid young man interested in success and better performance, he says that he would. Between intermittent periods of blowing snow the next day, I make notes at the wheel for memos to the office lead and to the regional and state directors of the Texas campaign. Somewhere
in my head, I see myself playing the role of Norman Clark’s “critical servant,” weighing in with feedback to a community I identify with. With a rerun Florida primary still possible, and Puerto Rico on the horizon, the campaign needs to figure a better way to reach Hispanic and Latino voters. It needs to find better ways to cross cultural boundaries.

I write and send the memos immediately after returning home, the teacher in me coming out full force in what I see as tough-love feedback to the kid who ran the office, and a view from the trenches for the higher-ups. I tell them among other things that the battle was lost when they sent so many gringos down to the border, outsiders who spoke no Spanish and were unfamiliar with the host culture. I recount to the higher-ups my perception of office leadership, the need for a surrogate to help combat the Muslim rumors, and the importance of maintaining strong community-level work in difficult communities to bolster the work done through mass media. I figure it’ll be read by no one, but a week later I get a call from the deputy regional director, thanking me for the feedback, saying she agrees with most of my points, and asking if I’d like to volunteer in Puerto Rico, where she and the regional director are headed next. I find myself hoping they do better next time with the Latino voters.

In the other memo, to the lead staffer in Laredo, I write that I think the office would’ve benefited from more coordination among paid staff and full-time volunteers, more open communication, and more engagement with the local culture. I also call into question his commitment to Laredo, as evidenced by the way he skipped out early the day after the election, when local and out-of-state volunteers were stopping by, and a television news crew appeared to inquire about intimidation at the caucuses. I try to be fair, and I include observations about his strengths, but the memo hurts his feelings, as I learn from follow-up e-mails. He feels that I have criticized his character, and though I tell him my comments only reflected his performance in one setting, it doesn’t seem to help much. Looking back on the memo now, I can see why he felt this way. Like the Laredo campaign itself, both memos were intense. My critical self took over in the aftermath of the defeat, and I lit upon perceived imperfections. It’s not a side of myself I’m particularly proud of.

County Convention

On Saturday, March 30, the Democratic Party of Webb County hosted its convention for delegates elected at the precinct-level caucuses. They decided to elect fifty-one delegates and fifty-one alternates, all of whom were pledged to Clinton. Obama-pledged delegates from the caucuses charged that they had been denied their right to participate, and were bullied by Clinton supporters. An elected Clinton delegate told the newspaper, “We were the majority, and the majority rules. That’s how the democratic process works” (Buch).

Reflections From a Distance

By some description, the Obama primary campaign in Laredo was a failure. The Mercurians from the North hit resistance in the form of political organization, social
loyalties, rooted cultural beliefs, and a well-established Clinton brand name. This resistance was dispersed throughout the city—in public places, party organizations, homes, businesses, government, newspapers, vernacular festivities, collective representations, and individual bodies. The Anglo Obamans from the North—recognized as “Americanos, “gringos,” “white people,” or pushy and questionably patriotic liberal defenders of stealth-Muslim black men—had a serious uphill battle from the start. The challenge was magnified by the fact that the new Obama office faced severe time constraints, lacked cultural expertise, suffered internal tensions, and didn’t warrant a visit by the candidate, or by a surrogate, in the last twelve days of the race. The office didn’t take full advantage of all the resources at its disposal, internally or in the community, though individual paid and volunteer staff made heroic efforts. As a whole, it was insufficiently Mercurian, never quite crossing borders of culture, space, or local networks. Over two weeks, undecided voters broke toward Hillary, sure defeat grew into a landslide, and a forty-point margin grew to fifty-six points by election day. Caucus night saw a few small, hard-fought victories to elect Obama delegates, but they would be wiped out at the county convention. By standard short-term accounting practices, the rhetorical effort was a failure.

Over the longer term, though, the Texas loss led to electoral victory, and to other outcomes not captured by standard accounting. Had Obama done better along the border and carried Texas, Clinton may well have dropped out of the race. Instead, the primaries continued into June, through contests in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Indiana, among others. This allowed the Obama campaign to establish strong, on-the-ground organizations and market their candidate on the airwaves in three swing states it would carry against John McCain in November. Webb County turned out strong in November with 72% of the vote going to Obama (John Kerry had won just 57% four years earlier), which helped keep the state from going immediately into the McCain column in the network projections when the polls closed on election night (a moral victory for Texas Democrats, if nothing else). In the bigger picture, the campaign’s ineptitude combined with strong Hispano support for Hillary yielded a collective rhetorical performance along the border in the Texas primary that sowed seeds for an Obama victory in November.

My sense of the experience shifted when I figured that defeat laid the groundwork for victory, and our collective failure had been redeemed. If it turns out that Obama’s is a catastrophic presidency, my sense will likely shift again. This narrative revision is of a piece with the double investment of self that Tom Benson wrote about in “Cowtown,” part of the natural history of determining the meaning of rhetorical productions we have a hand in and care about, and consonant with Mercurian movement and shape-shifting. This is one of the hermeneutic dimensions of performative criticism, whether undertaken by Benson or McGee, or by somebody else. As potentially significant episodes in the lives of “speakers who reflect and critics who speak,” double investments swim in currents of individual and collective meaning-making that change over time, revised by new circumstances and events. We can communicatively cash them out, Benson suggests, in the currency of rhetorical criticism,
moving forward by observing our responses, and trying “by an application of intel-
ligence to make structural sense of what began as unguarded feelings” (387). My
documentary snapshots have been one means of making sense of rhetorical events
produced and experienced in real time, through human bodies in communication
with one another. I’ll close now by drawing them toward a different register of
sensemaking.

“Unguarded feelings” lie in the domain of bodies, and mine told me that Laredo
was the most intense rhetorical experience of my life, which made itself viscerally
felt in many different places. Anxiety, hope, determination, friendliness, anger, soli-
darity, pride, disappointment, desperation, release, thrill, and awe were just some of
the emotions corporeally felt at early voting sites, on doorsteps, in the shower, at
the hockey game, flyering Bill Clinton, at the caucuses, behind the wheel, and in
dreams in my bed for many nights after I returned home. These unguarded feelings
found their way out, expressively and reflectively, in their moments and beyond.
With distance, the participant-observation settled into a category—a foray into
neo-sophistic, embodied Mercurian rhetoric. It had elements of the classic sophistic
scene of production, as beautifully explicated by Debra Hawhee—rhetoric marked
by agonism, manifest through bodies that seized spatial-temporal openings (the
kairrotic) and displayed degrees of cunning intelligence (mētis), and emerging in
social settings sometimes thick with “sensual intensities” (191). Much of it was
worked out through the media of human bodies in shared space, some trying to
invert local beliefs and make the lesser (known, liked, supported) greater. These
twenty-first-century rhetorical bodies of course navigated wildly different media
environments than the classic sophists, and the Obama and Clinton campaigns per-
formed a huge part of their rhetorical work through disembodied communication
technologies. But for volunteers like me, the body was the central rhetorical instru-
ment, engaged in a host of Mercurian activities: translation (of language, technical
expertise, and cultural orientations), interpretation (of situations, scenes, and
people), performance (of speech and gesture), movement (locally and from afar),
shepherding (voters and potential volunteers), and border-crossing (between places,
cultures, classes, and communicative codes). In my case, one body played the roles
of participant, observer, and critic (now typing this text for enfleshed rhetorical
figures like you).

The last bit of “structural sense” I’ll make from working in Laredo is this: Though
sophistic rhetoric developed as a border-crossing Mercurian art, rhetoric as practiced
in the academy today is too often an institutionally constrained Apollonian formation.
With the neo-sophistic revival of the postmodernist era, we have come to celebrate
mobile border-crossing hybridities, but our occupational lives as card-carrying rhet-
oricians are largely marked by talking to one another (in journals, at conferences,
and in our departments), or to students privileged enough to be enrolled in college
classes, where we tend to address them from our own disciplinary ground. We may
be mobile in careers that take us from one job to another, but we struggle to find ways
to extend our rhetorical knowledge and practice to the “environment that extends
beyond the university” (Leff 51; see also Mailloux “Places,” and Aune). To be sure,
as Stephen Hartnett’s eloquent essay in this volume suggests, there are a growing num-
ber of exceptions, border-crossing students of rhetoric and communication who
transport their bodies outside the cloisters to translate, advise, teach, and coproduce
in the names of social justice and public service (see also Frey). I supplement his call by
suggesting that one pathway there might involve breaking loose from modernist iden-
tifications with professionally organized and academically defined rhetorical studies,
and merging more into the places and social scenes well beyond its borders. There
might be a kind of post-academic rhetoric somewhere lurking, a dialectical step or
two removed from where we stand now, where we embrace the Mercurian roots of
the art, and invest ourselves more energetically in needs and opportunities elsewhere.
Celeste Condit once worried that McGee’s performative criticism made “the rhetorical
scholar indistinguishable from the street rhetorician” (345, n. 29). I would answer that
passing for a street rhetorician might in fact be the ideal. 12

Appendix A: Hockey Night Flyer

Laredo for Obama

We here in Texas have a chance to elect THE NEXT GREAT LEADER OF OUR NATION, a CHRISTIAN, a man of MORAL PURPOSE, a man who has dedicated his life to FIGHTING FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE, a candidate who will bring about CHANGE, when change is NEEDED MOST.

Why do we support BARACK OBAMA?

- Because he is a MAN OF THE PEOPLE. Barack Obama was raised by his grandparents and a single, working mother. He earned a scholarship to college. He worked in poor neighborhoods in Chicago, organizing Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, and Anglo-Americans. He refuses to take money from lobbyists. He has a PURITY that ESTABLISHMENT POLITICIANS LACK.
- Because he is committed to RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN DREAM for ALL WHO LIVE HERE. Barack Obama will invest in the middle and working classes, through tax cuts, health care, education, and tuition credits. He is against extending the border wall. He believes that America works best when it opens its arms to the peace-loving people of the world, and those who want to pursue their dreams and contribute to our great nation.
- Because he will BRING OUR BRAVE SOLDIERS HOME FROM IRAQ AND FULLY FUND VETERANS’ HEALTH BENEFITS.
- Because he can WIN IN NOVEMBER. Recent polls indicate that Obama could defeat John McCain by 5% or more, while Hillary would lose to McCain. Barack will appeal to independents & lead without dividing us.

For more information, visit www.barackobama.com, visit Laredo for Obama offices at 9902 McPherson, or call 956 566 6692
Laredo Por Obama

Nosotros aquí en Tejas tenemos la oportunidad de elegir un GRAN LÍDER, un CRISTIANO, un hombre de GRANDES MORALES, un hombre que HA LUCHADO TODA SU VIDA POR LA GENTE ORDINARIA COMO NOSOTROS, un hombre que QUIERE HACER GRANDES CAMBIOS cuando LOS CAMBIOS SE NECISITAN.

¿Porque apoyamos a BARACK OBAMA?

- Porque es un HOMBRE DE LA GENTE. Barack vivió su niñez con sus abuelos y con su mamá soltera. Él ganó una beca para ir al colegio. Él trabajó en vecindades de mucha necesidad en Chicago, ayudando las comunidades Hispana-, Africana-, y Anglo-Americana. Barack es el ÚNICO QUE HA RESACHADO DINEROS DE INTERESES ESPECIALES y CORPORATIVOS. Él tiene una política transparente.
- Porque él puede REVIVIR EL SUEÑO AMERICANO PARA TODOOS LOS QUE VIVEN EN ESTE PAÍS. Barack Obama invertirá en las clases medias y bajas, por medios de bajar impuestos, mejorar el sistema de salud, reforzar el sistema educativo, y ofrecer mejores créditos para continuar la escuela. Él rechaza la idea de un muro en la frontera. Él es una persona que cree que esta nación trabaja mejor cuando abre sus puertas a la gente que quiere trabajar y contribuir a nuestro hermoso país.
- Porque él REGRESARA A NUESTROS SOLDADOS QUERIDOS DE IRAQ y mejorar la sistema de salud para veteranos.
- Porque él PUEDE GANAR EN NOVIEMBRE. Recientes estadísticas demuestran que Obama le ganaría a John McCain por 5% o más, cuando Hillary puede perder. Barack puede UNIRNOS SIN DIVIDIRNOS.

Para mas información, visite el Laredo for Obama offices a 9902 McPherson, llame 566 6692, o visite www.barackobama.com

BARACK OBAMA SOBRE TEMAS HISPÁNICAS

Mexican American Democrats, el grupo mas antiguo de Hispanos del Partido Demócrata de Tejas, ha hecho publicamente que apoyará a Barack Obama. Ellos lo apoyan a él porque él entiende las necesidades de la comunidad Hispana.

Educación

Obama cree que debemos reformar nuestro sistema educativo para que se adapte a las necesidades de una población creciente y diversa. Obama he apoyado siempre la
Ley de Desarrollo, Ayuda y Educación para Menores Extranjeros (DREAM), que permitiría a los estados conferir matrículas universitarias a los estudiantes indocumentados que crecieron en los Estados Unidos.

**Inmigración**

Obama ha tenido un papel destacado en el diseño de una reforma inmigratoria integral y cree que nuestro defectuoso sistema inmigratorio sólo puede mejorarse dejando a un lado la política y ofreciendo una solución completa que fortalezca nuestra seguridad pero que a la vez reafirme nuestra herencia como nación de inmigrantes.

**Atención Médica**

Hay 14 millones de Hispanos que no tienen seguro médico. Obama se comprometió a promover leyes en materia de atención médica universal para garantizar que todos los estadounidenses tengan una cobertura médica de calidad, accesible al término de su primer mandato. Su plan extenderá acceso a una cobertura médica accesible, luchará contra desigualdades en dichas coberturas, está a favor de que más Hispanos estudiens carreras relacionadas con la medicina, y fomentará la competencia cultural de los profesionales de la salud.

**Oportunidades Económicas**

Obama aumentará el salario mínimo, brindará apoyo a las familias de bajos recursos y protegerá el Seguro Social y a los propietarios de viviendas. Obama apoya el financiamiento de programas de capacitación laboral y el otorgar préstamos de capital a empresas de dueños pertenecientes a minorías. Obama desea que más familias inmigrantes tengan acceso a los servicios bancarios tradicionales.

**Política Exterior**

Obama reafirmará la importancia de nuestra relación con más de 500 millones de personas que viven en México, Centroamérica, y Sudamérica.

¡CONOZCA LA VERDAD!

- Estas rumores son falsos y los circulan personas que teman cambio.

**Notes**

[1] The Obama rally is being carried by KMIQ-FM, 104.9 Robstown (“Puro Tejano Majic 105”), which has been promoting the broadcast all afternoon. The station is one of three owned by Cotton Broadcasting, headed by Humberto López, and is one of the less than 8% of minority-owned radio stations in the country, according to Minority Media and Telecommunications Council.
A third-generation Mexican-American from Los Angeles, López was inspired to become a stand-up comedian (occupational Mercurian) by Freddie Prinze, the half Puerto Rican comedian-actor (b. Frederick Karl Pruetzel) who played an East L.A. Chicano on the popular NBC situation comedy, “Chico and the Man” (1974–1977) (Navarro; “George López”).

Driving down to McAllen, I heard some of Kennedy’s singing at the start of a Houston talk radio show hosted by conservative Michael Berry (KTRH 740-AM, a Clear Channel affiliate), which Berry used as a jumping-off point for saying what a “joke” it was that Univisión hosted the San Antonio debate, since so few Texans speak Spanish. A video of the song was posted on YouTube, with commentary suggesting competing local interpretations of the event: “I’m from Laredo and personally I was offended by this. As if singing Jalisco in front of us hispanics [sic] is going to get us to vote for Obama; if anything it would make me against him for having an idiotic alcoholic like Ted Kennedy endorsing him,” wrote one teen viewer. “Lol I live in Laredo and I wish I went to see Ted Kennedy sing this! This is so funny but hey, this is at least Laredo gets some national attention that we have been deserv-ing for the longest time,” wrote another. Other posts were less articulate and revealed how a fragmented piece of a local rally can become a minor lightning rod for prejudices and puerile, text-message-quality electronic commentary (“Senator Ted Kennedy”). For an account of the full Kennedy event and the substance of his comments to 150–200 Laredoans, see Aguilar (“Sen. Kennedy”).

Among other information, the Times reported that the Clintons had visited Laredo in 1972 and 1992, and that the president “described his third stop in the Gateway City as ‘profound’ and ‘emotional’” (Cortez, “Clinton Campaigns”).

The headlines of the two main articles by Tricia Cortez—“Clinton Solidifies Her Position[,] Candidate Raises Hope,” and “City Savors Senator’s Visit”—set the tone for the mytho-heroic leads. “One woman arrived at 4:30 a.m. to give Hillary Clinton a rosary,” went the first, which turned Obama’s “hope” back to its Christian roots and attached it to Clinton. “You just saw the future president,” the second began, narrating a scene where a mother tells her son that he has witnessed history, while the boy chants “Hillary, Hillary, Hillary,” like the crowd around him proclaiming the greatness of the future leader, given voice in the remainder of the article through testimony from no less than fifteen Laredoans.


Peña, the Laredo-born former Denver mayor who went on to become Secretary of Transportation under Bill Clinton, had endorsed Obama in September, which was reported in the local newspaper (Cortez, “Peña”). His family had moved from Laredo to Brownsville, and Peña moved on to El Paso and then Denver after taking undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Texas. His visit received a relatively unfavorable newspaper story in the Laredo Morning Times, which reported that Peña drew “about 40 Obama supporters,” whom he talked to about betraying the Clinton family, “Obama’s Kenyan and U.S. heritage,” and the fact that “Obama voted for the border wall” (Aguilar, “Peña”).


According to numbers calculated by CNN, and posted on Monday, March 10, six days after the election (<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/state/#TX>).

According to CNN numbers, the seven largest counties along the border supported Clinton 73% to 27% and gave her a margin of victory of nearly 135,000 votes, which was 34,000 more than her 101,029 vote margin of victory in Texas (<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/county/#TXDEMMAAPrimary>).
An early version of this paper was presented for a colloquium in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado. Thanks for comments and encouragement in that forum, and from Brian Ott, John Lyne, John Durham Peters, Jerry Hauser, Adriane Stewart, Anthea Watson, Greg Dickinson, Ece Algan, Stephen Hartnett, and Lauren Archer, all of whom read drafts of the essay and improved it.

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