

Student

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A Word to My Audience

What is a speech without an audience? In her essay, “Miles Traveled, Miles to Go”, Erin Aubry Kaplan, a black journalista from Los Angeles, expresses her emotions about the new president of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama and his presidential deeds. She feels that America has just not overcome its racial prejudice and that it does not truly accept Obama as president, but merely uses him as a facade for display. Racial prejudice prevents Obama from taking the steps that he wants to, but in turn, Obama himself hasn’t taken the action desired from him. Kaplan’s audience, consisting of her frequent readers and chance readers of her essay collection, *Black Talk, Blue Thoughts, and Walking the Color Line: Dispatches from a Black Journalista*, will find Kaplan’s rhetoric somewhat effective, depending on a reader’s affinity towards various rhetorical strategies. In “Miles Traveled, Miles to Go”, Kaplan’s greatest strength is her emotional appeal, but her greatest weakness is the lack of factual evidence.

Kaplan presents numerous claims around which she centers her argument. She begins with a claim born in 2009, which celebrates the fact that America for the first time has a black president and “it is glorious” (Kaplan 541). But in 2010, Kaplan notes that Obama has not measured up to the expectations and that, in fact, “in some ways he is still not really president” (Kaplan 542). Kaplan explains this by arguing that Obama is hindered by racial prejudice because he is colored. Finally Kaplan concludes that despite the challenges he faces, Obama is just not taking enough action for the benefit of racial minority groups. Her overall claim is that America has yet to achieve true racial equality.

Kaplan's essay is colorful with vivid and emotional narrations described with powerful expressive words. Most often, these narrations serve to evoke an emotion stemming from an experience shared between reader and author through Kaplan's writing. One such narration presents Kaplan's reaction to Obama's inspiration pre-election speech promising hope to a black neighborhood in Los Angeles: "I nearly swooned. He made his points with his suit jacket off, chin up, white business shirt rolled up at the cuffs and gleaming in the sun. As far as I know, he never made them again" (Kaplan 547). The word "swooned" carries a feeling of being swept off one's feet like a maid by Prince Charming – a very positive emotion of charm and joy. But the last sentence of Kaplan's narration contrasts bitterly. Prince Charming disappeared, and only disappointment is left when Kaplan realizes Obama backed away from the change he made the black community hope for. With her writing Kaplan effectively shares her awe and disillusionment by skillfully describing the situation she witnessed and bringing the reader into the moment. Once one imagines him or herself in Kaplan's situation, one gains a better understanding of Kaplan's feelings and realizes the hurt of failed expectations. Her detailed narration also grants her credibility by proving that she personally experienced first hope, then dismay at Obama's lack of action in helping racial minorities.

However, Kaplan argues, Obama's lack of action is not fully his fault because he is heavily hindered by racial prejudice and antagonism from certain whites. This claim sounds rather extreme and biased to a moderately opinionated reader. But when backed up by evidence, it gains more credibility and effectiveness. Kaplan compares and contrasts Barack Obama to George W. Bush, stereotypically known as one of the worse presidents the U.S.A has ever seen: "It's interesting to compare this treatment to that of Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush. For eight years Bush, despite being widely despised, was granted plenty of latitude, shades of gray, and even forgiveness by media and by the voters, including those he made steadily worse off with his

policies” (Kaplan 544). Looking back, this argument cannot instantly be brushed away as false. It can’t be said with a certainty that Bush and Obama are judged equally, even though many people hate Bush with a passion. Kaplan presents enough evidence on page 544 to convince a reader that Obama’s race certainly has a lot to do with the active opposition of his presidency. She supports the claim that Obama faces harmful racial prejudice with evidence and thus renders her claim effective, making it more difficult to deny her rightness. It is her strongest argument.

Yet more often than not Kaplan expresses her own personal opinion in her essay and the beliefs that she herself holds. Frequently her statements are harsh and unreasonably judgmental. For example, “In the new era of Reconstruction, the reinvigoration of a states’ right, anti-central-government movement has found expression in the so-called Tea Party, which is not the Klan of old but has quite comfortably harbored elements of it” (Kaplan 546). Claiming that the Tea Party follows ideas of the Ku Klux Klan is a very extremist statement and very prejudiced. For sure, the statement is a perfect example of pathos for it definitely can fire up a reader! On one end are the readers who can perhaps agree with Kaplan. These are the people who for some reason dislike the Tea Party and believe that it is a racist organization. These people will be happy to agree with Kaplan. They can get wound up and start listening into Kaplan’s words more attentively, knowing now that she is on their side. The anger these people may feel can help convince them that groups like the Tea Party oppose Obama due to racial prejudice. But on the other end are the moderate readers who can be deeply offended and aghast when Kaplan openly accuses a political party of being racist without providing any evidence to her claim. A reader who perhaps even supports the Tea Party may quit reading Kaplan’s essay all together. Then her argument will be completely ineffective. Such an unsupported statement seeping with bias can either win a reader to Kaplan’s side or push one away.

In context of audience and specific events, Kaplan's arguments acquire an additional persuasive effect. Her audience falls into distinct categories: Kaplan's fans and frequent readers in one and chance readers in another. There is significance in this division. Kaplan's fans are far more likely to agree with her opinions and reasoning and give more attention to her words. Likely, this target audience is familiar with Kaplan's writing style and is not troubled by flaws that other readers may find. But the chance reader, on the other hand, is less likely to find Kaplan's arguments effective. The strategies Kaplan uses, such as the pathos mixed with personal opinion described earlier, will not be appealing to certain readers preferring a more rational, unopinionated, and factual approach.

Additionally, Kaplan herself makes a strong distinction between specifically black readers and all others. In "Miles Traveled, Miles To Go" Kaplan specifically addresses an audience of fellow black men somewhere between the middle and the bottom of the American social hierarchy. Phrases uniting Kaplan with fellow black men appear in her writing constantly: "Obama may not be a reflection of us. But he *is* us." (Kaplan 548); "What about black people? What about us? [...] We are listless and depressed, left to wonder" (Kaplan 547). When heard by the correct reader, such words can hit a personal string inside and resonate into power. "We" is such a striking word. Humans draw towards the people who relate to them and understand them. Sometimes the feeling of unity moves a person more strongly than any reason. When Kaplan addresses her readers with a uniting pronoun and the emotions she expresses after coincide with the reader's own, that reader will be convinced. The reader will be convinced that Kaplan is of his or her kind, and by stating that Obama is one of her kind, she is proving to readers that Obama is of their kind too. However, readers of a different race, likely whites, will feel more than a sense of alienation. Kaplan states, "Dictating who blacks are and what they should be allows whites to retain their cultural supremacy and to contain their eternal fear of blacks" (Kaplan 544).

By irrationally accusing whites and identifying only with black readers, Kaplan is potentially cutting off the white readers who stand somewhere between agreement and disagreement with her. Thus, Kaplan drastically increases the effect of her argument for the specific group of fans within her race and social class and just as drastically discredits herself to the readers or groups she accuses – white and leaning towards upper class.

Without an audience, no speech carries any significance at all. Every speech in every time was always spoken to those people whom the speaker wants to convince. In “Miles Traveled, Miles To Go” Kaplan effectively pinpoints her target audience and uses well chosen strategies to make the strongest impression. Perhaps she doesn’t need other readers to be convinced. She wants her people, the blacks in her community and her overall social class, to know that Obama is facing difficulties as president, but that he also needs to take some action himself. Kaplan speaks from her own point of view and seeks to better the lives of the people she shares a social position with. She is of these people and knows the ways of affecting them. These people are her target audience and she speaks to them, first and foremost, almost as if she was right there talking to them in person.