

After the raid on 12 May 2008 by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents that netted several hundred allegedly undocumented immigrant workers at the Agriprocessor slaughterhouse and meat packing plant in the town of Postville, Iowa, there were widespread protests and criticisms by numerous immigrant and human rights advocacy groups, lawyers, and rank-and-file citizens.

One of the critics was Professor Erik Camayd-Freixas, a professor at Florida International University, who served as an interpreter at the subsequent arraignments of the detained workers. He went public with his criticisms, "blowing the whistle" on the operation in an essay entitled "Interpreting after the Largest ICE Raid in US History: A Personal Account," which attracted a great deal of media attention.

Professor Camayd-Freixas performed an act of courage in going public with his opinions and concerns. Whether his actions and his essay were the best way of expressing his opinions and drawing public attention to what he and many observers considered to be injustices perpetrated upon the detained workers is open to argument.

Comment on those portions of the essay that discuss the legal aspects of the Postville operation is best left to legal specialists. I should like here to comment on the author's use of certain rhetorical techniques that I feel may have weakened its effectiveness.

One aspect of the essay that I found particularly troublesome was his effort to manipulate his readers' feelings and opinions. For reasons of economy of space, I shall cite only a few of the examples that caught my attention.

In the third paragraph, Professor Camayd-Freixas describes the procession of immigrants (mostly Central American Indians) to the arraignment site, and mentions his realization that "their nationality...was imposed on their people in the 19th century." This is an accurate statement of historical fact, but is not germane in this context, and it seemed to me to have been gratuitously intercalated for the purpose of arousing feelings of guilt among European-American readers, some of whose ancestors may not even have been in this country at that time.

Continuing the sentence, Professor Camayd-Freixas notes that "they too were Native Americans, in shackles." It seems to me that readers are being invited here to perform the following operations of logic: (1) Recall that the Indians of Central America are ethnically related to the "Native Americans," i.e. the Indians of North America; (2) Therefore, equate the treatment of the Postville Central American Indian workers with the countless acts of injustice perpetrated against the North American Indians by the European and European-American settlers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; (3) Therefore, view the government's actions at Postville as yet another episode in the "long trail of tears" experienced by the North American Indians at the hands of the settlers and the U.S. government.

The historical record is not at issue; what I find questionable in this sentence is what appears to be an attempt by the author to manipulate the reader's feelings, emotions, and thought processes.

Professor Camayd-Freixas sometimes appears to harbor feelings of contempt and superiority, another factor that could alienate readers.

In the second paragraph, there is a reference to "the retro 'Electric Park Ballroom.'" The positioning of a substantive within quotation marks is a tactic sometimes used to convey the concept of "purports to be but in fact is not"—i.e., something fake. The ballroom is moreover "retro": old-fashioned, outdated. I found myself wondering if this was an invitation to us readers to equate small cities in the U.S. heartland with "lack of sophistication" and "backwardness" (including in matters of economic and social justice?) and perhaps unconsciously attribute these traits to their inhabitants and to the government officials who conduct operations there—including even the "good" judge (17thparagraph), this once-common way of referring to professionals being now viewed as condescending.

In the twelfth paragraph Professor Camayd-Freixas describes how he offered one of the detainees a cup of soda. The man "superstitiously" declined, saying it could be "poisoned." Given the circumstances, fear of being poisoned may have been somewhat excessive but was not totally unreasonable, and may have sprung not from superstition but rather from very normal human emotion. "Superstition" is the label we hang on the beliefs and practices of persons and societies we consider "primitive" in the negative sense of the word. I wondered if Professor Camayd-Freixas's feelings about this man and his fellow Postville workers were more ambivalent that he realized or would be willing to acknowledge.

Innuendo and implication are used to cast an unfavorable light on the government officials. At the beginning of the essay, for example, we learn that the Postville raid "—officials boasted—was 'the largest single-site operation of its kind in American history.'" We are not told if Professor Camayd-Freixas was present for this statement and witnessed demonstrations of boastful behavior (high fives, jovial back-slapping, broad grins, cheers, pumping of fists) on the part of the officials making it. If he was not, then we need to consider the possibility that the officials were simply making a statement about an historical fact. The use of the word "boasted" would then be inaccurate and misleading, and an effort to "instruct" us readers in what opinion we should form about the officials and the operation.

In the same paragraph, Professor Camayd-Freixas refers to the transformation of the NCC into "a sort of concentration camp or detention center." The term "concentration camp" almost automatically conjures up in the minds of most readers images of the Nazi extermination camps, rather than of one of the many other less horrific, in fact sometimes necessary (e.g., camps for housing large numbers of refugees temporarily) historical examples of such places. The reader is seemingly being encouraged here to equate the U.S. government's treatment of the Postville workers with the actions of one of the most murderous regimes in human history. In addition to demonizing the government's law-enforcement efforts, this equation may be sufficiently exaggerated and over-dramatic to arouse laughter, along with doubts in some readers' minds as to whether the essay and its writer should be taken seriously.