

## Moment One: Protest Mechanics

Yesterday afternoon, a group of protestors, continuing the work begun after the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, met to block Interstate 70 in north Saint Louis County. The stated goal of the shutdown was to get Missouri Governor Jay Nixon to appoint a special prosecutor in that case. The organizer of the demonstration, Eric Vickers, tried this before in 1999, when about 300 protestors, upset by the lack of both black contractors and workers involved in public construction projects, successfully shut down the same interstate.

Planned immobility forcing residents and county officials alike to confront the systematic ways in which black residents of the county are excluded and exploited.

The protestors failed to make it out on to the interstate (a few individuals attempted to do so and were quickly arrested), but the response by local law enforcement and the rubbernecking curiosity of drivers resulted in a fairly significant, de facto shut down of traffic in the area. Law enforcement shut down N. Hanley Road, a road intersecting the interstate (where protestors had gathered in as a staging area), as well as the on and off-ramps to and from N. Hanley Road.

At a certain point, law enforcement began arresting individuals who moved from the curb onto N. Hanley Road (32 arrests were reported). Additionally, it is probably safe to assume that the threat of the interstate shutting down resulted in drivers finding alternate routes.

In this image, a screen capture, law enforcement work to contain the protestors in a (successful) effort to prevent them from reaching the interstate. There is much to say about this image. What strikes me most about it, and the roughly three-hour demonstration itself, is how the contained protestors nevertheless slowed (or contained) the traffic around them. Even within a wall of law enforcement, the protest works. Vickers was quoted as saying, "They are not going to allow us to get on the highway as we planned, but we did tie them up for a few hours." The response of local law enforcement was, intentionally or not, co-opted into the work of the protest: the police response helped the protestors to carve out a place.

A rhetoric of the civil disobedience variety is a tough and unforgiving art. A rhetor doesn't read the speech and then walk off the stage; he doesn't write the letter and hit send; she doesn't take the image and make it speak. The civil and disorient rhetor moves her body in place, using its inopportune location as a proof. Civil disobedience is required when channels for effective protest are not available: either because one is not allowed to move in/to those channels or because those channels do not (yet) exist. Civil disobedience is a rhetoric that challenges and disrupts the agora. It does not take place in the agora; it displaces the agora as a place of rhetorical action.

What I see in this image, then, is the trans/formation of a place.

The interstate is channel that generally allows for the frictionless movement of people across a large area. In the metro Saint Louis area, I-70 allows for people to move to and from (mostly from) the city and into the surrounding suburban areas. While the interstate is certainly an agonistic place where people interact, negotiate and persuade, it is not a place set aside to address a public. On most days, sequestered in automobiles, racing to and from the city, the

interstate is a place where citizens escape the agora. Getting into your car is the equivalent of Phaedrus leading Socrates out through the gates of Athens.

Shutting down this main artery of the body politic, then, makes an agora. Furthermore, it makes an agora tailored made for the claims of the protestors. An agora such as the Clayton Government Center in Clayton, MO, is designed to conduct the regular business of the county. But the regular business of the county is precisely what's being protested. As an unnamed citizen remarked in a recent County Council meeting, "We're not going to let you go back to business as usual."

And business as usual was certainly interrupted yesterday afternoon. What will come of it, what effect it will have, is anybody's guess. Oftentimes unquantifiable outcomes are often another thankless aspect of civil disobedience. New places are made: sometimes they stick around, and sometimes they hurried into the back of a police bus. Nevertheless, the civil disobedience of slowing traffic is the important work of reminding ourselves and each other that public places cannot be taken for granted. They are built, and they are built to serve. And who they serve is often not everyone. Places exclude and exploit. This needs to be said over and over and over again. It also needs to be felt. It needs to be lived.