20. Place in Protest: An Analysis of Place, Argument, and Protest

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Over our years of attending protest events, we have noticed that part of the power and energy that can be created by protest is related to physical unification of people for a common cause in a particular place. From the streets of major cities to corners of public parks and university campuses, protests and places often combine to create a uniquely powerful message, especially when iconic places are chosen as sites of protest. Consider, for example, the American Indian Movement's (AIM) take-over of Alcatraz Island for the purpose of asserting the inherent sovereignty of indigenous peoples. Through their 18-month protest event, AIM temporarily reconstructed the meaning of the former prison turned federal property to an American Indian place. AIM's reconstitution was an argument for their right to occupy and self-govern on their own land. Through their presence and renaming buildings on the island, such as The Bureau of White Affairs, temporary occupants made the island a place of self-governance and cultural disobedience. The protestors were unified for a common cause and their reconstruction of the meaning of Alcatraz played a central role in movement's efforts. Examples such as the Alcatraz take-over illustrate a need for critical attention to the relationship between place and protests.

This essay examines what we term *place in protest*, which refers to how social movements use *place-based arguments*, *place-as-argument*, and *place-as-temporary-argument* as forms of protest. In order to understand the dynamics of place in protest this essay examines two public Step It Up 2007 climate change rallies in Salt Lake City as a case study. The first is an event at the City/County Building with a line up of speakers and musicians. The second is a smaller event at a public park that invited participants to do yoga as a response to climate change. We evaluate the arguments (Schiappa, 1995) at these two events for which place served as evidence, warrant, or claim. Place in protest arguments can occur in a variety of texts, as such we will focus on both traditional written or spoken texts from the events (i.e., speeches, pamphlets) as well as visual texts, participant observation and interviews. We chose to incorporate participant observation and interviews while attending the events because we value the

insight that “bodily presence” at the event can yield (Blair, 2001, p. 276). This is especially important when examining the argumentative aspects of place.

This essay begins with a discussion of the study of place, its relationship to argumentation, and the concept of place in protest. This is followed by a refining of three forms of place in protest as observed at the two Step It Up events, which serve as a foundation to extend theoretical literature on place and protest. The essay concludes with a discussion of the implications of our analysis for argumentation theory and social movement theory.

Place and Communication and Protest

Place in protest relies on the geographic concepts of place and space. While space traditionally denotes a geographic boundary, place is the meaning that is associated with particular spaces (Cresswell, 2004; Massey, 2005; Tuan, 1974, 1977, 2004). Pointing to the distinction between space and place, Tim Cresswell (2004) stated, “When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place” (p. 10). Scholars interrogate place in myriad ways; two overlapping approaches are relevant to our essay: 1) identifying the meanings of particular places (Anderson, 1991; Cresswell, 2004; Forest, 1995), and 2) place as a site of politics and power (Blair, 2001, 2006; Clayton, 2000; Cresswell, 2004; Harvey, 1996; Forest, 1995; Pezzullo, 2003; Till, 1993). Through examination of our case study, we attend to the meanings of the specific places of protest. More generally, we examine the dimensions of power associated with protest places.

Because place describes the meanings associated with spaces, it is an inherently communicative and rhetorical phenomenon (e.g., Basso, 1996; Carbaugh, 2001). Several scholars have begun to discuss the importance of space/ place in rhetorical and argument theory and criticism, though often in the context of memorial sites and museums (Blair, 2001; Blair & Michel, 2000; Blair, Jeppeson & Pucci Jr., 1991; Dickinson, 2002; Dickinson, Ott & Aoki, 2005, 2006). Blair, in particular, extends the implications of memorial site and museum rhetorical analysis to more traditional forms of rhetorical analysis. She contends that to fully understand a speech, for example, locating one’s self at the event is important because the *place* will inform the critique (Blair, 2001). Our focus on the use of place in arguments by social movements — in often ephemeral protest events — expands our understanding of the relationship between place and argument. We do this by theorizing the functionality of place in social movement arguments, specifically regarding temporality and reconstructions of place.

Scholars in geography have already investigated linkages between social movements and place, in particular, that space can be constructed by social

movements into places that advance their agendas (e.g., Cresswell, 1996; Forest, 1995). For example, Benjamin Forest (1995) articulated the construction of West Hollywood as a "gay place," which allowed the gay rights movement to define its members not based on their sexual practices, but on collective identity through place. A communication perspective offers the opportunity to better understand *how* people use argument and rhetoric in the transformation of space to place, or reconstruction of places. We explore what we call place in protest that explicitly attends to how place functions as an argument in protest events of larger social movements. We conceive of place in protest in three forms: 1) place-based arguments — speeches and other written or spoken texts that make arguments based on the value of a place, 2) place-as–argument — space used in protest to create a visual argument of place, and 3) place-as-temporary–argument — temporary re-constructions and performances of place through the protest event.

Place in Protest

The first and most traditional conceptualization of place in protest — place-based argument — involves the use of place as a commonplace for arguments. In other words, a value of place is invoked by an arguer as evidence or warrant for a claim. The appeal to place is typical in environmental rhetoric and argumentation (e.g., Cantrill, 1998, 2004; Cox, 1982; Oravec, 1984; Vokinn & Riese, 2001). For example, the Sierra Club strategically chose to sacrifice Glen Canyon, a space "hardly anyone had seen," (Ingebretsen, n.d., ¶ 4) in order to advocate for the conservation of wilderness spaces in Colorado called into place as "Echo Park" and "Split Mountain Gorge" knowing that there is an "affective bond between people and place or setting" (Tuan, 1974, p. 4). The reason this type of argument works is because attachment to place becomes a reason to "save" the place. Lawrence Buell (2001) clarified, "an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern" (p. 56). In the context of protest, we contend that place can similarly be employed in protest events to advocate for the movement's goals.

In the case of the Step it Up events in Salt Lake City we observed limited use of this strategy. In a speech, Mayor Rocky Anderson called for Utahns to enact particular climate change prevention practices as a means to protect our beautiful natural surroundings. However, this form of place-based argument was not as widely adopted by participants as we expected. If we agree with Buell that place attachment leads to more environmental awareness, then there should have been more of this type of place-based argument. Perhaps the reason that more participants did not use place-based arguments is because of Step It Up's focus on

national action; that is, step it up *Congress*. Regardless of the effectiveness of its use in this instance, place-based argument still frequently functions as a justification for adherence to the goals of a movement.

Unlike place-based arguments discussed above, in which the place's meaning is preexisting for certain audiences, the second form of place in protest, which we call place-as-argument, relies on rhetors to physically alter the space in order to create meaning or place — be it through bodies, signage, fences, flags, and so on. The meaning/place is ideally constructed to serve as an argument in line with the movement's goals. In order to further distinguish this form of place in protest from the first, we should be clear that place-as-argument fundamentally includes the visual as well as verbal text if it happens to be part of the visual (e.g., words on a protest sign). Take, for example, the arguments of the Castro District in San Francisco. On the one hand, in place-based arguments, people would cite the Castro District — a place with a decidedly queer meaning — as evidence of the city's celebration of queer identity. On the other hand, in place-as-argument, the presence of rainbow flags throughout neighborhood and other material aspects of the place argue for the queerness of the place. We posit that protests can also use space to create meaning, especially visually. Carol Blair (2006) suggested that the Civil Rights Memorial Center is a visual argument that at once confronts complacency with current civil rights status and challenges spectators to take action. We extend Blair's contention to assert that place can serve the same function of confronting and challenging. Furthermore, members of a social movement can create a place of such confrontation.

Organizers of the two Step It Up events used signs, groups of people, buildings, a stage, streets, and bodies to alter the meaning of the places at which they held their events. The downtown event was located at the City/County Building, in the center of downtown, a place that represents for many people government, the mayor, and summer festivals. The place changed because of signs hung on the perimeter on a fence, invited organizations and businesses that set up booths, a stage with series of musical acts, and a collection of humans. The second event was a yoga sun salutation gathering in Liberty Park at the corner of two main thoroughfares in Salt Lake City. The place was changed by a sign facing the passing cars, a group of people doing yoga, and an information table flanked with two large speakers. All of these physical alterations contributed to an atmosphere different from a usual day. In a basic sense, these factors meant something was happening and served as a reason to attend or take notice. In both locations researchers and participants perceived a shift in energy and atmosphere of the places. In this way, the place itself communicated an argument and confrontation to the status quo uses and expectations of the place.

Of course, place-as-argument is not as tidy as we would like it to be and does not always support the purposes of the event organizers. Place-as-argument can also create counter messages that undermine or confuse the position of the movement or goal of the event. Typically, a “protest” calls forth images of people marching, holding signs, obstructing traffic, or assembling for a rally. However, the downtown event constructed place in ways that we perceived as problematic. Specifically, the organizers attempted to evoke a Woodstock-esque protest rally feel with music interspersed with political speeches, an outdoor setting, and a gathering of like-minded organizations; they advertised the event as a “Free Concert” on the flyers and in mediated outlets. Since the event was in downtown Salt Lake City, the organizers faced constraints and expectations of the place. Because of these, the space was fenced in and police monitored the entrances, which responded to the constraint that they could not have alcohol unless they created a “beer garden” and the expectation that all downtown events, especially concerts, will have fences.[1] As the evening progressed, our researchers noticed that the event adopted a carnivalesque atmosphere with children jumping in a moonwalk, people hula-hooping, and a costumed person walking on stilts. Although a protest could contain those elements, this carnivalesque atmosphere was jarring because of the combination of the “Free Concert” signage, the creation of the “beer garden,” and the festival feeling — none of which communicated protest. In thinking about constructions of place, Dickinson (1997) raised the importance that collective memory has on the meaning of a place (see also: Blair, 1999; Casey, 1987; Foote, 1997; Hayden, 1995; Till, 1999). The organizers, by their own account, tried to create a 1960s protest event, invoking our collective memory of a time past. While Dickinson’s article refers to collective memory of a particular place over time, in this instance the organizers relied on a collective memory of place constructed for protest.

In constructing places for the purpose of the protest, organizers are bound by time. Therefore, our third form of place in protest, place-as-temporary-argument, consists of temporary reconstructions of place as an argument to advance the movement or particular protest event. This form assumes that “Places are never finished but always becoming” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 35; see also, Pred, 1984). In other words, researchers generally agree that making meaning of spaces—or making places of spaces — is dynamic and processual. Although geographers often conceptualize place transformation over long periods of time that result in a semi-permanent change, like neighborhood gentrification (Harvey, 1996) or a “gay” neighborhood (Forest, 1995), our project examines intentional temporary transformations of place — ranging between a couple of hours to a couple of months — which then return to status quo notions of place. For example, the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests created an image event that

reconstituted downtown Seattle as a place of anarchy and civil disobedience instead of commerce (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). However, after the WTO meetings ended, the place returned to business as usual. Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples (2002) used this as a starting point to theorize the public screen. We, on the other hand, use this as an example of place-as-temporary-argument. For the week of the WTO meetings protestors employed various tactics to redefine downtown Seattle in ways that confronted globalization and, in effect, embodied an alternate set of values.

Although the Seattle event demonstrated a mass alteration, place-as-temporary-argument can happen on both small and large scales. The Liberty Park sun salutation event, in which participants did yoga and set intentions, communicated an altered sense of place for the two hours they were there. The organizer cited her desire to show people that Liberty Park could function as a site of political action as one of her reasons for selecting that location. This statement is an argument for temporal reconstruction of the meaning of a place. Our interviews with participants revealed that they also perceived a change in atmosphere, a new use for the space, and a new meaning of the place. Moreover, one of the authors observed that passersby took notice of the non-typical use of the place and inquired about the purpose.

However, dominant meanings of a place limit the potential for transformation. For example, in the downtown event, despite the physical alterations, interviewees reported feeling the same as they usually do when they are there. We argue this is because they are usually there for other concerts and festivals, such as the Arts Festival, the Jazz Festival, and the Gay Pride Festival. By somewhat conforming to the expectations of the place as festival site, Step It Up did not redefine the place, and consequently, lacked the protest spirit. This is evidenced by a large number of interviewees who did know what Step It Up was or that they were at an event that was one of hundreds in a national response to human-caused climate change.

The three forms of place in protest — place-based arguments, place-as-argument, and place-as-temporary-argument — push argumentation and social movement scholars to attend to the role of place as a significant discursive element. By examining the place as a communicative act itself, we further the potential for theorizing place as more than a site of memory (e.g., Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, Jr., 1991; Blair, 2001; Blair & Michel, 2000; Dickinson, 1997; Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2005, 2006), place as reconstituted in temporary ways, and protest as an inherently place-based phenomenon.

Implications

This essay has important implications for both argumentation theory and social movement theory. First, our essay investigates place in protest as necessarily argumentative. Although place-based argument and place-as-argument have been discussed by communication and geography scholars, we contribute to this line of inquiry by exploring place and its connection to protest. Additionally, place-as-temporary-argument names a phenomenon heretofore unarticulated, offering a unique perspective on both place and protest scholarship. Unlike current scholarship that interrogates semi-permanent places and their meanings, we explore the often-ephemeral nature of a protest event as a new conceptualization of place. When a place is temporarily reconstituted for at least the duration of a protest, the effect is different than that of a semi-permanently reconstructed place such as a memorial or neighborhood. Though the meaning of place in a museum or memorial may certainly change over time, a protest happens for a defined period of time and, at the end of that, returns to its previously constructed status or site.

Second, current work on social movements often focuses on movements in the past (Brick, 1998; Bruner & Oelshlaeger, 1998; DeLuca, 1999a, 1999b; Peeples, 2005; Short, 1998; Sowards, 1992). This study is unique in that we have studied the movement as it happened by attending the Step it Up events. This work is in line with Phaedra Pezzullo's (2001, 2003, 2007) work on Toxic Tours as a contemporary form of environmental justice activism. Studying a movement as it happens and watching the rallies first hand allows researchers to gain greater insight into the activities of social movements to persuade their immediate audiences, including understanding the function of place in protest. This approach produces research that potentially becomes useful tools for members of the movement outside academia (whether the findings are appreciative or critical).

The third implication also relates to the importance of "being there" as the movement happens. We are answering Carol Blair's (2001) call for rhetorical criticism grounded in place and the researchers' experiences in place. Studying the movement *in situ* allows for the collection of a more diverse set of texts for analysis including using participant observation and interviews as texts. It also allows researchers access to materials and texts that may not become permanent written texts that can be accessed after the fact. The traditional approach to rhetorical criticism of social movements examines after the fact texts that are produced by social movements such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, archives of the American Indian Movement, or the mediated representations of the Seattle WTO protests (see Alvarez, 1988; Lake, 1983; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). While this research is incredibly valuable, social

movement studies in the field of rhetoric are lacking in analysis of place in contemporary protests, rallies, and image events. Having access to the primary texts of a social movement rally and "being there" allows for a more nuanced understanding of the rhetorical dynamics of the event itself, specifically the use of place in protest.

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Notes

[1] One of the authors asked a police officer about the fences. His response was that they had "to keep the beer in and the smoking out," essentially creating a "beer garden."

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