

Sample Autoethnography #1

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A Day in Philadelphia: An Infrastructural Auto-Ethnography

I had not really thought specifically about infrastructure for a few months before January, but I suppose that's often the goal. Well built infrastructural systems can often slip by unnoticed, helping to make lives functional but never really being the focus of conversation besides among enthusiasts. And while I certainly carried an interest in discussing things like rail networks and electric vehicle support systems, I rarely stopped to think about how they interacted with my own life besides when bemoaning my home city of Houston's lack of effective public transportation outside of an inefficient bus network. However, January and February brought infrastructure to the forefront of my mind when I started running into a couple minor problems in my home in Philadelphia while my family in Houston ran into major ones with this year's historic freeze. I live off campus with 9 other roommates, and while some of us have rooms that insulate against cold a bit better, my choice to live in a room with a lot of windows meant that my room would be among the first to feel the cold. I thought that was just a normal part of being in Philadelphia, but when my room measured at 54 degrees and my roommate's clocked in at 51, I realized our house might have an insulation and heating problem. This prompted several calls to our landlord for maintenance; a visit by Soned, the maintenance worker responsible for our landlord's network of houses; and a crucial purchase of a space heater and insulation equipment that I was fortunately able to make. While my room would still feel the cold on some of the more frigid days this past month, the combination of the slight improvements to the heating system and my room's

improved door and window insulation made the winter much more pleasant. My family, however, had a much worse experience with infrastructure in February.

Texas has long hated federal authority, with “secede” bumper stickers being a surprisingly common feature when I first moved to the state; unfortunately, the distaste for federal regulation was disastrously coupled with state-level privatization and mismanagement in the pursuit of profits. When a winter storm sent most of the state to historically low temperatures, the non-winterized state-specific power grid could not produce electricity to meet demand while it struggled to even remain afloat; this sent power offline for the majority of the state. Of course, the effects of the shutoff were not evenly felt; downtown areas remained lit up, creating a poignant symbol of the mostly empty office buildings lit up in the night as people froze in their homes. My family was fortunate to have a gas fireplace to keep warm, but they still lost power (and therefore heating) for about two days and water for five due to a burst pipe. Between my own house’s cold issues and my home state’s traumatic freeze, interactions with infrastructure were on the forefront of my mind as I started my journal.

I began my day, as always, with a blaring iPhone alarm. The phone was plugged in to charge overnight, my typical routine. Fortunately, my house hasn’t had any problems with electricity besides the one time my roommates and I ran a TV, tea kettle, toaster oven, and microwave at once, briefly cutting the lights and taking our living room’s power out for a full day. That time, we had to move our food downstairs to our roommate’s fridge and wait for another visit by Soned to access our fuse box, which had been locked away from us. After waking up, I had breakfast bought from the Acme a few blocks away and boiled tea in the kettle. During the fall semester I normally went to the Aldi on 46th and Market or sometimes the Heirloom after a COVID test, but January and February cold and ice made the closeness of

Acme too tempting to pass up. Following my breakfast, I joined a work Zoom meeting over the Internet while my laptop downloaded a free synthesizer plugin in the background. Our Internet, run by Verizon, has mostly been stable throughout the year, but we had one day where it went out for the house and needed to be fixed by a technician. After the meeting, I worked for a bit on a problem set online, then went to the high rise tent to get COVID tested under Penn's system. I returned home to have lunch, leftover pasta that I had cooked the day before on our gas stove, and joined my virtual classes for the day. When classes ended, I went for a run due to the finally wonderful weather and nearly thawed ice on the roads. Although I still haven't built up to full-length runs, being nervous to ramp up intensity too quickly due to my past hip injuries, I was still able to run to the Schuylkill trail, do a quick loop, and return just as dusk began to fall. For dinner, I was saving my cooking for later in the week when I had fewer assignments, so I ordered out and walked to pick up food. After eating, I talked to my roommates for a bit while we played some music streamed over the Internet, then went back to work and finally to bed.

Most of my activities that I documented were done completely at home; leaving the house for three different events is above average for me in this stage of the pandemic, and even that was only because of getting tested for COVID. This meant that I did not have to rely on walking to classes or taking SEPTA to get to any part of my daily life; with ridership down this year, especially for Regional Rail services, it currently seems like most of the people using public transportation in Philadelphia are the ones who cannot afford not to take it (Madej). A good bit of my relationship with infrastructure, and especially with COVID, was insulated by privilege in a similar manner - I take classes from home, have a remote job, am extensively tested for COVID by Penn, and have been going for tests even at a time when the Philadelphia community struggled to have access to tests. Most of the infrastructural systems I worked with

were essentially the default, leaving me with not much choice. I hardly mind the sidewalks I walk on unless they have not been properly salted and certainly could not choose the circumstances of their placement; the gas, electricity, and water systems in my house were simply chosen as the default option. Even the utility of our choice, the Internet access, was chosen collectively by the house I live in. The main choice between options was the choice over where to buy groceries; buying at Acme required the labor of store workers and truck drivers to be able to stock the store, put it on shelves, and help me check out.

Finally, my ability to use Philadelphia's infrastructure was directly impacted by my gender. As a cisgender male, the fact that I could run even when the light had begun to drop and pick up dinner in the dark was because of the fact that I do not have the fear of being assaulted that my friends who aren't cis males carry. Although I try to run when it's lighter outside, the times when I return and it's dark prompt very different reactions from male and female roommates - mainly shrugs and indifference from men, and surprise that I would be out that late from women. My ability to navigate the city at night is a mark of my being a cis male. However, my race also adds a point of consideration to my ability to walk through Philadelphia. I'm half black, and although I may not be visibly black, I'm clearly not white, which means fears about increased suspicion as part of the talk that every black child - and especially male - receives when they are young. Here, I try to insulate myself with another form of privilege as a Penn student, wearing Penn gear if I leave when it's dark and still trying not to leave without a group. If I walk to Penn's campus, the idea is simply to justify my presence there to be able to use that land freely.

Works Cited

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