

**URBS 277: Infrastructural Autoethnography**

For my autoethnography, I decided to go through everything I do each day in a very deliberate and intentional way in order to reflect on all my actions and recognize the structures and systems that enable me to do each of them. I started my day with a warm shower and as the hot steamy water poured on me I asked myself - what enables me to do this? The deeper I went into thought the more I realized the sheer number of steps it took for the water to be collected, purified, stored and, finally, transported to me. I took a moment to not only recognize the labor of many workers who currently work at the water treatment facility, but also the many construction workers that built the structures at these treatment facilities and put together a network of pipes all the way from the reservoir to my apartment. As humans we need water for every basic need to survive. We often take running water as granted, but there are so many people around the world who do not have access to clean running water. To think of life without this passive, yet so important, structure as the source of life is fascinating. I can imagine the workers in the water system infrastructure to be from low-income families who depend on income from the physical work. As a society, we see lifting heavy objects and physical work as a role performed by the masculine gender. My suspicion is that majority of construction workers would identify as male.

When I was walking to the testing site for my covid test on the high-rise field, I noticed the variety of infrastructures like public transportation system, road networks, food distribution networks, electricity and power grids that all intersect with each other at the intersection of 40<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Street. At this crossing, we also see Penn's New College House West being constructed. Unsurprisingly, like the construction workers for water systems, most workers at this site would identify as men. As Lakritz (2020) mentions in *Insider*, only 9.9% of the construction industry's workers identify as women. These systems indirectly contribute to how socially gender

is seen - binary and specific character traits for each side. It is important to think about these systems, because they, inherently, define our view as a society of who is more able as a provider.

As I continued through my day, a large chunk of my day was spent on Zoom for my classes and meetings. Over the course of this pandemic, this space, even though not physical, has become extremely important to the way we live life. As social beings, our existence is deeply attached to other humans. We want to talk, share and love. This past year technological systems have enabled us to do that as we focus on keeping ourselves and our communities safe and healthy. Looking deeply into these systems, I thought about who builds these systems - college-educated software engineers at big tech companies. The pay that software engineers receive at these companies is drastically higher than other workers who are constructing physical structures to fulfill our basic needs as humans. As a society, it is important to make the distinction between physically and mentally intense work and what we reward more. This is a great example of inequity in infrastructural incomes. Moreover, I also think about the privilege one has because of open access to the internet and technology that we need to survive through this pandemic. Communities of color, neighborhoods with poorer demographics and rural, remote communities often do not have access to free internet which deprives them of the resources they need to not just get through this pandemic but also for them to prosper as a community.

Throughout my exploration of different infrastructure systems, I spent time reflecting on how much pre-existing knowledge I had about each of them. Some clearly felt closer to me since I physically interact with them each day compared to other infrastructural systems that impact me more passively. Specifically, as opposed to construction of water systems which seems distant despite its importance, I think a food distribution system or park system is closer to my day-to-day conscious experience. What directly impacts me in a food distribution network are the food

delivery workers who serve as the most direct link to me. Labor that is responsible of supplying ingredients to grocery stores and restaurants are one step further and farm workers who work to make grow these ingredients are further away so on and so forth. From a racial, gender and economic stand point, the folks who deliver my food are often Black, male, and/or from lower-income backgrounds. Food delivery workers support a very important structure in our society that fulfills the basic human needs just like water supply, yet the pay for these workers is extremely low and the work itself involves late hours. This reinstates my initially proposed question of why certain infrastructures are valued more than others, despite similar levels of importance. I believe the more commonplace and older a system gets, the lesser we value it in our lives.

This semester, I went on a walk to Clark Park every day. For this assignment, when I got there to take notes, I decided to focus more deeply on who *uses* this space instead of following the same pattern from our previous discussion about who *makes* and *runs* these systems. As I sat on one of the benches on this early evening walk, I noticed other people who occupied this space. People sat on benches, played in the field, jogged around the area, enjoyed a picnic among many other activities. What drew my attention was how each person in the area had their own unique aesthetic. Specifically, many folks sitting on the benches near me wore jewelry including rings and piercings. Certain clothing articles and colors also seemed distinct. Traditionally in the very conservative society I grew up in, I was taught to believe that certain articles like jewelry are feminine, while others like denim and leather clothes more masculine. Interestingly enough, that was not the case at this park. As someone who is questioning, it was refreshing to see the ability for folks to openly express their self in urban spaces like this park. However, I wonder given how we perform gender in this society, were all “males” wearing jewelry or *feminine* clothing articles identified as queer or a women?

Throughout this exercise as I explored the different infrastructures that touch my life, I realized that all of them were equally important. Each space allowed for its own expression of our gendered selves and is often dominated by certain communities. Some structures like water systems are seen more common place while others like the internet are still seen as a amenity. It is important that we bridge the gap in provision of such infrastructures, so that we can empower everyone in society. These are the resources that can provide uplift communities. It is up to us to determine what systems we consider vital and how we value those who provide them.

## References

Lakritz, Talia. "10 Occupations That Are Still Dominated by Men," March 8, 2020.  
<https://www.insider.com/male-jobs-women-underrepresented-numbers-2019-8#only-399-of-financial-analysts-are-female-4>.