

Sample Autoethnography #4
Urbs 277- Gender, Sex & Urban Life
Infrastructural Auto-Ethnography

The assignment: keep an infrastructural journal for a day noting key observations between how you/other people interact with it. Then write a descriptive narrative revealing what you found out. That is the prompt that I, second-year, black, female, and First Generation Low Income student, Sereina Ferguson was assigned to complete. The task was nevertheless easy, but the reality of the long list of things that I had written was nowhere close to being digestible; it was even hard to swallow. Not only because of the clear injustices embedded in the infrastructure that I interact with on a daily basis but because of the unavoidable shame and guilt that I feel while interacting with it, and those feelings carry with me every day. Every day that I step foot out of the comfy little single apartment dorm that I live in, and every moment when I return, because whether we want to believe it or not, infrastructure, systemic racism, environmental racism, inequality, inequity, et al. aren't just tragedies of society that are characterized and supported by physical forces but they are also moving entities within us. And the hardest part of this process was acknowledging and accepting that I represent infrastructure too, and being Black didn't ease the discomfort of this overwhelming reality.

So, throughout the beautiful Saturday that I spent developing my journal, I recognized a myriad of ugly disproportionate features that concretizes infrastructure and the true essence of it in the setting that I live in. Before diving deeper into a few of them that really provoked thought and impacted my navigation through Philly, I would first like to list all of them because each of them are very deserving of attention and worthy of including in this narrative that I am trying to convey. These are the sources that I took notice in how infrastructure lies within them- their accessibility within the Penn dynamic/community in contrast to outside of that bubble: laundry, water (specifically, hot water), electricity, Covid testing, pest extermination, food accessibility, elevators, internet connection, labor (including racial make-up of that), social life, housing (considers homelessness and poverty), and mental health resources.

To explore a little deeper into some of the systems that I observed that had multiple complexes to them, I first want to start off by addressing the element of food accessibility. As a highly aided student, when it comes to food accessibility, Penn basically pays me to eat. Whether it be healthy or unhealthy meals, I have the freedom and access, while limited to the extent of dining-dollar "friendly" locations, to explore food options and also to make a conscious effort/decision to take advantage of the opportunity to have a diet of fresh foods. While I struggled freshman fall to see the alternative side of only eating burgers, pizza, donuts, and a long list of other foods that appear as "the ultimate food heaven", I have now as a sophomore realized the chance that I have to engage with fresh and organic food. First off, the word *organic* isn't even a thing in my house, because we've never had the money to afford a diet strictly of organic food. So as I started my

Saturday morning off with a bowl of organic cereal, organic oat milk, with some slices of organic strawberries and blueberries, topped off with a drizzle of organic honey (yeah I kind of went all out), I couldn't help but feel like my parents would be disappointed in me at that moment. And it wasn't because I was doing anything wrong, but because I was doing everything right, and doing everything that I couldn't do when I was at home with my family. In the black community, this is called acting "bougie", a term that has prevented even the richest black person from expressing their new lifestyle, that simply money permits them to have. So yes, every time I indulge and/or prepare a healthy, plant-based meal, I feel guilty and somewhat like a trader, and I feel even worse when I can feel the judgemental stares of the all black dining staff as they watch me scan my items, but the point is that this concept is much bigger than me, and very much stems from the ingrained inaccessibility to fresh food to ethnic minorities, specifically Black and Hispanic communities. In the West Philadelphia community, which Penn is located right in the middle of, there has been an idea of food insecurity, a food desert which some people call it but I learned that these terms do not completely define the problem, because there is plenty of food around. The question is what kind of food? What kind of food is accessible because of prices and also because of location? When you have Penn students expressing that the closing of Fresh Grocer was a terrible decision because the prices there for food, in particular, fresh food, was a lot cheaper than the new ACME, that's a problem, because I couldn't imagine how local residents feel.

In addition to the infrastructure of food in the urban community of Philly where Penn's campus resides, I want to address the interrelationship between race and labor, while being still in slight conversation with the element of food inaccessibility. When I first came to Penn, I noticed something that didn't make sense to me, and that was why the staff was all Black (for the majority), and that is something that I reflected on while writing my journal. As we have discussed so many different topics about the social and political uses of urban spaces, the knowledge that I have gained only has further strengthened my strong speculation of racism in this dynamic. Specifically, it made me think of Jackson's piece *She Was a Member of the Family* and the roots of slavery, when thinking about the complex and racist theory behind filling labor positions with solely ethnic minorities, in urban spaces that mainly cater to white, wealthy individuals (can you see how this looks like slavery?). And as a reality that is undeniably true, which we can see in the restaurants, in CVS, in our own Penn dining staff, in who salts the pavements and who has cleaned up the snow, this is an observation that disgusts me and forces me to think about the stereotypic tropes that once embodied the society Black Americans lived in- black hands feeding the white mouth, while simultaneously not having access to the daily product that they interact with. Accordingly, I refuse to believe the condescending justification as this being Penn's way of "giving back" to the community. Needless to say, I am very interested in diving more into this phenomenon throughout the course of the remaining semester.

The last observation that I wanted to draw attention to was the entitlement that many of us have towards how we decide to occupy and use urban spaces. Often, we tend to think of urban spaces as playgrounds, places for us to neglect our own inhibitions, and this is definitely something Penn students and faculty take advantage of. However, how is it that we still feel like we have the right to do this, much less in a careless way, in the midst of a pandemic that directly negatively impacts the poorer communities? The simple answer is because we have the privilege to do so. This is no different than what we have perceived throughout the multiple readings that reviewed social tragedies (water poisoning, fatal dehydration from excessive heat, etc.) that arises from the exploitation and negligence to care for the people that make up these urban environments. Penn's decision to allow more students back onto campus, was an indirect admission of money being more important than the lives of actual people. And while we have daily access to free Covid testing, these residents don't. Yet, what they do have are 9-5 jobs that do not permit them the time to routinely visit the doctor nor the financial freedom to get tested whenever they suspect a symptom. So, with that said, the least Penn could do is invest in a site that at least gives residents free access to testing as well.