

## Sample Autoethnography #5

### Infrastructural Autoethnography

Like the vast majority of people in the United States, I am entirely dependent on infrastructure for every aspect of my life. In theory, I knew this to be true, but my privilege has afforded me the luxury of never having to think about it. If I am cold, I turn on the heater in my room; if I am thirsty, I fill up a glass with filtered water from the sink; if I am antsy, I go on a drive around town. My status as a wealthy, white, cis-gender woman means that I do not have to be conscious of these decisions. For the privileged people of the world, there exists an assumption that infrastructure will always be there to meet our needs. This is contrary to the many other communities in the U.S. who feel as though infrastructure is a source of stress, anxiety and betrayal. This paper will serve as a reflection and exploration of this assumption by examining what the recent disaster in Texas can tell us when we posit it against wealthy and white suburban towns, like mine in Princeton, New Jersey.

For the past week, Texan communities have been suffering due to a devastating winter storm that resulted in a state-wide blackout. But this loss of power and heat has not been equally imposed amongst all people. In this very recent example of environmental racism, Black and Brown Texans have been disproportionately impacted by the outcomes of the storm (Dobbins and Tabuchi 1). This is because they tend to live in neighborhoods with fewer food resources and in older homes that are more likely to have at-risk and outdated pipelines. This is in stark contrast to the way the upper-middle class experiences infrastructure crises. Even in Texas, those communities are not experiencing the same level of crisis because negligence related to infrastructure is not tolerated in wealthy, white towns (Dobbins and Tabuchi 1).

We know this to be true because of the way the Northeast responds to cold weather and winter storms. On the day I kept my infrastructure journal, February 19th, my home of Princeton, NJ had already experienced two major snow storms and was anticipating another come Friday.

When I woke up that morning, my bedroom was freezing, a daily occurrence in the winter. My room sits directly on top of our garage and is not well-insulated. To fix this issue, my parents installed a heater in my room when I was in high school so that I could be more comfortable. Before walking downstairs for breakfast, it has become part of my routine to turn the heater on so that my room will be warm when I return for class. That morning, I ate strawberries with honey for breakfast. These strawberries were from two days before when my mom bought extra food for us, knowing that a snowstorm would be coming (which would mean we could not leave the house). Here we see another example of infrastructure consistently supporting the needs of the wealthy. Since the pandemic began almost a year ago, 63% of Americans report living paycheck to paycheck (Berbaum 2). Constrained to a tight budget, many people cannot afford to buy groceries in bulk in preparation for this kind of hibernation. If they do have the money to buy extra, it does not help that 2.3 million Americans live in a food desert, as illustrated by the current situation in Texas (USDA). Defined by the federal government, a person lives in a food desert if they do not live within a one mile radius of a supermarket and do not own a car to travel to a further one. Wealthy and white communities, like mine, are privileged not just for the ability to have that financial safety net, but also for being surrounded, oftentimes, by 3+ grocery store options.

However, the infrastructural security that many people experience in Princeton, and towns like it, is not universal. There are deeply rooted class and racial barriers that leave communities in Princeton feeling some kind of distrust towards the more general infrastructure systems. After I finished class for the day, my partner (who lives with me) and I asked my mom if the roads were plowed well enough for us to pick up lunch at a local restaurant. She agreed, so we took my car and drove off. Because I live in a development, all of our plowing is taken care

of through annual fees, including the walkway up to our house and our driveway. The roads near my house are always paved and salted as quickly as possible— this is not just true for my development, but also for my town and county, too. My family has never experienced an issue with plowing where we live, but the same is not true for sidewalks. Princeton receives well-placed criticism for not being a walker-friendly place. During the winter months, sidewalks are not cleared which becomes an accessibility issue. So while it is possible to walk for leisure, there are not enough sidewalks cleared to walk into the downtown area. In practice, this means that the only viable transportation method to get there for several months out of the year is through driving. People who do not own a car are forced to use public transportation, which was unreliable before the pandemic and poses a safety issue now in 2021. And, in Princeton, the majority of people who find themselves in that situation are people of color and/or people of low-socioeconomic status.

During my time spent observing, I picked up on another violent manifestation of racism. Of white Flint residents, Pulido writes: “they suffer a fate similar to their Black neighbors insofar as the entire city is racialized as Black” (Pulido 2). In predominantly Black towns with few white residents, the town is identified as a “Black town;” the white people who live there are treated worse because they are grouped into the same category, or racialized, as Black. The disparity is that within predominantly white towns, Black residents are not afforded any of the privileges of Whiteness. In other words, they are, even then, treated as though they are Black. Undoubtedly fueled by racism and racial capitalism, majority-white towns are and can never be entirely racialized as white, despite the reverse being true.

Privilege, coupled with a lack of awareness, creates a fallacy for people that infrastructure works, and that it works for everyone the way it works for them. But this is not the

reality that many people experience: infrastructure can be (is) failing, stress-inducing, and traumatizing. While I have recognized the ways privilege has created a kind of tone deafness for me, this reflection on my infrastructure journal has helped me remove a blindspot about access to and reliance on infrastructure that may not have existed previously.

## Works Cited

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