

URBS 277 / GSWS 277: Gender, Sex & Urban Life
Spring 2021
Instructor: Davy Knittle

Infrastructural Autoethnography Assignment

Due Date: Thursday, February 25th, at 12:00 PM (on Canvas)

Introduction: Ethnography, Autoethnography, and Infrastructure

Ethnography: “Ethnography is a method that involves a period of immersion in a local group, community, or place. It gathers accounts of practices while also observing and/or participating in those practices. Ethnography has its origins in anthropology and has spread to many other disciplines, including sociology, cultural studies, design, computer science, and physical geography. Central to ethnography is participant observation, but it [can also draw] upon interviews, photography, video recordings, archival materials, drawings, and other forms of data that help ethnographers immerse themselves in the setting that they are seeking to research.”

Eric Laurier, Rebekah Miller, Daniel I. Muñoz Zech. “Ethnography,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2017.

Autoethnography: “Autoethnography is a genre that places the self of the researcher and/or narrator within a social context. It refers to works that provoke questions about the nature of ethnographic knowledge by troubling the persistent dichotomies of insider versus outsider, distance and familiarity, objective observer versus participant, and individual versus culture. Moreover, it reflects a view of ethnography as both a reflexive and a collaborative enterprise, in which the life experiences of the [researcher] and our relationships with our interlocutors should be interrogated and explored.”

Deborah Reed-Danahay, “Autoethnography,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2017.

Infrastructure: “The basic systems and services, such as transportation and power supplies, that a country or organization uses in order to work effectively.”

Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020.

The Assignment: This assignment asks you to conduct an autoethnography of your relationship to infrastructure. This assignment will take place in two parts. **Part 1** requires keeping an infrastructure journal for **one full day** in which you note the infrastructural systems (water treatment, heating, roads, transit, food distribution, telecommunications, etc.) you use on a daily basis. What systems support your daily life? Who is responsible for the maintenance and operations of those systems? **Part 2** asks you to write a narrative description of what you noticed about your relationship to infrastructure during your observation, and to relate your observations to our conversations about the interrelationship between sexuality, gender, race, labor, environment, and urban space.

Submission: The completed version of the assignment should be composed of a **1000 to 1250-word** narrative description of the infrastructural systems with which you interacted, what you observed, and what your observation revealed about how urban space, gender, and sexuality inhere in the infrastructural elements with which you engaged. You will use your infrastructure journal to

write your narrative description. **Please note that you will not need a works cited page for this assignment, unless you conduct outside research, which you are welcome, but not at all required, to do.**

Please submit your completed assignment to Canvas by 12:00 PM on February 25th, 2021

Guidelines for Observation

Examples of Potential Infrastructural Contexts: water system, roads, subway, street grid, houses and buildings, elevators, internet, electricity and power grid, food distribution network, waste disposal system and landfills, parks system, bike lanes and sidewalks, heating and cooling systems, etc.

Questions to consider as you keep your infrastructure journal:

- What are the infrastructural systems with which you engage? What counts as infrastructure? Why?
- Which of these systems contribute, directly or indirectly, to how you or others perform gender? What might be gained by thinking about these systems from the perspective of gender studies?
- How do you interact with these systems? Are there particular actions you take? Are there things you touch or use to engage with these systems?
- How much of a choice do you feel you have about the infrastructural systems you document? What kinds of decisions do you make?
- Are some infrastructural systems more interesting to you than others?
- Are some infrastructural systems more transparent to you than others?
- What other information would you need to be able to definitively identify whose labor facilitates the infrastructural systems with which you engage?
- Do you want to include your interactions with other people (if any) in your infrastructure journal? How is your use of infrastructure related to other people's use of infrastructure?
- If you do include other people in your journal, do you and they agree about how to interact with these infrastructural systems? What is the nature of your agreement or disagreement?
- What kind of style will you use when you write your essay?
- Are there social norms around your use of a particular infrastructural system? How do those social norms contribute to how you and a given piece of infrastructure interact?
- Do some interactions with infrastructure make you more or less comfortable? If so, why might that be the case?
- What emotional responses do you have to the infrastructural systems with which you interact?
- How are the infrastructural systems you describe related to questions of racial, gender, or environmental justice? Do some infrastructural systems strike you as more closely related to questions of environmental, racial, or gender justice than others?