Re-writing pathways – an autoethnographic story of post-storm geographies

- Allison Hui

It was the sudden dimming of all of the lights in our flat on Saturday afternoon that prompted the first of what was to become many conversations about infrastructural disruption.

“It feels strange not to have an emergency kit here like we always did back home,” my partner reflected, sitting across the table from me as we ate lunch. The rain pounded down outside and the Lune River rushed passed outside the window. All day it had been moving much more swiftly than usual – occasionally carrying huge tree trunks and other debris out to sea at a surprising speed.

“But what would you put in it? The contexts aren’t really that comparable.” Growing up in the Canadian prairies, winter emergency kits were standard equipment for both of us – particularly within cars, as their collection of such things as blankets, mittens, hats, flashlights, flares and basic food provisions could mean the difference between life and death if winter highway driving and snowstorms ever resulted in someone being stranded 10+ kilometers from any human settlements in -25°C weather.

“I don’t know, but it seems strange not to have one.” At the time the conversation petered out here. But in the next few days we had more opportunities to reflect on how the built structure of our flat affected feelings of preparedness as well. In the build-up to the millennium, with fears of Y2K crippling computer systems and major infrastructures across North America, major media outlets repeatedly suggested the importance of each household having provisions for at least a few weeks in case of any major disruptions. Both of our families, having connections to farming and a well-established propensity for hoarding, laughed at the advice, already having freezers and shelves filled with multiple weeks of food. Even without the threat of a disruption, the large houses and basements that are standard in the wide-open prairies made finding space for such a storehouse of provisions easy, and in our cases, normal.

As it turned out, when the lights went out on Saturday evening at around 10:30pm, our shelves were stocked due more to luck than to planning. We had forced ourselves to go shopping earlier in the day, despite the rain, and refilled the small spaces in our flat where food was meant to be stored. While some of it was raw or perishable, when we rose the next morning to find the power still off, we realized quite a lot also could have been in a Canadian emergency kit – dried fruit, a range of nuts, and things like bread and honey that could be eaten even in the absence of any form of cooking apparatus. We were more prepared than we realized.

There were, however, still significant gaps. By the light of mobile phones we were quickly able to find two torches – one battery powered and the other a wind-up torch – and a flat of 100 tea light candles that had been purchased a year earlier on a whim and never opened. But we couldn’t find any matches. At some point we did have some, but neither of us could remember where, if anywhere, they might be now. The lighter that had once been lying around had also been lost a year before. One of the friends who was visiting when the power cut occurred mused that it was too bad that he had stopped smoking – otherwise he would definitely have a lighter. So he and my partner set out to find someone with matches and to check on the level of the river – which was still high but not obviously flooding anywhere nearby. They didn’t have far to go – by the emergency lights in our block of flats people were gathering, sharing candles and matches, and commenting on the strength of the rain. Then we went back to what we had been doing – playing a board game – as it was just as easily done by the flicker of candlelight.

The next morning we woke to find power had not been restored, and so we set out to take stock of what was going on. Neighbours in our flat had commented the previous night that the centre of town had been closed due to flooding, and that they had ended up leading a group of people over the footpaths on castle hill since some people, unaccustomed to walking in Lancaster, didn’t know alternative routes to make their way home. It quickly became clear that sometime after 1am, when our guests left, the flood water had backed all the way up the Quay from the town centre to levels that allowed a large wheely bin and someone else’s potted shrub to float up the street to in front of our balcony. Owners at the restaurant and pup in the next block were already airing out and surveying their properties, which had gotten a lot of water, and as we got closer to town it became clear why we had seen traffic turning back all morning – there was still a substantial amount of water in the street near the Millenium bridge and bus station which prevented all through-traffic.

[photo]

We therefore diverted ourselves to a new route – up over castle hill. At the top of the hill, many small groups of people on their phones made clear that despite many mobile towers going down when the power went out, one or more were clearly still accessible from this high vantage point. Accessing websites to try and find news out about the electricity proved frustrating as they wouldn’t load properly or quickly, yet our phones (which thankfully were nearly fully-charged when the power went out) could still text fine. And thus was established one key place in our post-flood geographies – a communication point. We would return to castle hill in the coming hours and days to send messages to family back in Canada, to receive advice from them (copied from the Lancaster City Council websites that we couldn’t access easily) about how long food could remain frozen in an unopened freezer, to coordinate meet-ups with friends and colleagues, to distribute our landline number (which was still fully working) and to access Twitter, which we eventually figured out offered both up-to-date and easily downloaded news.

At the town end of castle hill, we ran into a colleague and his daughter, out for a walk. It was at this point that we first heard the expected duration of the power outage – two or three days – and our understanding of just how much adaptation we would be doing began to develop. News from the university – where he had been called to investigate water leakage the afternoon before – also prompted our first questions about what might be happening on campus.

This interaction became indicative of how familiar communication pathways were re-written during the blackout. In the absence of easy internet access and more definitive sources of news, we became more reliant upon – and even attracted towards – people whose own pathways and networks provided interesting stories. A friend whose father works for the police force became an important source of news about not only the mobility of more staff from as far away as Blackpool, but also the reason for the closure of both major bridges across the Lune River (a steel container that floated into them the previous day) and foiled looting at McDonalds (the perpetrators planned via Twitter and arrived to find police has joined in their meet up). As we wandered, we accumulated observations and information of use to others – where the working phone boxes and ATMs could be located, which corner shops seemed to be informally open despite having no power, and which shops had emergency lighting on seemingly unimportant things (brightly lit Christmas displays in the windows of M&S seemed in particularly poor taste). We wandered the city not only to see the city, but also to see whose paths we might cross and what information those crossings might bring. We checked in on friends to see how they were doing and what if anything they needed. We moved physically rather than virtually to touch base and learn about our world.

Given the amount of raw and perishable food we had just purchased the day before, and the dominance of our flat by electricity infrastructures (hob, cooker, but thankfully not the water pumps as in some other new-builds), one of our major tasks for the day was to find a place to cook it. This proved quite easy as the friends who had been over the previous night had a gas hob and had already offered that, if the power was still out on Sunday, we would be welcome to come by and use it. So for the next two nights this became another key place in our post-storm geography: a home with not only gas for cooking, but also a battery-powered radio (something that was missing from our accidental collection of emergency materials).

Having access to their radio during our visits further re-wrote our post-storm geography. We learned the Salt Ayre Sports Centre was acting as a refuge, which meant we had another source of hot water slightly closer to our flat. The quality of this information was not always reliable though. After hearing that the Morecambe Asda was open, my partner walked over on Sunday only to get there to discover closed doors and another man who had similarly come due to the radio message on BBC Lancashire.

What was interesting then was how the power cuts re-directed our lives for a few days. The cessation of flows of electricity prompted shifts in our mobilities – narrowing the spaces in which some practices could take place (mobile communication on hill tops) and shifting other places for practice normally rooted in our home to other locations (hot water at Salt Ayre, cooking at a friends’ home 20 minutes away by foot). Even within our home, the use of candlelight and torches changes how we inhabited the spaces – with 100 tea lights we could have lit the entirety of our sitting room, as electric light normally does (being on one switch). But instead we found ourselves gathering in a corner of the room around a few strategically placed candles. The outage also prompted many conversations about those who escaped – using largely private means of transportation (at least in the first few days until buses and trains were running again) to migrate to areas and homes still on the grid. Being without personal transport of our own, these migrations were a subject of curiosity. On Monday night we witnessed what seemed to be a more local migration – with the somewhat surprising sight of a middle-aged couple sitting in their red Audi convertible eating food outside a chippy in Primrose – one of the few areas that still had generator power after the second outage. Perhaps, we speculated, they had set off on a drive to find anywhere with light, and therefore hot food. The car itself suggested they weren’t exactly locals, and hadn’t arrived on foot as so many others had.

As others, and Bowker and Star, have noted, the disruption made infrastructures visible in ways that they hadn’t been previously. On both Sunday and Monday night small pockets of lights could be seen from higher vantage points, prompting questions about the geographies of sub-stations and generators. Why did part of Marsh remain fully lit both nights? Why were some but not all pedestrian lights in a roundabout part of the same substation? Or the street lights but not houses on one side of a street? Just how long could a generator run on diesel given the size of the area it was clearly powering?

The disruption of infrastructure also brought attention to the existence of compensatory knowledge and materials. Not having power to cool a freezer isn’t a problem for up to 36 hours, so long as you know not to open it up. Keeping the more than 3 litres of milk we had acquired on Saturday fresh wasn’t a problem when they were submerged in a bucket of cold water. Keeping warm at night wasn’t difficult after importing hot water in thermoses and then filling a hot water bottle. Even walking through the strangely dark streets of Lancaster at night became easier and more normal over the course of two days. Despite having a torch, we rarely used it as in the absence of any street lights our eyes adjusted and could still distinguish between puddles and piles of leaves, pavements and streets (curb lines are easy to pick out even in relative darkness). Within the black out we were able to find a new sense of accomplishment in alternative ways of doing things and exercise sometimes long dormant skills and knowledge. Though many of these would surely be unsustainable in the context of our ‘normal’, harried everyday lives, they held a certain sense of appeal. When the normal mesh of everyday practices was disturbed, we could afford to take time to venture further and perform tasks more slowly.

When power returned for the second time – with a promise that it was less likely to be cut again – I certainly felt a sense of relief. The planning of paths and infrastructural access for basic tasks like cooking would no longer need to continue. A cup of tea could be made at home, rather than only after the completion of much more winding pathways through public spaces. But there was lingering disappointment as well. The exceptional state of infrastructural interruption had opened up possibilities in the landscape of practices as well as of energy, and returning to normal routines was easy but also anticlimactic. We know now, however, what to include in our emergency kit.