

MOBILITIES OUTSIDE THE CENTER:
Towards a Study of Rural Mobilities in the Philippines

By

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ABSTRACT

In 2018 Mimi Sheller called for a decolonized study of mobilities in her seminal book *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*, following a Western-centric focus since the mobility turn. This thesis is my way of responding to that call. Informed by the new mobilities paradigm and its subsequent theories on the politics of mobility, I argue that transport and commute have been overly studied in the context of urban settings particularly in the Philippines. This has become more apparent during the pandemic with transport advocacy groups' ongoing demand for dignified commute and the emerging bike culture in Metro Manila. Drawing from documentary research; interviews with members of transport advocacy groups and supercommuters; and autoethnography of my bike rides in two provinces in Southern Luzon, Philippines I propose a rural turn in the study of mobilities. Such a refocusing is indispensable for a more holistic and critical understanding of mobilities especially in the context of a developing nation. In the end, I identify potential themes which require further attention in pursuing rural mobility studies in the Philippines and in other similar geographic areas.

Key words: rural mobilities, mobility studies, Philippines, public transport, commute

For all the mobile warriors outside the center whose stories are yet to be heard

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgment.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Tables and Figures.....	vi
List of Abbreviations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	
Over-urbanization of mobility studies: A lesson from the pandemic.....	6
1.1 <i>An overview of the mobilities turn</i>	6
1.2 <i>What is amiss in the transport discussions during the pandemic?</i>	7
1.3 <i>Metro Manila as an archetype of Philippine (urban) transport studies</i>	10
1.4 <i>Magna Carta for Dignified Commute: Ensuring whose dignity?</i>	12
1.5 <i>Metro Manila's emerging bike culture and the (non) future of public transport</i>	16
Chapter 2	
Supercommute: The missing link in urban and rural mobilities.....	21
2.1 <i>The Philippines is an archipelago: Metaphor and reality</i>	21
2.2 <i>Supercommuting as daily experience of the Filipinos</i>	24
2.3 <i>Checkpoints and essential work: Supercommute during COVID-19</i>	29
2.4 <i>Making sense of supercommuting: Motilities and mobilities as events</i>	35
Chapter 3	
Rural Mobilities: Mobilities outside the center.....	39
3.1 <i>Placing mobility studies in the rural</i>	39
3.2 <i>Musings of a sociologist/anthropologist on wheels</i>	42
3.3 <i>The promise of a rural turn in mobilities</i>	49
Conclusion.....	51
References.....	53

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1	Key items of Newman’s Mobility Bill of Rights (2017) versus AltMobility PH’s Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting (2019).....	14
Figure 1	A jeepney terminal in Laguna, Philippines.....	5
Figures 2-4	Glimpses of road infrastructure in Lucban-Majayjay Road.....	46
Figure 5	The author at the welcome arch at Tiaong, Quezon.....	47

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APOR	Authorized Person Outside of Residence
CALABARZON	Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon Provinces (Region)
COMPAS	Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (University of Oxford)
EDSA	Epifanio De los Santos Avenue
DOTr	Department of Transportation (Philippines)
IATF	Inter-Agency Task Force
LRT	Light Railway Transit
MMDA	Metro Manila Development Authority
NCR	National Capital Region
NCTS	National Center for Transportation Studies (University of the Philippines)
NMP	New Mobilities Paradigm
SLEX	South Luzon Expressway
SURP	School of Urban and Regional Planning (University of the Philippines)
TNVS	Transport Network Vehicle Service
UP	University of the Philippines

INTRODUCTION

“It’s getting dark and car lights are beginning to flash. The streets at the heart of the city, at this time, are fenced by a countless number of people staring at overpacked vehicles. For each passenger who alights the jeepney, twenty have become like warriors fighting to get a ride, it is as if they are battling for dear life itself. At the doors of the buses, bodies are like morsels of food forced inside an already full mouth. A passenger-less taxi suddenly arrives and ten hands wave at it to stop. Meanwhile, those inside their cars are at rest, smiling, sitting comfortably in their Cadillacs, Buicks, Plymouths, and Pontiacs.”

– Edgardo M. Reyes, *In the Claws of Light* (1966)¹

I have been a commuter for most of my existence, not by choice but forced by necessity. Just like most people my daily commute has been a source of frustration and delight. The former is brought by the dire public transport conditions in the Philippines, my home country, while the latter, owing to the time being stuck in traffic, is due to moments when I can ponder on a multitude of things and do a few leisurely activities that a cramped space permits. My interest in public transport and commute piqued during one of my daily jeepney² (see Figure 1) rides to work in 2018. Back then, I was residing at Parañaque City while working at Manila, a distance of about 16 kilometers, which took me more or less an hour depending on the traffic, and constituted two transfers from tricycle to jeepney, and finally the Light Railway Transit (LRT)³. From the LRT Central Station, I had to walk to my workplace for at least 20 minutes passing through the dense streets near Manila City Hall and the ever busy Lagusnilad underpass. But the most challenging part in my daily commute was securing a jeepney

¹ This cited quotation is from Reyes’ novel *Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1966) originally written in Filipino, and was roughly translated with the assistance of Ian Derf Salvaña, MA Political Science (CEU 2019-2020)

² Considered as the Philippines’ main mode of transportation and is largely considered a cultural icon symbolizing Filipino ingenuity

³ One of Metro Manila’s three elevated metro lines which starts in Pasay City, traversing through Manila, and ends in Quezon City.

seat as I had to get ahead of other passengers, often at the expense of physically hurting not only myself but also my fellow commuters. It was a scene reminiscent of the above quoted passage from Edgardo M. Reyes' novel "In the Claws of Light".

At first, I thought that such commute struggles are generally normalized among the majority of passengers, especially in Metro Manila. I observed, however, that not only do individual passengers make personal coping mechanisms (e.g. waking up early to avoid the throng of passengers; finding alternative routes; taking alternative modes of transport; residing near their workplaces; buying their own vehicle) but there are also instances of "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott 1985) such as posting rants and memes online, and a growing social movement by transport advocacy groups notably AltMobility PH. The latter, after continuous lobbying, successfully crafted an unprecedented Magna Carta for Dignified Commute in close coordination with legislators outlining a "commuter's bill of rights" and the institutionalization of a Commuter Welfare Office. As of this writing, it is yet to be passed into law.

While the efforts of AltMobility PH along with other transport advocacy groups is indispensable in raising awareness about commuters' woes, I noticed it to be entirely focused on the struggles experienced by commuters in most urban centers in the Philippines, if not solely in Metro Manila, the nation's capital region. This has become more pronounced with the mobility disruptions induced by the current pandemic. Even the discussions by transport planners and the solutions they propose are centered on the national capital region and in dialogue with the Metro Manila Development Authority

(MMDA)⁴. This made me realize how urban-centric the ongoing discourse on mobilities, particularly about transport and commute, is in the Philippines. Unfortunately, this leaves out almost half of the Philippine population in the discussion as the most recent census in 2015 identified 48.8% of the population residing in rural areas (Philippine Statistics Authority 2019). For someone who hails from the province, I am aware of the stark difference between the transport situation in urban and rural areas in the Philippines. The former offers relatively more options other than the common modes of transport such as Transport Network Vehicle Service (TNVS) and rail transit compared to the latter which remains captive users of motorcycles, tricycles and jeepneys. Not to mention the varied ways of road use between these areas. Moreover, given the archipelagic nature of the Philippines, many rural regions, especially in island and coastal towns, are dependent on inter-island and maritime transport which is not a feature of Metro Manila's transportation system and its neighboring regions which are entirely land and road-based. Lastly, there are observable differences in the notions of mobility, immobility, and fixity which further translates to varied concepts of time and space between urban and rural areas which are worthy of further attention.

It is in this light in which I am undertaking my research. Informed by the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) and in response to Mimi Sheller's call for mobility justice (2018), I will seek to answer the question: *How does a study of rural (mobilities) transport and commute contribute towards a more critical understanding of mobilities?* Relatedly, *what can we gain when we include forms of rural movements in analyzing*

⁴ Transport planners and advocacy groups insist the government to institutionalize certain reforms in the transport sector such as the shift in business model, and the putting up of infrastructures for bikes and other personal mobility devices (PMD) in Metro Manila.

regimes of mobility in the national and global levels? I would like to emphasize, however, that it is not my intention to place rural mobilities in opposition to urban mobilities. Rather, what I would like to highlight is the complementary relations between rural and urban forms of movements. In doing so, I will underscore the characteristics of rural mobilities instead of focusing on its so-called deficiencies in relation to urban mobilities. It is my claim, as will be developed in this thesis, that a study of rural mobilities especially in the context of a developing nation like the Philippines is integral towards a more coherent and potent critique of unjust and uneven mobility regimes. Furthermore, I assert that the characteristics of rural mobilities are reflective of and are a result of the dominant politics of mobility.

In answering my research question, I utilized a combination of methods primarily documentary research, interviews, and autoethnography. While the first two seems to be an obvious choice as I was dealing with policies and statements of both state and non-state actors, I feel that the latter needs to be justified. As such, I would like to disclose as early as now that this research comes from a particular position—my being a commuter. In a way, choosing to incorporate an autoethnography is how I come to terms with my positionality. Guided by Lila Abu-Lughod who, in *Writing Against Culture* (1991), reminds us of the real nature of impartiality, this thesis partly takes into account her prescriptions particularly “ethnographies of the particular”.

I have divided this thesis into three main chapters gradually directing my readers to the main themes of this research: (1) The over-urbanization of mobility studies mainly in the fields of transport and commute which led to under-theorization of rural mobilities; (2) this over-urbanization can be balanced by looking at intrazonal movements such as

supercommuting which serves as a conceptual link in understanding the complementary relations between rural-urban transport; and finally, (3) a proposal towards a study of rural mobilities.

Figure 1. A jeepney terminal in Laguna, Philippines



Source: Author

CHAPTER 1

OVER-URBANIZATION OF MOBILITY STUDIES: A LESSON FROM THE PANDEMIC

1.1 An overview of the mobilities turn

Human movements have always been a fascination among social thinkers and laypersons alike whether it deals with everyday forms of movements or protracted and historical ones. In the past decades, different disciplinary auspices dominated the study of movements in a compartmentalized manner notably geography, transport studies, and migration studies. However, this changed with the introduction of the “new mobilities paradigm” (NMP) in 2006 by John Urry and Mimi Sheller.

Tracing its epistemological roots from early theorists of mobility from the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, geography, migration studies, and sociology, this paradigm follows a mobile ontology which posits that movements define any social phenomenon. In other words, everything in society constantly moves in contrast to the ‘a-mobile’ or sedentarist views posed by majority, if not all, social theories. With this, all kinds of movement even non-human ones should be examined as the term “mobilities” now encompasses “a broad-ranging generic sense, embracing physical movement...to movement enhanced by technologies...[Mobilities] It also includes movements of images and information on local, national, and global media” (Urry & Sheller 2006, 212). In this regard, I may, at times, use mobility when referring to transport and commute as the latter is part of an overarching definition of the former, and is the common usage in transport literature.

It is no surprise, therefore, that since the development of NMP, studies on everyday forms of movements such as commuting have become replete. A quick browse on

specialized journals like *Mobilities* shows a long list of research focusing on the subject. Faulconbridge and Hui (2016) as well as Sheller and Urry (2016) have made this easier by doing exhaustive compilations. Even so, I noticed, and as already observed by Vannini (2010), that the majority of these inquiries were Western-centric often neglecting the experiences of those in the Global South.

As noted by Ponsavady (2018), this gradually changed in recent years as mobility researchers have come to recognize the importance of the Global South in understanding im/mobilities. Studies by Melissa Butcher (2011) on the commuting culture in Delhi's metro; Berna Yazici (2013) on the anthropology of traffic in Istanbul; and Doreen Lee (2015) on the infrastructural aptitude of individuals stuck in "absolute traffic" in Jakarta are just a few of the growing literature on the subject. More recently, Mimi Sheller in her seminal book *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (2018) called for a decolonized new mobilities paradigm by taking into account not only the Global South but also racialized, gendered, sexualized, and differently abled mobile subjectivities. Two years hence, we find Sheller's work to be more relevant as the world faced yet another "age of extreme", a global health crisis, which brought to the fore numerous mobility-related issues.

1.2 What is amiss in transport discussions during the pandemic?

I find it interesting, as many mobility scholars have also pointed out, that it took a pandemic for decades-old problems of inaccessibility and unequal access to urban transport to be finally acknowledged and taken seriously. In fact, a quick online search reveals how the current health crisis sparked discussion on its effects on mobilities. Among them is an online forum put up by University of Oxford's Centre on Migration,

Policy, and Society (COMPAS) and facilitated by Prof. Biao Xiang. It is dedicated for “discussion among researchers from multiple disciplines across the world to deepen our understandings of the crisis” specifically its relation to transport (Xiang 2020a, 2020b; Surico 2020). In a way, COVID-19 served as an equalizer as no nation-state was spared from its devastating effects especially in terms of mobilities. Pandemic-induced mobility disruptions and its catastrophic consequences were witnessed in various urban centers especially in densely populated cities in the Global South such as in New Delhi where an exodus of domestic labor migrants from the Indian capital to their home villages was deemed as “the greatest man-made tragedy” (Maskara 2020) in Indian history since the 1947 Partition. Meanwhile, in the Philippines’ National Capital Region (NCR), or commonly referred to as Metro Manila, the shutting down of all modes of public transport following President Rodrigo Duterte’s imposition of a Luzon-wide lockdown in mid-March 2020 has proven to be disastrous for most workers and those from middle to low socio-economic classes who are captive users of public transport. Prior to the pandemic, it is estimated that there are 12 million commuters accounting for 70% of total road trips in the region (Abad 2019; Ramos 2020).

Considered one of the strictest lockdowns in the world due to the national government’s highly militarized response, the Philippines’ urban mobility scene at the height of the pandemic can be characterized by multiple layers of regimes of mobility which gave unfettered power both to the national and local governments in determining whose movements are authorized, and at times legal. Following Schiller and Salazar (2013), regimes of mobility refers to “relationships between the privileged movements of some and the co-dependent but stigmatised and forbidden movement, migration and

interconnection of the poor, powerless and exploited” (Schiller & Salazar 2013, 6). Aside from the lockdown, which automatically limits movements, these regimes of mobility are manifested in several legal measures⁵ imposed by the national government which are implemented by local authorities. These include the “Authorized Person Outside of Residence” or the APOR policy which regulates the number of people going outdoors by issuing a single quarantine pass per household; interzonal checkpoints manned by uniformed personnel at each municipal, provincial and regional boundaries; travel permits issued by the local police to be presented at interzonal checkpoints; usage of face mask and face shield; and imposition of curfews. These multi-layered restrictions were heavily criticized as these hit the poor, who are mostly daily wage earners, and other marginalized sectors the hardest as their daily subsistence requires them to move constantly using mass transportation. Instances of “commuting pains” (Jalea 2020) and other similar difficulties faced by commuters in Metro Manila were decried even after lockdown measures were loosened by the government (Rey 2020).

Nevertheless, I deem it bemusing that while urban transport and commute experiences in the Philippines are well documented, impressions of rural mobilities notably transport and commute are lacking, if not totally non-existent. However, this is not unusual as already pointed out by Milbourne and Kitchen (2014) who discerned that the spatial focus of mobility research has largely been urban places. They further noted that, in the case of the United Kingdom, “the city has emerged as the archetypal space of (hyper-) mobility given its association with ‘speed, movement, energy and 24/7 economy” (Milbourne & Kitchen 2014, 327). Needless to say, just as the pandemic revealed deep-

⁵ RA 11469 or the Bayanihan to Heal as One (BAHO) Act, and the Omnibus Guidelines in the Implementation of Community Quarantine in the Philippines by the Inter Agency Task Force

seated mobility issues as any “disasters and the resulting disruptions of mobilities are one instance in which a range of different kinopolitical problems come into view” (Sheller 2018, 43), it also exposed the skewed focus of mobility studies towards urban movements and transport. A closer inspection of current Philippine transport studies as well as the overall transport and commute discourse exhibits that this discrepancy is very much evident even in the Global South.

1.3 Metro Manila as an Archetype of Philippine (Urban) Transport Studies

As I was poring over existing literature on transport in the Philippines, it became more apparent that much has been already said about the transport situation in Metro Manila whether by commuters themselves (Karunungan 2014; Go 2019) or by transport planners and other experts (Siy 2020; Sidel 2020). In fact, it has become a field of its own dominated by urban planners, engineers, and transport economists who unanimously demand for reform in transport business models and the strengthening of transport infrastructure. Basically, academic mobility scholarships in the Philippines have been entirely focused on transport planning and policy. As lamented by Michael D. Pante (2016), a Filipino geographer and transport historian, contemporary mobility and transport studies in the Philippines can be visibly scrutinized by examining the University of the Philippines’ (UP) School of Urban and Regional Planning (SURP) and National Center for Transportation Studies (NCTS) “as instruments of state building” which channel “funds and grants to commission projects that answer particular policy questions” (Pante 2016, 91). Although his comments are grounded on transport history as being understudied, I consider it analogous with my argument that urban transport is the predominant focus of transport studies in the Philippines.

Moreover, the current Philippine transport scholarship seems to be interested only in providing solutions to problems plaguing Metro Manila and other urban centers such as Metro Cebu in Visayas and Metro Davao in Mindanao. It is fascinating that the problematization of traffic and the general transport woes repeatedly highlights the experience of a typical Metro Manila commuter. This is extremely evident in the traffic reports by major national news outlets that always cover the traffic situation in Metro Manila particularly the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), the region's major thoroughfare. Aside from the news, this is also obvious in other forms of popular media, an example of which is Lizette Daluz' *Ang Hari ng Komyut*⁶ (2017). It is a comic strip set in Metro Manila portraying the everyday commute experience of a graduating student described as an outstanding (*katangi-tanging*) commuter, always early and attentive to traffic updates alongside other characteristics of an ideal commuter⁷.

Nonetheless, there are two specific events which convincingly illustrate the extent of urban-centric focus of the current transport studies and discussion in the Philippines. First, the ongoing discourse on dignified commute culminates in the crafting of Magna Carta for Dignified Commute. Second, the emerging bike culture in Metro Manila in response to the pandemic-induced disruptions in the transport sector.

1.4 Magna Carta for Dignified Commute: Ensuring whose dignity?

Notions of dignified commute are not popular in Philippine transport and commute discourse not until the late 2010s when AltMobility PH, a transport advocacy group, introduced it alongside a proposed bill calling for its realization, the Magna Carta for

⁶ It can be roughly translated as "The King of Commute".

⁷ He is further characterized as one who pays exact change in the morning, uses pedestrian lanes, and is courteous to fellow passengers.

Dignified Commuting. But unbeknownst to many, the term dignified commute can be traced back to the concept of “dignity of travel”, coined by Cresencio Montalbo, Jr., a faculty fellow at the UP NCTS. Accordingly, it is defined as the “ability of all people to travel using safe, reliable, convenient, affordable, and prestigious means” (Montalbo & Brader 2015). In an interview, Montalbo emphasized on the qualifier ‘prestigious’ as he deemed it applicable in the context of the Philippines where public transport users are seen as second class citizens because car ownership predominantly continues to be a status symbol. He explained that making public transport prestigious requires that other attributes of dignity of travel (i.e. safety, reliability, convenience, and affordability) be met. Unfortunately, there are no subsequent attempts to further theorize on the concept of dignity of travel. Later on, Montalbo met Jedd Ugay and his colleagues who would later form AltMobility PH, the latter having learned of Montalbo’s “dignity of travel” was inspired to reconceptualize it into “dignified commute”. It has since then been reconceptualized from a scholarly concept to a more practical one as it became an advocacy tool and eventually as a legal concept closely related to the right to mobility.

The transformation towards becoming a legal term occurred when AltMobility PH drafted the first-ever Magna Carta for Dignified Commute and its corresponding bill which they continuously lobbied to several legislators including Sen. Francis Pangilinan who introduced Senate Bill 775⁸ in 2019. Unfortunately, the current health crisis put AltMobility PH’s advocacies to a temporary halt. However, seeing that the pandemic made their advocacy more relevant they turned to social media to continue with their work (Sunio, Peckson & Ugay 2021) and to widen their network by organizing a larger

⁸ An Act Providing for a Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting, creating the National Office of Commuter Affairs, appropriating funds therefor, and for other purposes

transport alliance aptly named #MoveAsOne Coalition⁹ consisting of more transport advocacy groups in Metro Manila, transport workers and other sectoral organizations (e.g. students, senior citizens, and persons with disability).

At present, there are nine additional bills filed in the Philippine House of Representatives all in close coordination with AltMobility PH. In essence, the said bills advance the novel notion of mobility as a right. And for such right to manifest, the bills highlight these three key provisions:

1. The institutionalization of a National Office of Commuter Affairs under the Department of Transportation (DOTr) and its corresponding local offices in each city and urbanized municipality;
2. A 10-point Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting; and
3. The annual crafting of a public transportation services and infrastructure plan.

The Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting put forward by AltMobility PH resonates with Daniel Newman's clamor to establish a Mobility Bill of Rights (2017). Arguing the lack of attention to economic fairness or social equity in most sustainable transport policies, Newman noted how transport poverty has been an enduring yet neglected issue in the United Kingdom. He argued that a Mobility Bill of Rights "means not simply the state subsidizing transport but, rather, looking at mobility at a broader context that also includes localism and the ways grassroots projects can be facilitated in opposition to centralization" (Newman 2017, 104). Looking at both documents, the Mobility Bill of Rights clearly shares the same public transport aspirations of the Magna Carta such as

⁹ A wordplay of the national government's "Heal as One" campaign in combating the COVID-19 pandemic

affordability, environmental sustainability, efficiency, and participative decision-making (see Table 1).

Mobility Bill of Rights (Newman 2017)	Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting (AltMobility PH 2019)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We all have the right to affordable transportation to meet our basic needs; 2. We all have the right to transportation that does not harm us, the environment, or the climate; 3. We all have the right to transportation that does not threaten health, safety, water, air, or the local environment of a community; 4. We all have a right to a fair transport pricing system that does not penalize those who use less; 5. We all have the right to not be cut off from society; 6. We all have the right to not be forced to use a car; 7. We all have the right to a public transportation system that is owned by us and run in our interests; and 8. We all have the right to efficient, inviting mobility options that do not adversely contribute to resource depletion. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Right to adequate public transportation services; 2. Right to affordable public transportation services; 3. Right to alternative public transportation services; 4. Right to road safety; 5. Right to proper mobility infrastructure; 6. Right to fair share of public road space; 7. Right to breathe clean air during travel; 8. Right to information for efficient and convenient travel; 9. Right to compensation for public transportation service breakdowns; and 10. Right to participation in decision-making processes involving mobility and public transportation services;

Table 1 Key items of Newman's Mobility Bill of Rights (2017) versus AltMobility PH's Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting (2019)

At this juncture, it is compelling to examine how mobility and commute particularly in the case of AltMobility is seen in the frame of dignity. Sunio, Peckson, and Ugay (2021) in their analysis of urban social movements in Metro Manila noted how a dignity frame was mobilized by groups like AltMobility PH. Accordingly, they claimed that framing commuting in the lens of dignity “invites the various stakeholders, as well as its wider audience, to think of an unwalkable street and physical hardships in commuting not just as an inconvenience but as an affront to the people’s self-respect” (Sunio, Peckson & Ugay 2021, 73). In this regard, commute woes have become issues concerning dignity, or more broadly, moral issues.

In Filipino, the closest translation of dignity is *dangál* although it is used interchangeably with its Spanish equivalent *dignidad*. *Dangál* is defined as a characteristic or condition of being excellent, valuable, just or honorable (Diksiyonaryo, n.d.). Looking at online posts expressing frustration on the commute conditions in Metro Manila or hearing them in person from commuters themselves makes it not surprising for AltMobility PH to employ that frame. A running joke among commuters that goes “*Papasok kang estudyante, lalabas kang mandirigma*” (You will go in as a student¹⁰ then come out as a warrior) best captures that rhetoric. While this sounds funny, it encapsulates the dreadful experience a typical Metro Manila commuter has to face, to the extent that one has to fight (like a warrior) just to get to one’s destination. As such, the rhetoric of dignity can be easily communicated especially when coupled with portrayals of misery.

Filipino sociologist Nicole Curato in her book *Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedies to Deliberative Action* (2019) discussed how depictions of misery allow the formation of publics. Publics, similar to Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, is a group of individuals engaged in discussion and debate who share a common imaginary (Curato 2019). Further, she distinguished what she termed as spectacular publics who are spectators empathizing with the miseries of others thus allowing them to show solidarity and to act as moral actors creating avenues in bringing attention to the dire situation of others (Curato 2019; Sunio, Pekcson & Ugay 2021). Such is the case of AltMobility PH when they utilized the dignity frame in problematizing commuter dilemmas in Metro Manila, especially considering that some, if not most of them, are not commuters themselves.

¹⁰ This can be replaced with “employee”, whichever is appropriate for the situation.

Having said that, I believe it is important to examine the kind of public being created by AltMobility PH. While there can be no doubt as to the extent of hardships experienced by commuters in Metro Manila, will it be appropriate to assume that the same is true with the experiences of those outside the region? Relatedly, it begs the question of whether a Magna Carta of Dignified Commute, constructed based on the imaginary of what a typical Metro Manila commuter is, be able to give dignity back to all commuters in the country especially those residing outside Metro Manila and other rural regions? This goes without saying that the transport discourse in the Philippines continues to give primacy to urban transport and uses the urban commuters' struggles as an imaginary encompassing the entire commuter population's experiences. Later on, even during the pandemic, such preference to urban transport continues to be the tenable approach in problematizing the country's transport conditions.

1.5 Metro Manila's emerging bike culture and the (non) future of public transport

At the height of the pandemic, a broader alliance of transport advocates as well as sectors dependent on the transport sector was born. As of this writing, it is composed of 140 civil society organizations and over 77,000 individuals. Better known as the #MoveAsOne Coalition, it is a product of the exigencies of the pandemic when on 5 May 2020 transport planners, government workers and other transport related organizations formed a transport budget study group to draft a budget proposal to be lobbied to key government agencies. Informed by AltMobility PH's call for dignified commute, the coalition problematizes the Philippines' post-COVID public transport system as a "ticking time-bomb" endangering millions of commuters, the Philippine economy with emphasis on Metro Manila, and transport workers whose suffering from "an inhumane

public transportation” stretches back even before the pandemic (#MoveAsOne Coalition 2020). In response, they proposed the Php 110 billion urban mobility support package also known as the “BIYAHEnihan¹¹ Proposal” to be implemented in three tiers over a three-year period (see Camus 2020).

In their proposal, the coalition demands for higher government investment in active transport which includes cycling. This comes at an opportune time as it coincides with the growing bicycle culture in the country particularly in Metro Manila as public transport remains shut (dela Cruz & Ives 2020). Eventually, this led to calls by bike users and active transport advocates for MMDA to install bike lanes to which the latter did not approve of at first (Rodriguez 2020). Again, after continuous lobbying, Php 1.3 Billion was granted by the national government to the Department of Transportation (DOTr) as part of a national COVID-19 recovery and response plan¹². The DOTr is set to utilize them for vital bike infrastructures such as lanes and the institutionalization of a bike-sharing program.

Although this may be considered a success not only for transport advocates but most especially for bicycle users, it is unfortunate that it will only benefit bike users in Metro Manila, Metro Cebu, and Metro Davao—three key urban centers in the country (Ramos 2020; Ting 2021). This shows how national transport policies are yet again geared towards the maintenance of those in the urban regions. A detailed look at DOTr’s response plan indicates that it continues to prioritize urban over rural transport. It is as if the transport sector in rural regions were not affected by the pandemic.

¹¹ A portmanteau of the Filipino words *biyahe* (from the Spanish *viaje*) and *bayanihan* which can be roughly translated to trip or journey, and civic unity and cooperation, respectively.

¹² Republic Act 11494 or also known as the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act

Moreover, the emergence of “corona cycleways” (Alderman, 2020) in the Philippines as portrayed in the news only highlights its occurrence in Metro Manila with EDSA and other major thoroughfares (e.g. Commonwealth Avenue) as contested spaces between “traditional” road users (i.e. motor vehicle users, car users) and the new ones (bike users) (Bigtas 2020). Between a motor vehicle user, especially trucks and buses, and bicycle users, it is understandable that there should be an allocated safe road space for the latter. Yet, the experiences of rural bicycle users are not given that same attention when they are using national highways¹³ which are equally risky, if not more dangerous. The emergence of bike culture in the Philippines is not limited to the urban areas alone as the nationwide transport sector was paralyzed in the midst of pandemic-induced mobility disruptions.

Given this, it is imperative to question the future of public transport in the Philippines when it is problematized based on the imaginaries and practices of the urban commuter along with its concomitant frustrations and idealized notions of a functional public transport system. In corollary, the solutions to the perceived problems of public transport, namely the Magna Carta for Dignified Commuting and the construction of bike infrastructure, should be equally scrutinized.

But first it is essential to understand why a mobile imaginary based on urban movements dominates transport discourse in the Philippines. One straightforward response to such a question is that Metro Manila is the political and economic center of the Philippines, thus it is only natural that its mobility is not only unremittingly checked

¹³ Republic Act 4136 or Land Transportation and Traffic Code prohibits non-motorized vehicles on major highways

but ensured of orderliness. This is quite evident in the way disruptions are always illustrated based on the logics of economics, more precisely on the financial losses that Metro Manila traffic incur on the economy.

As such, this can be further understood when we look at the “constellations of mobility” Metro Manila possesses which Tim Cresswell refers to as “the entanglement of movement, representation, and practice” (2010, 19). As the seat of economic and political power, it only follows that patterns of movement in Metro Manila are dictated by the logics of law and capital accumulation. It is therefore indispensable to assign particular movements as legal and economically productive, or illegal and less productive with the former normally favored and socially desired. This is best exemplified by the predominant belief that car ownership symbolizes affluence or financial prosperity since it is only those with high disposable income who can afford it. In fact, this is no longer surprising given that most peoples in the world have regarded the automobile not only as a representation of wealth but also of modernity and individual freedom of movement (Sheller & Urry 2000; Sheller 2004). Finally, this affects the practice of movement as transport infrastructure is car-centric in nature. This is most apparent in the elevated walkways, commonly known as footbridges or overpasses. These have become so ubiquitous in almost all Philippine cities to the extent that it is seldom seen as a mechanism to give cars full access to roads while directing pedestrians away from them.

Although AltMobility PH, along with other transport advocates, has already seen through these “constellations of mobility” by framing transport problems using the rhetoric of dignity, still it upholds a particular way of seeing mobility. In her article *Mobility, Space*

and Power: On the Multiplicities of Seeing Mobility (2011), Anne Jensen argued for a wider appreciation of seeing multiple forms of mobilities. Accordingly, she stressed that seeing mobility in multiple ways widens our language when talking about power in mobility, strengthening how we look at mobile lives, politics and cities (Jensen 2011). Drawing from the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, she stressed that “the very establishment of ways of seeing, be it by policymakers, urban people or academics, is itself a productive exercise of power” (Jensen 2011, 258).

In this regard, it can be said that the reason why an urban imaginary of transport and commute persists in the Philippines is because it remains unchallenged. And this can only be addressed by accommodating other ways of seeing mobility which remains to be done. Again, Jensen citing Foucault reminded us that “power is always joined by resistance” (2011, 268) and by looking, or rather, by seeing mobilities in a different light, in this case by turning our gaze to the rural and the means it is linked with the urban will we only have a fuller picture of the problems plaguing transport in the Philippines.

CHAPTER 2

SUPERCOMMUTE: THE MISSING LINK IN URBAN AND RURAL MOBILITIES

2.1 The Philippines is an archipelago: Metaphor and reality

It is common knowledge that the Philippines is an archipelago. This fact is repeatedly taught in Philippine schools not so much to provide a brief geography lesson but more to inculcate national pride. Randomly ask any Filipino how many islands comprise the country and you will get an instant answer of 7,107¹⁴. Despite being popular, I find it interesting that only a few Filipino academics particularly in the social sciences have pondered deeply on its implications to our political, economic, socio-cultural and most especially on our mobile lives. It is not until Edwin Wise in his book *Manila, City of Islands* (2019) did the archipelagic nature of the Philippines be capitalized for social scientific thinking albeit in a quite limited scope.

Wise draws from Dick and Rimmer's historical analysis of Southeast Asian cities in analyzing Metro Manila as an archipelagic city. Accordingly, an archipelagic city is "multicentered or nodal...it lacks the unifying spectacles found in the modernist city" wherein it (archipelagic city) has "a fortification of the fragments of the city, so that each community or subsection of the city becomes semiautonomous" (Wise 2019, 10-11). This is the reason why, according to Wise, particular urban problems in Metro Manila remain unsolved.

Zooming out of Metro Manila, Wise's notion of an archipelagic city can be transposed to the overall situation of the Philippines as it is naturally an archipelago. As such, it shares

¹⁴ This number has been the official count prior to the confirmation by the country's National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA) in 2017 that the Philippines is made up of 7,641 islands.

the characteristics of multicentricity as one can pinpoint a center for almost all islands, if not the three major islands¹⁵. Moreover, this can be a helpful concept in understanding the country's transport situation. As already mentioned, the Philippines is divided into three major island groups with each having their own center—Metro Manila in Luzon, Metro Cebu in Visayas, and Metro Davao in Mindanao. However, the entire archipelago is administered by a centralized government located in Metro Manila. Over time, Metro Manila, being the Philippines' capital, has gained the reputation of becoming the prime city of the country, making it the archetypal urban area with the rest designated as rural¹⁶. This further fortifies a naturally fragmented archipelagic nation affecting not only the socio-economic and political facets of Filipino society—which is a subject of intense debate in the country¹⁷—but also the overall transport situation of the Philippines. Since Metro Manila is the site of central governance, all policies and laws including those pertaining to traffic and transportation emanate from there. Additionally, Metro Manila receives the bulk of transport infrastructure investment and eventually becomes the model for other urban centers along with the rest of the country. Geographer David J. Keeling (2008) observed in his survey of regional studies on transportation geography that most transport policies are homogenizing often at the expense of regional and local

¹⁵ The Philippines is divided into three major island groups largely based on cultural and ethnolinguistic distinctions: Luzon in the north, Visayas in the center, and Mindanao in the south.

¹⁶ From this emerged binary categories of *conyo* and *promdi*, with the former referring to those residing in Metro Manila especially those who use Taglish (Filipino English; portmanteau of Tagalog and English) in everyday conversations while the latter coming from a Tagalized English phrase 'from the province' refers to those who came from the provinces.

¹⁷ There is a persisting notion of an 'imperial Manila' originating from Visayas and Mindanao which asserts that the unitary government in Manila has caused the underdevelopment in the regions particularly those in Visayas and Mindanao (see Tusalem 2019). While it is tempting to include here a discussion on the protracted debates on the disadvantages brought by the centralized government in Manila to the economic development of the country, I will leave it to more expert minds to discuss the said issue.

populations' needs. This is quite true in the case of the Philippines where transport policies are crafted at the national level and handed down to the regions.

It appears, based on the discussion above, that an archipelago as in the case of the Philippines, is fragmented. However, in as much as it is divided, an archipelago always has a unifying element. As observed by Wise, it has “unity, or signifies a unity, a many that is one: it is connected” (Wise 2019, 11). In the case of Metro Manila being an archipelagic city, Wise proposed that it is its urban art scene which weaves together a seemingly fragmented city. For him, it allows people from all social backgrounds to become exposed to the conditions and experiences of others as his case studies show. Following this, I would like to propose that we also need to identify a unifying element to better understand the Philippines' transport sector. In fact, we do not need to look further as the country's transport sector is interconnected through road networks.

Berna Yazici (2013) in analyzing the traffic in Istanbul, Turkey demonstrated how roads, especially during traffic jams, can be viewed as a site where numerous social encounters occur. In this regard, roads may be effectively studied as a unifying element of a fragmented transport situation of the Philippines considering their varied users including private automobiles, freight trucks, and public utility vehicles. Roads are the quintessential site in examining the link between urban and rural mobilities in the Philippines as there is a vast network of roads (i.e. highways and expressways) connecting Metro Manila with its sub-urban and rural neighboring regions. Moreover, it is an advantageous choice given the undue priority given to land transportation in the country as it will be difficult to clearly identify the urban-rural interconnection of mobilities outside this form (e.g. marine transport).

Meanwhile, Dimitris Dalakoglou and Penny Harvey argue in their survey of current road ethnographies that “roads emerge as interfaces, negotiating but also creating and consolidating boundaries and borders while at the same time transcending the limitations of prior relations in their promise of new found connectivity” (Dalakoglou & Harvey 2012, 461). In this regard, road networks allow us to conceptually imagine and appreciate that mobilities not only occur within a specific boundary such as in urban settings but also take place across boundaries, oftentimes in rural areas where they usually originate. These movements occurring in distinct and bordered geographies are always interconnected through road networks and are most noticeable when interzonal boundaries are crossed such as in long-distance commuting.

2.2 Supercommuting as daily experience of the Filipinos

Commuting has taken a special place in social scientific and transport scholarship since the start of the mobilities turn. In fact, there is a wealth of research focusing on commuting as an everyday form of mobility despite being a fairly new phenomenon. It is widely acknowledged that commuting was made possible by the eventual separation of the physical locations of the home and the workplace in the late 19th century—a legacy of the industrial revolution in the West (Bowlby 2010; Gately 2014; Aldred 2014). It does not come as a surprise then that much of commute literature tackles and analyses how it occurs in the West and other developed countries. Even today when commuting became more quotidian and longer in terms of time and space, a phenomenon termed as long-distance commuting or supercommuting (Bissell, Vannini & Jensen 2016), experiences in the Global South continue to be understudied.

In a recent census, it was estimated that Metro Manila is home to 12,877,253 people (Philippine Statistics Authority 2016). But just like any other megacity in the world, this number swells up to 15 million during daytime as people from nearby regions flock to the nation's capital to work, to study or to conduct any other business. Deducing from these numbers, it can be said that there are around two million supercommuters travelling to Metro Manila on a daily basis. Despite these numbers, it is noteworthy that transport experts have paid less attention to them except when they are already absorbed in Metro Manila's commuter population. Their commute experiences only become significant once they enter the national capital region, without any attempt to look, much less to characterize, their everyday experiences. Although they receive occasional recognition when they return home in the provinces for the holidays especially during Christmas, All Saints' Day, and Lenten week¹⁸, there are no studies that neither offer significant analysis nor effected change.

Interestingly, Philippine transport scholarship has not paid attention to this phenomenon given its increasing ubiquity. But to be fair, even Western mobility scholars have yet to recognize its importance as already noted by David Bissell and his colleagues (2016). In lieu of the lacuna in supercommuting literature particularly those situated in the Philippines, allow me to share a personal vignette of my supercommute experience.

For someone who hails from CALABARZON, a region situated south of Metro Manila, I have the advantage of experiencing supercommutes to Metro Manila first hand. Back in 2016, I was living in Calamba, Laguna (in CALABARZON Region) and I had to

¹⁸ As a nation with a predominantly Christian populace, these religious holidays are important occasions for most Filipino families, and is a time when they hold family reunions.

commute daily to Alabang, Muntinlupa (in Metro Manila) where I was working. Back then, my typical supercommute began with a tricycle ride which was easily accessible inside our village¹⁹ where there was a makeshift tricycle terminal. Almost everyday I had to take a 'special trip'²⁰ on a tricycle from our village to bring me to the bus station where I had to endure long queues. As it is a common practice for bus operators to fill the buses more than their allowable capacity, it was a usual experience for me to either make do with the cramped space inside or to stand up at the aisle. I had to take the bus via the South Luzon Expressway (SLEX) covering nearly 30 kilometers which is the shortest and quickest route to Metro Manila from the south. The bus ride ended at a terminal in Alabang where I had to transfer to a jeepney to bring me to the office. This also took considerable time as there was no queue in getting inside a jeepney, forcing me to get ahead of other passengers, sometimes risking my personal safety just to get a seat.

The morning commute was supposedly around 45 minutes but it usually took me approximately one and a half hours because of traffic jams and waiting time at the bus terminal. Mondays were particularly stressful compared to other days of the week because it was during those days when most passengers, mostly workers from farther places, travel back to Metro Manila. They would go back home at the end of the week.

The commute was quite different at night. Although I used the same modes in reverse (i.e. jeepney, bus, tricycle), I would normally let the rush hour pass by having dinner with

¹⁹ Subdivisions are usually referred to as villages in the Philippines. Urban planners and other academics also call them "gated communities" (see Lico 2008; Lorenzo et al. 2020).

²⁰ A tricycle can accommodate at most four passengers, however, a single passenger may opt to take the tricycle for him/herself and pay for the total amount of fare for four passengers. Hence, it is called a special trip. At the time of writing, a one-way special trip costs Php 50.00, or around USD 1.00.

my friends at the mall across our office to avoid the hustle. Because of this, I would usually leave for home at around 8:00 PM. Sometimes when weather permitted, I would skip the jeepney ride and walk from the mall, or the office, to the bus terminal. At the time I would arrive at the bus terminal there were fewer passengers which meant that I could take a seat of my choosing. Also, the travel time was shorter because there was less traffic. If in the mornings it took me an hour and a half, my evening bus rides were just around one hour. At the bus station in Calamba, I would usually hail a tricycle to bring me home. Sometimes, drivers would charge extra at night without giving a reasonable explanation.

Looking back, I have an ambivalent attitude about my supercommuting experience. There were times when I enjoyed it because the bus rides allowed me to read leisurely, to watch the scenery by the window, or to listen to songs on my phone. But there were instances when I detested it especially during the morning rush. I remember I was always ranting about my daily commutes, of how every day was a struggle just to have a decent commute. I would always ask myself if it was too much to ask for a comfortable, easy daily travel. Sometimes I would tell this to my workmates who would share in return their experiences of the morning rush. But this would usually end with resignation, and a resolve that we have to make personal adjustments to work through the daily obstacles of commuting.

Thinking about it now, I understand that a lot of people share the same experiences I had with supercommuting. Given the large number of supercommuters travelling from the provinces to Metro Manila not to mention those who do it seasonally, it is interesting that not much media representation, much less a discourse, has been given to this

phenomenon. It was only recently when it was covered by a national news agency just when dignified commuting and its corresponding magna carta was gaining attention. The coverage is aptly entitled “A Day in the Life of a Commuter” (ABS-CBN News 2019) where it follows the daily commute of Ning, a female government employee, from her house in Calamba, Laguna to her office in Quezon City, Metro Manila. The video documentary is brief at around 6 minutes and simply remains true to its title. It attempts only to capture on camera the life of a commuter without any attempt to provide context of the commute situation in the country, let alone contrast Ning’s experience with other commuters. The video ended with Ning disclosing her coping mechanisms, if not advice, to fellow commuters.

Again, the lack of representation either of supercommuting in academia or the media, brings us back to Anne Jensen’s notion of seeing mobility. Just as the current way of seeing mobility in Philippine transport discourse gives priority to urban settings, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, it is expected that any mobilities occurring outside what is urban are automatically taken-for-granted. In a sense, for as long as an urban imaginary in transport discourse remains dominant expect that it will always take on its homogenizing tendency. Just like in the case of the documentary described above, while it shows a glimpse in the experience of a (super)commuter, it is framed based on the notion of a ‘typical’ commuter without giving regard to the nuances of supercommuting. It is as if all commuters whether short- or long-distance, face the same struggles, frustrations, as well as hold the same aspirations.

In a twisted turn of events, however, the COVID-19 once again became instrumental in bringing transport issues like the long-distance commute to the fore as already noted in

the foregoing chapter. The pandemic-induced disruption has amplified the reality of supercommuting for many Filipinos especially for those whose livelihood and employment are conducted in Metro Manila. At this point, let us now turn to the experiences of supercommuters at the time of COVID-19.

2.3 Checkpoints and essential work: Supercommute during COVID-19

The pandemic exposed the link between urban and rural forms of movement. This has become more apparent not only after President Duterte ordered the shutting down of all public transport in March 2020 but especially when checkpoints were placed at boundaries that were largely ignored in pre-pandemic times. In an instant, spatialities were reconfigured by the government creating interim administrative regions such as the 'NCR Plus bubble'²¹ to better suit lockdown protocols and to effectively limit and control the movements of people therein.

In the first few months of the pandemic, long-distance commutes became very strict to almost impossible, as the national government imposed layers upon layers of mobility restrictions depending on the level of community quarantine²² imposed in an area. Despite these, the government made allowances for essential workers to make their daily movements possible. These are outlined in the Omnibus Guidelines on the Implementation of Community Quarantine in the Philippines²³ crafted by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF).

²¹ Better known as Greater Manila Area (GMA) which refers to NCR and its nearby provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna, and Rizal

²² The levels of community quarantine (or lockdown) are as follows, from the strictest to the most lenient: Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), General Community Quarantine (GCQ), and Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ).

²³ This was initially issued in April 2020 and is continuously updated by the IATF almost on a monthly basis.

Accordingly, the government has identified select economic sectors to remain functional given the essential nature of their work. In order to pass through checkpoints and to ride public transport vehicles, essential workers need only to present their company IDs or employment certificate. While the impacts of these policies on essential worker-commuters in Metro Manila are widely documented (see Rey 2020), it is quite unfortunate that the experiences of essential workers who are also supercommuters are not given the same attention particularly during the first months of the pandemic.

At this juncture, I will provide vignettes from three supercommuters and their experiences during the pandemic. The interviews were conducted through online means in May 2020, almost three months since the beginning of the pandemic. Of the three persons I interviewed, one of them was referred to me by a friend while the other two are close friends of mine. I have resorted to a non-random approach because of the difficulty in gathering participants despite online calls being posted. Nevertheless, I will not be using their real names to protect their identities.

In addition, I will recount my personal experience of supercommuting during the pandemic. I have decided to include it here to juxtapose my experience with the experiences of those I interviewed. Also, to relate my observations of how the pandemic affected supercommuting.

2.3.1 Supercommuter #1: Rose

Rose is a business process outsourcing (BPO) worker from Calamba, Laguna who regularly commutes even before the pandemic. Her route—Calamba, Laguna to Bonifacio Global City, Taguig in Metro Manila—involves the use of multiple modes of

land transport. Before the pandemic, it took her almost 3 hours to reach her office, depending on the traffic situation. However, the logistics of her commute changed when the pandemic happened. Due to the public transport suspension, she was forced to look for other alternatives which led her in using carpool services. She discovered this through Telegram, a messaging app, where there are chat groups exclusively for carpool users. Although she considers this easily accessible and convenient, she still regards carpooling unsafe in terms of exposure to the virus. Moreover, carpooling costs more compared to the pre-pandemic fare rates which she admits is okay with her given that travel time has become shorter.

Generally, she deems her commute as a struggle because of how tiring it is. She even quipped “the struggle is real” when she recalls her commute experience. For her, the lack of transport options is an enduring problem especially during the pandemic. If before, she stood in queues for a long time to ride a bus and had difficulties in securing comfortable seats, she has now become captive to the availability of carpool services. Nevertheless, she still finds good things in her commutes that allowed her to view the scenery albeit it was the same everyday. She also uses her commute time as a time for musing.

In the end, she remains hopeful that a better public transport is possible citing some improvements already implemented which include the point-to-point buses, motorcycle taxis as well as railways. Lastly, she believes that digital technology, particularly apps like Waze, is key to resolve some, if not all, of the problems experienced by commuters. She stresses that commuters should learn to make use of the technology available to make their situation better.

2.3.2 Supercommuter #2: Marie

Marie works as a production supervisor in a private company in Marikina City, Metro Manila. Unlike Rose, she is not a regular supercommuter but she visits her hometown in Lucena City, Quezon Province at least once a month. These visits require her to take a bus which is the most common mode of transport when heading down to provinces south of Metro Manila. The bus rides take around 4 hours one way.

Similarly, her visits to her hometown were affected by the pandemic. She then needed to find alternatives which also led her to using carpool services via Telegram. She seemed satisfied with the carpool particularly with its affordable rate although she was a bit hesitant to avail their services. Her main worry was not getting past the multiple interzonal checkpoints (i.e. municipal and provincial boundaries) along the way. However, she mentioned that knowing the driver is working for the Department of Transportation (DOTr) allayed her fears. She believes that it was an advantage as the driver, who is a government employee at the same time, may have an easy pass through the checkpoints.

She ascribes the transport woes to the poor road infrastructure of the country. Accordingly, she observes that roads are too narrow for the growing vehicle population. This, for her, causes massive traffic jams. In this regard, she surmises that road widening may help resolve the problem of congestion coupled with road safety education.

2.3.3 Supercommuter #3: Joseph

Joseph works in a government agency in Manila, but resides in Bacoor, Cavite, some 23 km away. It usually takes him around one and a half hours and two to three transfers to complete his pre-pandemic commute. Although he may opt to use his own car in going to work, he prefers to take public transport to save money on gas and other expenses such as toll and parking fee. He also claims that taking public transport allows him to do things which he cannot do when he is driving such as texting and watching using his phone. Just like Rose, his daily commutes to work are affected by the pandemic. Fortunately, his office provided shuttle services for all of its employees. While this may be good news for some, he somehow feels worried that he might catch the virus while taking the service. Moreover, he is more anxious of possibly infecting his parents who are both senior citizens. Because of this, he sometimes uses his own car and tries to minimize taking the office shuttle.

He believes that transport problems are generally caused by poor urban planning that goes a long way back. For him, it will require a lot of resources to undo or change the effects of ineffective government policies. In lieu of this, he proposes that there should be a policy requiring citizens to reside in a zone or region where their place of work is located. That way, it will lessen the number of people commuting. Lastly, he deems it important that transport measures should be data driven, and that the pandemic has opened an opportunity to overhaul the transport system of the country.

2.3.4 My supercommute experience during the pandemic

It was only in September 2020 when I was able to travel to Manila again. It has been six months since I arrived from Hungary. I have not been around much except when I need

to run to the grocery or do some errands. But other than that, I tried to be as compliant as possible to the quarantine protocols set by the government. Although the national government put Metro Manila and its surrounding provinces under a more relaxed community quarantine status around June 2020, I was still a bit hesitant to travel to Manila because I was afraid I would not be allowed to ride the bus. At that time public transport has become operational again albeit minimum health protocols are yet to be observed, which includes wearing of face mask and face shield, temperature checks, social distancing among others.

In comparison to my pre-pandemic long-distance commute, there were many changes now that I observed. Aside from the mandatory health protocols, bus companies have now employed a point-to-point scheme along with a travel schedule. These were totally non-existent in provincial buses before the pandemic. Back then buses usually left the station once the full capacity was reached; they also loaded and unloaded passengers even when not on designated stops. Now that the buses follow a point-to-point route, travel time is cut shorter which is a seldom occurrence prior to the pandemic.

I went to the bus station 20 minutes before the scheduled time of departure. I wanted to be there earlier just in case the queue would be long. Fortunately, I did not need to stand in line, so I went straight to the makeshift ticketing booth and asked for a one-way ticket to Makati, a city in Metro Manila. After paying, I boarded the bus and waited until it left the station. I thought it would not follow the schedule as we, Filipinos, are known for

always being late²⁴. But contrary to that belief, the bus left on time and after an hour of non-stop travel we arrived in Makati.

During the bus ride, I was a bit anxious because some of the health protocols were not observed. There were passengers who removed their face shields and face masks once they settled in their seats. Others started to chat and to eat even though it was discouraged. The bus conductor also did not check our body temperature before boarding. To ease my anxiety, I tried to distract myself by watching the scenery by the window. I could not remember the last time I have seen this view. It was only then that I noticed how the landscape transitions from rural to urban; the view of Laguna de Bay, the country's largest lake, gradually changes to buildings. Meanwhile, billboards welcome those entering Metro Manila through Muntinlupa, the southernmost city of the national capital region.

2.4 Making sense of supercommuting: Motilities and mobilities as events

The vignettes provided above are just a few of the many experiences and its attendant frustrations, anxieties as well as aspirations of supercommuters in the Philippines. While this may not be the general sentiment of the entire supercommuter population, still this may prompt us to look into this phenomenon more closely.

An initial study of supercommuting has already been done by David Bissell, Phillip Vannini and Ole B. Jensen albeit limited in the context of developed countries. Each of them did separate ethnographic field works in Australia, Denmark, and Canada then

²⁴ This refers to the idea of Filipino time which connotes the chronic tardiness of Filipinos, often described as a cultural trait of Filipinos.

collaborated to come up with a “collective understanding of the experiential particulars of long-distance workers or ‘supercommuters’” (Bissell et al. 2016, 1).

Interestingly, in contrast to the experiences of those from developed countries, there is an obvious difference in the mode of transport being used. While it is common for supercommuters in countries like Denmark to take the train, in the Philippines supercommuters like myself are taking multi-modal transport. In effect, this translates to the difference in the level of comfort and ease experienced by supercommuters in developed and developing countries. Yet to be fair, even within a specific country or geography, there remain differences in experiences as can be gleaned from the vignettes above.

At this point, the concept of motility is useful in better understanding these differences. Motility refers to the “capacity of entities to be mobile in social and geographic space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances” (Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye 2004, 750). Simply put, motility is mobility as capital.

Using the above illustrations of supercommute experiences, we can say that Rose, Marie, and Joseph have different capacities for movement, or motilities. For one, they have differentiated access to modes of transport. While Rose and Marie can easily access carpool services with the use of their mobile phones, Joseph has the option to drive his own car. Needless to say, he also has the competency to drive as he possesses a license. Moreover, given the differences in their access, each of them appropriates their motilities depending on their needs. A good example of this is their

ability to look for alternatives when the need arises. In the case of Joseph, this is exemplified when he chooses to use his car in fear of contracting the virus.

With the situations described above, imagine that each supercommuter is placed in a certain field, and each supercommuter is a point in that field depending on their capacity to move. However, each coordinate may be separately represented by a line indicating its origin and its destination, as is the usual practice in transport studies. Unfortunately, given the urban bias in transport scholarship, this line is commonly situated within an urban geography or spatiality often ignoring that this line may, at times, cross geographies or boundaries. In the case of supercommuting, it traverses from rural to urban geographies.

In a similar vein, Peter Adey and his colleagues pointed out how mobilities can be seen as events. Accordingly, “moving is by definition an event: it begins and ends, it has a measure and a tempo, it is infused with rhythm and breaks” (Adey et al. 2014, 439). Following that definition, it compels us to look at the reality of most movements that do not only occur in urban areas but also elsewhere. For the longest time, we have only imagined and appreciated movements and how it shapes modern city life to a point of obsession. It is as if people and things only move once they enter a city.

As discussed above, supercommuting reveals that mobilities cover geographies and boundaries. It exposes the urban-rural nexus in mobilities as well as its roles as a gateway in better appreciation of rural mobilities. It is also a perfect example of how mobilities can be seen as an event that begins in the rural and also ends at the rural, at times at the urban. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that supercommuting, in

the case of this thesis, only serves as a heuristic device for there are multitude of ways in which we can explore how mobilities occur across boundaries. But first, we have to turn our gaze where most movements begin—the rural.

CHAPTER 3

RURAL MOBILITIES: MOBILITIES OUTSIDE THE CENTER

3.1 Placing mobility studies in the rural

The rural has always been portrayed in opposition to what is urban. It is often described as stable, conservative, tightly-knit communities. This has always been a long-standing theme in social scientific literature which can be traced back as far as Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in 1887. The urban-rural dichotomy has become too entrenched in social scientific thinking that during the post-war years the urban became the manifestation of development with the rural as a site of problems and underdevelopment, if not backwardness.

In a developing nation like the Philippines, such a mindset continues to thrive. Looking at the pioneering book of eminent Filipino rural sociologist Gelia T. Castillo, *Beyond Manila: Philippine Rural Problems in Perspective* (1979), she discussed in detail the issues plaguing the rural scene of the Philippines at that time. In her analysis, she illustrated “the many faces of inequality” by looking at the rural-urban differentials in the country. More than four decades since Castillo's work, rural-urban differentials remain the tenable approach in regional development policies and analysis (see Mercado 2002). The rural is still seen as a site of problems, lagging behind the modern city.

But, nowadays notions of rural and ruralities are gradually changing, at least in some parts of the world, as evidenced by the European Society for Rural Sociology's special issue of its journal *Sociologia Ruralis* in 2010 with mobilities and ruralities as its theme. In the introduction of the said issue, Michael M. Bell and Giorgio Osti emphasized how “the rural is on the move, now as always” (Bell & Osti 2010, 199). It is their objective to

highlight how mobilities and ruralities are two concepts that are historically not mutually exclusive. Four years after this landmark issue of *Sociologia Ruralis*, Paul Milbourne and Lawrence Kitchen reiterated the importance of examining rural forms of movements. Accordingly, “‘the rural’ constitutes an extremely interesting case study of contemporary mobilities. Not only are rural places being reshaped by complex patterns of movement in similar ways to cities but rural mobilities offer new perspectives on the complex interplay between movement, fixity and place, as well as the everyday problematics of mobility” (Milbourne & Kitchen 2014, 327).

However, similar to the case studies presented in *Sociologia Ruralis*, Milbourne and Kitchen’s research is limited in the context of Europe. Although the latter expressly observed that some aspects of urban mobilities are “either absent from or more problematic to practise in rural places” (Milbourne & Kitchen 2014, 334), they failed to recognize that the situation may be far more different in non-Western contexts. The lack of non-Western representation in mobility studies has been lamented over and over again by scholars.

More recently, Mimi Sheller attempted to bridge that gap in her book *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (2018) wherein she outlined what she deemed as a more comprehensive and holistic approach in understanding contemporary global mobilities. Accordingly, she proposed a mobility justice framework which connects three seemingly disparate crises in climate, urbanization, and refugee. She stressed the need for a multi-scalar approach in fully grasping the gendered, racial, classed, and sexual nuances of the world’s mobility issues. For Sheller, “academic research has not done enough to decolonize the very approaches it employs...by

seeking out ideas and practices around transport and mobility from the Global South or from Indigenous knowledge or from critical disabilities scholarship” (Sheller 2018, xiv).

Heeding this call by Sheller, it is time that we take notice of mobilities occurring in the Global South. Moreso, it is equally crucial to examine movements outside conventional centers of (economic and political) power, that is, rural areas which are important in the maintenance of mobility regimes in urban centers. Michael M. Bell, Sarah E. Lloyd, and Christine Vatovec had initially theorized on the notion of ‘rural power’ (2010). Stemming from a critique of mobilities paradigm as employing a passive rural voice, the term ‘rural power’ attempts to regain the active voice in rurality. Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec turns the rural imaginary of stability on its head by arguing that “movement configures and enables staying in place as much as the other way around. Thus we prefer the terms mobilisation and stabilisation, words that imply activeness in the accomplishment of either movement or staying put” (Bell et al. 2010, 213).

Ever since the mobility turn, new methods have emerged corresponding to the need to be “on the move” (Buscher & Urry 2009). In this case, examining ideas and practices of movement and mobility in the Global South and its associated issues necessitates a mobile ethnographic approach. However, the current pandemic made the conduct of mobile ethnography quite difficult, if not totally impossible, which is why alternatives have to be employed. Fortunately, bicycling has become a popular mode of transport, allowing people to remain somewhat mobile regardless of the lockdown measures. Because of this, I opted to take the bike and use it in doing a mobile ethnography of rural places in the Philippines.

3.2 Musings of a sociologist/anthropologist on wheels

Cycling ethnographies are not new when it comes to mobility scholarship. There are notable studies that have employed this albeit focusing on the embodied and affective capacities associated with cycling (see Palmers 1996; Kidder 2005; and Fincham 2006). While this may be helpful in my endeavor, I find Justin Spinney's ethnography to be useful in my research. In an ethnography of cyclists on Mont Ventoux, Spinney explored how "we create meaning and belong in a place according to *how we are in a place*" further arguing that "movements in and through a place ultimately define our engagement with it and constitute it as a place" (Spinney 2006, 712).

Similarly, I would like to understand what constitutes rural mobilities by experiencing it firsthand. This is not to say that I do not have any prior experience of moving in and around rural areas, but rather my past experiences were done in a different circumstance. Usually, I travel around rural areas as a passenger in a motorized vehicle which gave me a different experience compared to when I travelled using a bike. Spinney observed that "technology also plays a central role in defining the capabilities of the human body" (Spinney 2006, 715). Citing Norberg-Schulz (1976), Spinney further explained that the "character of a place depends on 'how things are made' or experienced and is consequently determined by the technical realisation of a place" (Spinney 2006, 715).

Moreover, Larsen demonstrated the sensuous and corporeal differences between cycling and driving by arguing how cyclists, in comparison to car drivers, are exposed to various multisensory awareness from weather to the environment. Accordingly, the

cyclists “feel the contours of places”, they “inhabit the air, the weather-world and the typography of the place” (Larsen 2014, 62). He also identified how fear becomes a “major emotional barrier to cycling” (Larsen 2014, 63) particularly where cars continue to be dominant. With these, I would like to stress that my experience of cycling in rural areas in the Philippines afforded me a nuanced standpoint in characterizing contemporary rural mobilities in the country.

My interest in biking started in October 2020 when I received a hand-me-down bike from my father who is the bicycle enthusiast in the family. He gave me his Surly Pugsley²⁵, an off-road expedition (fat) bike. Not an enthusiast myself, I did not pay much attention to the brand. What mattered to me is having my own bike which would allow me to roam around despite the mobility restrictions. Initially, I would just bike within the limits of Calamba²⁶ where I am presently living. My usual destination is the bayside as Calamba is situated along Laguna de Bay, the Philippines’ largest lake. Eventually, I decided to challenge myself to cross the borders of Calamba, and to bike to the towns dotting the shores of Laguna de Bay. As of this writing, I was able to visit eleven out of the thirty municipalities situated along the coast of the lake. The farthest I reached is the town of Paete in Laguna Province which is around 54 kilometers from Calamba. Later on, I wanted to further test myself which led to my decision to bike to the nearby province of Quezon.

My long-ride from Laguna to Quezon is the highlight of my cycling autoethnography. I chose it not only because of the distance but also due to the length of time it took me to

²⁵ See <https://surlybikes.com/bikes/pugsley> for more information

²⁶ Situated in Laguna, a province south of Manila

complete the bike ride. It is by far the farthest and the longest bike ride I have ever taken. I followed a route called the Banahaw Loop²⁷ which covers the provinces of Laguna and Quezon with a distance of around 140 kilometers. Needless to say, the area is rural in the conventional meaning of the term which would be a perfect site to observe contemporary Philippine rural mobilities.

Prior to the long-ride, I prepared the itinerary and contacted some of my friends who I would visit and make stopovers along the way. I also downloaded a mobile application called Relive to help me record the route I was taking. In addition, I decided to take pictures to complement the recording done by the mobile app. This would add to the visual representation of my observations during the long-ride.

I did my long-ride from February 17 to 18, 2021. I left Calamba at around 8:00 AM and followed an alternative road up to San Pablo, where the boundary between Laguna and Quezon provinces is located. From there I proceeded all the way to Lucban, a distance of around 40 kilometers, where I spent the night. During the first day, I covered 86 kilometers within seven hours including stops.

On the following day, I left Lucban at around 8:00 AM to continue with my ride. I took what is locally referred to as the “backdoor route” because it is an alternative when one wants to avoid the national highway from Quezon to Laguna. It is a hilly terrain where most roads, spanning at an estimated 63 kilometers, are narrow and pass through the centers of the town lining the foothills of Mt. Banahaw. In total, the entire bike trip covered an estimated 149 kilometers.

²⁷ In cycling parlance, a loop refers to a unidirectional trail which starts and ends at the same point. It usually encircles a certain area. In this case, the Banahaw Loop is a trail encircling Mt. Banahaw.

In line with the current ways of studying mobilities, I decided to focus my observations on rural transport infrastructure; rural mobility regimes and rural power; and movements, distance, and time.

3.2.1 Rural Transport Infrastructure

One thing that is easily observable during my long-ride is the transport infrastructure, specifically the road networks in the area, and how it affects rural spaces. It is noticeable that current road systems in Quezon and especially in Laguna have Spanish and American influences. This does not come as a surprise given the country's colonial history²⁸. Interestingly, looking at the layout of roads and the spaces in towns, most towns in the places I biked in are still structured based on the plaza complex installed by the Spaniards. Additionally, the highway system initially constructed during the American colonization is also a curious thing given the hilly terrain of these places. Biking through the asphalt roads, I cannot help but wonder if the current Philippine highway system is the exact road networks laid down during the American occupation.

Furthermore, I noticed numerous road repairs and road constructions during my two-day bike ride. I am aware that the Duterte administration has ushered in a multi-trillion infrastructure project aptly called Build, Build, Build Program since 2017. But I did not realize not until my bike ride how extensive the project was to the point that rice fields gave way to new roads. This made me think how road construction may be likened to punctures, opening up places for accessibility, and shortening road trips.

²⁸ The Philippines was subsequently colonized by Spain (1500s-1898) and US (1899-1946) for 300 and 50 years, respectively.

With this, it goes to show how road-based transport continues to be the dominant mode of transport in these areas. As the national government remains funneling funds for road development projects, local residents will continue to be captive users of jeepneys and motorcycles. However, it is interesting to find other uses for roads in these parts of the country. Given that people's livelihoods in the provinces of Laguna and Quezon are largely agricultural, it is a common sight that roads are used by rice farmers to dry their harvest. Coconut farmers, on the other hand, ride their horses along the road on their way to coconut farms.



Figures 2-4. Glimpses of the road infrastructure in Lucban-Majayjay Road
Source: Author



Figure 5. The author at the welcome arch in Tiaong, Quezon
Source: Author

3.2.2 Rural mobility regimes and rural power

My bike ride further revealed how pervasive car and other motorized vehicle usage is in contemporary Philippine society even in rural areas. As I already mentioned, this is apparent in the transport infrastructure existing in these places. This even extends to the behavior and attitude of people using roads. During the first day of my long-ride, I experienced getting shouted at by a van driver. He even stopped his vehicle and lectured me as he accused me of being a bad cyclist. At first I was speechless as it was my first time to have such an encounter. But eventually I tried to reason out by saying that I was using the correct side of the road. He just dismissed what I said and insisted

that I was wrong. Later on, I began to recognize that this shows how some drivers perceive cyclists and, in relation, who they deem to be rightful road users.

In a similar way, the spike in road constructions made me ponder on the politics behind them. I started to ask who decides to make those roads and where; do the immediate communities' voice matter in the decision-making? In a way, whenever new roads are built I believe it is crucial to ask: For whom is the road being made for? In what ways will it benefit the communities along and near these constructions? I may not have gotten the answers directly during the bike ride but thinking about them tells us something about the power dynamics in rural areas especially when it comes to mobility and movement.

3.2.3 Movements, distance, and time

Lastly, one aspect of rural mobilities that I observed during my long-ride is the notion of distance as well as time in rural areas. Although I relied on my experiential knowledge of the specific routes I took, there were times that I had to ask for directions to passersby. I noticed that when asked about how far a certain place is, I would always get a qualified answer. Instead of saying the numerical distance of a place, answers would always be in the lines of "*diyan lang, malapit lang 'yon*" (It's over there. It's just nearby) while pointing one's finger to the direction they were referring to while others use their lips. At times, geographical distance is measured by the time it takes one to get to a place.

Even before my bike ride, I have already made this observation in my travels in rural places in the Philippines. I remember once during a hiking trip with my friends, our guide would always assure us that we were near the summit by saying "malapit na tayo, mga

5 minutes na lang” (We’re approaching the summit in just 5 minutes). But five minutes passed and we’re still “five minutes” away from the summit. It is interesting how distance is measured in a subjective manner in such a way that a universal standard of measurement is ignored. While some people would simply dismiss this as a manifestation of illiteracy, I believe that there is a deeper explanation to this that needs to be explored. For one, it would be important to examine how dominant mobility regimes in rural areas shape spatialities and temporalities, and in what ways these affect people’s notions of distance and time in relation to movement.

3.3 *The promise of a rural turn in mobilities*

In his classic book *The Sociological Imagination* (2000), C. Wright Mills enjoined sociologists and social scientists to employ what he deemed as an important quality of mind that allows one to see the interconnection between personal biography and the larger societal history. He also emphasized sociology’s promise to better understand social problems with the right use of sociological imagination. And that promise has become my guiding principle in doing my cycling autoethnography in the provinces of Laguna and Quezon.

Relatedly, I began to think of the benefits of bringing mobilities to a rural turn. In other words, what can a rural turn in mobilities promise in understanding movements and its concomitant issues. In the preceding subsection, I discussed my observations of the contemporary rural mobilities as I have experienced during my long-ride. It provided us glimpses on the transport infrastructure, rural power dynamics as well as notions of distance and time in rural areas. In a way, what I also did is to offer the possibilities of what a rural turn in mobilities holds.

However, there remains so much to understand about rural mobilities. Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec (2010) rightfully reminded us how we are always rural to the point that we are inevitably dependent on it. The food on our tables, clothes we wear, and the gadgets we use everyday all of them rely on rural mobilities. At this point, when we think of rural mobilities let us think of its wider scope—the movements not only of people (via transport systems) but also of goods, animals, ideas, and things.

In the case of the Philippines, a study of rural mobilities might also mean a promise of return to its roots. By this I meant, a Philippine rural mobilities scholarship will largely benefit in the scrutiny of oceanic and other marine forms of transport. Given the archipelagic nature of the Philippines, it is only appropriate that movements across waterscapes be examined. A similar proposal has already been put forward by Kimberley Peters and Rachael Squire (2019) with regards to mobilizing maritime research. However, they failed to include everyday forms of movement in waterscapes, a taken-for-granted occurrence in the Philippines and other Pacific Island nations, in their recommended topics.

These are just some of the possibilities once we turn our gaze to the rural. I would like to emphasize that much has to be gained from understanding rural forms of movement towards a more comprehensive appreciation of contemporary social issues. As proposed and illustrated by Mimi Sheller in her conceptualization of mobility justice, it reveals how seemingly disparate crises have interconnections waiting to be uncovered.

CONCLUSION

I began doing this research asking myself why we are moving the way we move. There are numerous answers to this especially in the advent of mobility scholarship. However, less attention was given to the experiences in the Global South. With this thesis, I somehow attempted to fill that gap.

This research, aside from contributing a perspective from the Global South, primarily dealt with the urban bias in Philippine transport scholarship and how this can be balanced by looking at rural forms of movements. Situated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I demonstrated how this urban bias manifests not only in academia but especially in policy making. Guided by the new mobilities paradigm and Anne Jensen's notion of seeing mobility, I contend that the proliferation of an over-urbanized transport scholarship can be attributed to the lack of representation of other forms of movement outside urban contexts.

In order to challenge this urban mobile imaginary, I examined the phenomenon of supercommuting through the experiences of three supercommuters. Long-distance commute or supercommuting allowed us to appreciate that movements occur in varying geographies; it begins at the rural and ends at the rural, sometimes at the urban.

From there, I looked at contemporary rural mobilities as observed during my cycling autoethnography in the provinces of Laguna and Quezon. Accordingly, I described the transport infrastructure, rural power dynamics as well as notions of time and distance. I ended with a note to consider the possibilities of a rural turn in mobility scholarship.

This thesis does not provide an exhaustive list of how to deal with rural mobilities. Nevertheless, this opens up new opportunities to explore rural mobilities in places similar to the Philippines. It will also benefit more from a scrutiny of the most mundane and basic issues such as but not limited to notions of movement and stillness in contemporary Philippine society; politics of rural movements; and the connection of localized mobilities with the wider global movements of people, things, and ideas.

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