Toward an Oral History of Metro Manila's Railways

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ABSTRACT. This research note outlines the contribution of oral history in the interdisciplinary study "The Mass Transit System in Metro Manila: From Tranvia to MRT, 1879–2014." It engages the scholarship in oral history to lay down the theoretical bases for the assumptions made in the deployment of oral history—the conduct of the interviews, the method of recording, the analysis of the gathered data—to answer the study's key research questions. Aside from offering a more nuanced account of the development of urban mass transit, the oral history project will be opening to the public access to the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews—reflecting as well recent discussions about the directions of oral history beyond the interview as method of engagement to issues of storage and access. This accessible online archive is envisioned to be a rich collection of data gathered by the study, which will include not only oral history video recordings and transcripts, but also materials provided by the other component projects of the study.

KEYWORDS. oral history · mass transit · recorded interview · access to oral history

ORAL HISTORY IN BRIEF

In a distillation of her review of the theoretical development of the concept, Shopes (2011) breaks down to six characteristics the "professional, disciplined practice" of oral history (451–452). It is a) "an interview, an exchange between someone who asks questions . . . and someone who answers them," that is b) "recorded, preserved for the record, and made accessible to others for a variety of uses." It is c) historical in intent and is both d) "an act of memory and an inherently subjective account of the past" prompted by e) "an inquiry in depth, . . . a planned and scheduled, serious and searching exchange . . . that seeks a detailed, expansive, and reflective account of the past." Most importantly, f) oral history is distinctively "oral," an essential characteristic that digital technology has unprecedentedly brought to the fore.

Since its reintroduction as a legitimate method of accessing historical data with the establishment of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in 1948, the scholarship and practice of oral history have undergone significant changes. It started as a discipline that was preoccupied with preserving for posterity accounts of white males in positions of power (Sharpless 2006, 22). Oral history has later become a representation of the democratization of historical research; that is, it has democratized the "proper" subjects of historical study. Conducting oral history has broken down barriers between the academy and "the world outside," and empowered "the people who made and experienced history" by writing into history their own participation in their own words (Thompson 1998, 21–22). This change in understanding of the ends of oral history was supported by the preoccupation, following work in the 1970s, with the "dialogic exchange that lies at the heart of an interview, as well as sustained engagement with the narratives generated" (Shopes 2011, 458). Oral history interviews were mined not so much for accurate historical facts, but for how people make meaning, "for ways narrators understand— and want others to understand—their lives, their place in history, the way history works." This challenged the perception that narratives should only be reliable (whether an individual's narrative will be consistent throughout repeated retellings) and valid (whether this narrative confirms data from other historical sources) to be acceptable data gathered from oral history (Sharpless 2006, 30). This project follows from this understanding of data gathered from oral history interviews. This is not to say that contradictory or patently false statements will be accepted uncritically; they will rather be looked at as contributing to an individual's subjective positioning with regard to the past. Questions of interests that might explain a particular representation either of events in the past or of a person's role in these events add texture to narratives gathered from oral history interviews.

Recording technology has always been an important aspect of doing oral history; in fact, as Sharpless (2006, 24) notes, portable cassette recorders—which supplanted the ponderous reel-to-reel tape recorders—played a huge role in popularizing oral history practice and research in the United States in the 1960s. At every juncture in the development of technology, issues have been raised with regard to the nature of primary data gathered from oral history interviews and access to them. In the beginning, though some historians thought transcripts were enough records of oral history, the audio recording of interviews

itself was deemed an essential component of oral history (Sharpless 2006, 25). This preoccupation with how to best preserve data, Grele (2006) reports, centered on issues of access, applicability of standards, and ethics. Relying on transcripts as the primary record of oral history interviews was initially preferred by oral historians and archivists alike because it was easier to index transcripts and to apply citation standards used for written documents, and because transcripts protected narrators from potentially embarrassing or defamatory comments made during an interview (46). However, as the oral history interview came to be understood as not just another source of historical data but a considerable mine for individual interpretations of the past, transcripts were deemed poor oral history records—they "leveled the language, put everything in place, could not indicate the tone, volume, range of sound, and rhythms of speech" (78).

It was thus no surprise that the advent of video recording and its promises for oral history had practitioners abuzz as to how images changed the nature of the record (Sharpless 2006, 34). Video makes for oral history a more nuanced reading, as "facial expressions and body language . . . reveal even more of an interviewee's personality" (Ritchie 2003, 134). Shopes (2011, 460) points out that oral history captured on video "enhances oral history's cultural power, connects it more deeply to the imaginative realm of the humanities, and challenges traditional notions of history as rational, critical inquiry." Video can thus be seen as extending the argument that Grele (2006, 79) makes for oral history in audio form, that the intersubjective nature of the oral history interview is enriched when nonverbal elements are exposed and audiences get a better sense—aural and visual—of the dialogic process involved in surfacing meaning between interviewer and interview subject. Digital film technology has made recording oral history more widespread in use, what with its practical benefits as relatively low-cost for its high definition quality and requiring minimal additional equipment (e.g., lighting, sophisticated sound equipment). The latter in particular meant a less intrusive material environment for the interview, putting at ease interview subjects who would otherwise find the recording equipment intimidating. Now, more recent discussions on oral history take for granted video recording as the best possible means to preserve interviews for posterity.

Oral History in "The Mass Transit System in Metro Manila: From Tranvia to MRT, 1879–2014"

This oral history project is part of the broader interdisciplinary study of the historical development of plans drawn for Metro Manila's rail transportation system, "The Mass Transit System in Metro Manila: From Tranvia to MRT, 1879–2014." It traces its contribution to the study in the inevitable gaps left by written sources. Aiming to reveal something about the past that historical documents cannot, this oral history project places at the center of its inquiry the subjective individual. In particular, interviews with individuals who had been intimately involved in transportation and urban planning and those who had been instrumental in the formulation, execution, and review of such plans either as engineers, planners, legislators, economic policy administrators, country coordinators of international aid agencies, and academics, among others, are expected to both complement and elaborate on the historical account of the development of Metro Manila's railway system. These interviews will be especially valuable in fleshing out the more contemporary contexts of specific transportation plans.

Individuals who will be interviewed will be chosen based primarily on their involvement in the conceptualization, funding, execution, and the evaluation of plans. This oral history project will thus rely on the other composite projects of the broader interdisciplinary study for names and roles, questions to ask, and the particular contexts—socio-political, economic, field-specific (e.g., urban and transport planning and engineering)—which frame each potential interview subject's actions and decisions. A mapping of stakeholders and their complementary, overlapping, or contradictory mandates and interests and how these shifted over time will also be necessary in prioritizing potential interview subjects. To do this, a review of the histories and profiles of the relevant institutions and of biographies of potential narrators will be made. A survey of the narrator's writings—published either as policy papers, technical plans, academic journal articles, conference presentations or as opinion pieces in popular media—and the narrator's interviews on TV and radio shows will complement his or her biography or biographies to get a sense of how he or she assesses the current state of public transport in Metro Manila and how he or she would most likely see his or her own hand in it. The following questions will guide the general direction of inquiry per interview, to

be modified according to each interview subject's profile and specific involvement in planning:

1. Who or what institution or both came up with the idea or ideas for the railway system? Who were the persons and institutions involved in making the plans for the envisioned railway system? How was the planning done?

2. How did the public, the government, and other concerned parties react to the plan?

3. For the plans to become a reality, what was the existing bureaucratic setup that it must go through in terms of assessment, approval, and financing?

4. During the plan's evaluative stage, what aspects of the plan were changed? By whom and for what reason or reasons?

5. How was the execution of the approved plan to be paid for? By whom?

6. What were the issues raised for or against the impending construction? How were the issues resolved? By whom?

Preinterview meetings with potential interview subjects will be held to discuss the interdisciplinary study and the consent form and waiver. Possible points of interest in the latter that are expected to be discussed further will include the recording of the interview, the voluntary nature of the interview subject's participation in the oral history project and his or her right to refuse specific interview question or questions and the public release of information about the narrator, and the review of transcripts.

This oral history project expects to encounter the following challenges: a) building up institutional profiles; b) potential interview subjects refusing to be interviewed or recorded; c) false memories; and d) contradictory statements within the same interview. A comprehensive institutional profile, which includes an institution's vision and mission, its formulating laws, organizational flow, and history, is necessary to map not only the bureaucratic setup that mass transportation plans, studies, and proposals need to go through, but also the movement of individuals relevant to the study in between government positions. To address the constraints presented by uncooperative staff and very poor,

if not absent, archiving of official documents in the public and private institutions in question, university libraries and collections kept in the National Economic Development Authority, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, and the Philippine Information Agency will be accessed.

One of the key criticisms against oral history is the reliability and validity of data gathered from oral history. False memories and contradictory statements are particularly considered problematic. To address this, comprehensive research from available documentary sources will be completed and prompts derived from this research to be incorporated in the interview questionnaire to help jog memories. Potentially contentious statements made elsewhere in previous media interviews or published materials or both will be repeated to the interview subjects for elaboration, which also offers opportunities to confirm the veracity of the statement. Indeed, the narratives that will be given by individuals of interest in this oral history project are expected to either validate or contradict written documents, providing for a richer discursive field and a more nuanced account of the history of the development of the railway system in Metro Manila. Whatever the responses will be, these will be considered as explaining a particular representation either of events in the past or of the narrator's role in these events. Interrogating how urban and transportation plans were developed, interpreted, and executed provides not only insider information about the negotiations of interests, the forwarding of certain ideas, the compromises that were involved, but also the "ways narrators understand—and want others to understand—their lives, their place in history, the way history works" (Shopes 2011, 458).

All oral history interviews will be recorded on video—unless otherwise specified by interview subjects—and transcribed. Interview transcripts will be returned to the interview subjects for validation. Approved and copyedited transcripts will be posted, along with the video recorded oral history interviews, in an online collection of textual and visual materials gathered by the different component projects of the study. This effort recognizes the current preoccupation in oral history scholarship with how digital technology has radically widened access to video recorded interviews. The type of access that digitization in particular has made possible—direct access to "the core primary source"—was deemed by Frisch and Lambert (2012) the "most profound" effect digital technology has made in oral history. Given the tools now available, Frisch and Lambert (2012) argues, the number

one concern then should be content management, and maximizing these tools' utility ultimately "depends on knowing what is there, and how to find it—fluidly, flexibly, responsively, and on demand."

The planned website will gather in one readily available venue previously inaccessible transportation plans and scattered references to old plans by previously involved individuals in biographies, news articles and opinion columns, conference presentations, monographs, academic journal articles, and blogs, among others. The content of this website will be formulated in such a way that the generated knowledge of the interdisciplinary study is easily accessible to the lay public, while sharing vital information to interested policy and academic researchers and students of related disciplines. It is in this manner that this oral history project aims to contribute to the broader study's impact not only on academic research and policy, but also on the public's awareness about the development of initiatives toward providing for the needs of a growing metropolis.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP OF AN ORAL HISTORY OF METRO MANILA'S RAILWAYS

This oral history project of individuals involved in the development of Metro Manila's mass transit system may be the first of its kind, either among oral histories or histories of mass transportation systems in general. The project "Economic Policymaking and the Philippine Development Experience, 1960-1985: An Oral History," funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and concluded in 2010, comes closest to this oral history project in terms of general objectives. In that study, Filipino technocrats, mostly of the Marcos administration, were interviewed to gain insights in economic development planning during the period. As with this oral history project, interviews were transcribed, recorded audiovisually, and archived, along with other digitized written documents provided by the former technocrats, at the UP Diliman Main Library and the Kobe University Library (Katayama et al. 2010, 2). In at least two cases, the recordings supplemented document collections (the Sixto Roxas papers and the Armand Fabella papers) already archived at the UP Diliman Main Library, essentially functioning as road maps (per Ritchie 2003, 157) to navigate large documentary collections. Aside from the journal articles that have been published based on the findings of the project (Tadem 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014), the

project team also looked toward at the very least uploading the edited transcripts of certain interviews (i.e., those whose narrators gave their consent) for free and public access to other researchers. In fact, an initial step has already been taken in the formal entrustment of the said transcripts to the UP Third World Studies Center for online dissemination (www.uptwsc.blogspot.com).

As public outcry against the inadequate railway system in Metro Manila intensifies, the need to bring to account past efforts to anticipate the infrastructural demands of a rapidly expanding metropolis grows. Dealing with the past is inherently political, as the Popular Memory Group (1998, 79) argues, because it has a "living active existence" in the present, ultimately determining actions and beliefs of groups and individuals today. Now, more than ever, will an oral history project focusing on individuals who had been intimately involved in transportation and urban planning and those who had been instrumental in the formulation, execution, and review of such plans prove relevant and useful.❀

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