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# A BRIEF HISTORY OF FILIPINO IN LOS ANGELES: ON THE CREATION AND GENTRIFICATION OF HISTORIC FILIPINO TOWN

Noelle Sepina

**ABSTRACT.** This paper was inspired and informed by my own experiences as a Filipino-American growing up in different Filipino communities in Los Angeles. Since my family and friends still live in L.A., I make frequent visits and have witnessed the transformation of Downtown L.A. and Historic Filipinotown over the past 10 years. Because this topic is so close to home, I chose a different methodology in attempts to capture the *feeling* and space of the neighborhood and people. Rather than relying mainly on secondary sources and cultural analysis, I used ethnographic methods of observation and oral histories for the first time in my research. I walked and drove around the neighborhood and engaged with visitors, business owners, current and former residents. The presentation featured a “mini documentary” on Historic Filipinotown, written and directed by myself. The film centers around the stories of Tribal café and HiFi Kitchen and highlights the infrastructure, artwork, and main streets of HiFi. I also wanted to capture the movement from the center of Downtown L. A. westward toward Beverly Blvd in order to provide a sense of the geographic landscape and show the differences in the built environments between the two areas. This paper summarizes key points of the film in the section on gentrification. As a “side project,” this paper is guided by my dissertation research on U.S. empire in the Philippines and Philippine cinema during the Marcos era and the political and intellectual project of putting Black studies and Filipino American studies in conversation.

## Introduction

As many scholars in Filipino-American Studies have shown, the history of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines shapes the Filipino-American presence, experiences, and history in the U.S. The shifts in location, conditions, and demographics of Filipino-American communities relates to the evolution of U.S. empire and domestic racial politics. Given this historical and political context, Filipinos experience difficulty in forming ethnic enclaves and gaining visibility

in general, despite the large population of Filipinos in Los Angeles and the U.S. in general.<sup>1</sup> According to Joseph Bernardo,

... deeming Filipino Americans as 'invisible'... was only possible through the *systematic recalibration* of lenses through which to view *race and empire in the U.S.*, a process that becomes legible through an examination of *the built environment* . . . The *emergence, disappearance, and later reclamation* of 'Little Manila'/ 'Historic Filipinotown'. . . marked *critical shifts in articulations of US imperialism*.<sup>2</sup>

Following this line of thought, this paper traces the movement of the Los Angeles Filipino enclave from Little Manila to Historic Filipinotown and the current process of gentrification occurring in the latter within the context of shifts in U.S. empire in the Philippines and domestic racial conflicts.

Since the infrastructure and urban planning of Los Angeles is tied to race, class, and the policing of mobility and connectivity for communities of color, I argue that it is necessary to consider domestic racial politics in the U.S. as well as imperialism in the Philippines to understand Filipino-American experiences in Los Angeles. For example, the construction of freeways coincided with the post-WWII "white flight," which accommodated white middle class families' mobility in and out of the city, and the area that would be known as Historic Filipinotown borders the high-traffic 101 Freeway. The placement of communities of color near freeways is common in the U.S. as a result of environmental racism, which negatively impacts the physical and mental health of residents in the area. After the 1965 Watts Rebellion, the Los Angeles Police Department collaborated with city planners to redesign Downtown Los Angeles to increase security and prevent future "riots." These infrastructural factors and shifting race relations under the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, along with the granting of Philippine "independence" after WWII and the 1965 Immigration Act that shifted the racialization and demographic of Filipinos migrating to the U.S., gave Filipinos an opportunity to buy into the American Dream—moving away from blackness and toward whiteness. This begs the question, how have Filipinos been racialized in relation to other people of color in the U.S.?<sup>3</sup> Given this transnational and racial context, I suggest that it is necessary to do more research on the historical relationships between Filipino and African American communities in order to deepen our understanding of Filipino-American experiences.

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1. Joseph A. Bernardo, "From 'Little Brown Brothers' to 'Forgotten Asian Americans': Race, Space, and Empire in Filipino Los Angeles," PhD diss., (University of Washington, 2014).

2. Bernardo, "From 'Little Brown Brothers,'" 4-5, emphasis added.

3. Anthony Ocampo, *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*, (Stanford University Press, 2016).

## Creation

In the 1920s–1940s, the original Filipino community known as Little Manila was situated in the center of Downtown Los Angeles. During this time, there was growing racist violence against Filipino immigrants, most of whom were men, and racial segregation and labor conditions forced them to form this community.<sup>4</sup> With the end of WWII and through the 1950s came the destruction of Little Manila and the reconstruction of the Los Angeles City Center. Filipinos began moving westward toward the present-day Historic Filipinotown location. According to Carina Monica Montoya, in the 1940s “racial tensions between Filipinos and African Americans” and “the city’s redevelopment of the Little Manila area, which included the demolition of its buildings, hotels, and apartments,” forced Filipino residents to move westward to Bunker Hill. Shortly after, the city began demolishing the buildings and residences there, forcing Filipinos to relocate again to the Temple-Beaudry area (See Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> After WWII, the city began to “redevelop” that area by destroying the buildings and constructing freeways. As Bernardo argues, this shift from the center to the margins of downtown L.A. was caused by both the government’s restructuring of downtown *and* Filipino families’ desire to own houses (specifically away from African American residents)—the quintessential sign of the American Dream. With formal Philippine independence, the racialization of Filipinos in the U.S. shifted in relation to U.S. empire in the Philippines. Whereas Filipino immigrants were previously segregated and denied rights, after WWII, Filipino-American veterans who fought in the war received government benefits that allowed them to buy houses.<sup>6</sup> Given the importance of these political and social conditions, more research needs to be done on the nature and causes of the “racial tensions between Filipinos and African Americans,” as Montoya puts it, to gain a deeper understanding of Filipino-American experiences and anti-blackness within the Filipino community.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the area now known as Historic Filipinotown, located between Temple Street and Beverly Boulevard on the westside of the 110 Freeway, became a “landing spot” for Filipino immigrants. Given the political climate in the Philippines during this time, with Marcos declaring martial law in 1972, this wave of immigration might be better understood as displacement caused by the dictatorship. The new Filipino immigrants came to this area because they had family or friends who owned property there and access to jobs. This is the history referenced in the designation of the

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4. For more information on the violence and discrimination against Filipinos and the formation of Filipino communities, see Antonio T. Tiongson, ed., *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourse*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

5. Carina Monica Montoya, *Los Angeles’s Historic Filipinotown*, (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 8.

6. Bernardo, “From ‘Little Brown Brothers’”.

neighborhood as “Historic.” From the 1920s through the 1980s, we saw waves of migration and displacement of Filipinos to and within Los Angeles as a result of shifting U.S. domestic racial policies and immigration laws and the evolution of empire and democracy in the Philippines.

By the 1990s, there was “urban decay” in cities across the U.S. as a result of socio-economic conditions including the city’s urban planning and the construction of freeways that ran through and destroyed communities of color. Under those conditions, Filipino residents of Historic Filipinotown reported gang violence and police corruption in the area. The infamous Rampart police division of the LAPD was located in the center of the neighborhood. Within the context of this built environment, the racial tensions in L.A. during this period—specifically between African Americans and Korean Americans after the “Rodney King riots”—likely affected the Filipino community, yet there is not much research on their experiences and political stance on these issues. Given the “racial tensions” between Filipinos and African Americans in the past, more research needs to be done to understand the relationship between the two groups.

In 2002, Historic Filipinotown received its official designation by the city of Los Angeles as a historic-cultural neighborhood.

## **Gentrification**

During the early 2000s, the process of gentrification began. Historic Filipinotown (aka HiFi) is a low-income neighborhood with the majority population being Latino (mainly Mexican and Central American) and Asian (mainly Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese). With the rising cost of rent and destruction of homes, Filipino residents, along with their non-Filipino neighbors, were at risk of displacement once again. At the same time, cultural and historical markers were installed in the area, including the Filipino American WWII Veterans Memorial—the first and only one in the country—and streetlight art that represents Filipino culture and values.

Historic Filipinotown continues to be a hub for Filipino social organizations, churches, and cultural events—a tradition that was established in the 1970s. While some Filipino businesses have been shut down during this period of gentrification, others have thrived. For example, Tribal Cafe, which opened in 2005, has become a landmark of Historic Filipinotown. The owner, Josh, states that their mission is to bring healthy food—vegan, raw juices and smoothies—to the masses. Yet, despite being owned and operated by a Filipino immigrant and located in HiFi, the majority of customers are, unfortunately, not Filipino.<sup>7</sup> Tribal Cafe also became known as a popular venue for open

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7. This may be attributed, in part, to the culture of Filipino food. Based heavily on meat, rice, and cooked vegetables, perhaps the raw vegan offerings do not appeal to Filipinos

mic nights and other artistic events. According to Josh, this contributed to attracting gentrification and white consumers to the area. He says that since they are so close to Downtown L.A., the people there were tired of living in their high-rise buildings and wanted to experience “culture.” With the construction of new “luxury-apartments” across the street from Tribal Cafe, Josh asked the developer why they didn’t just buy his building “so that he could retire.” The developer responded saying that the Tribal Cafe is the reason they chose their location—so they can promote the fact that they’re next to this cultural landmark.

Driving through the streets of HiFi, going westward on Temple St., you will see a mix of new “luxury apartments” and construction sites juxtaposed with traditional Filipino restaurants and older residences. You will notice that some Filipino establishments have attempted to adapt to the changing environment by painting over their formerly vibrant island aesthetic to appeal to the white demographic. On the residential streets, you will see encampments of homeless people juxtaposed with white people taking a casual stroll. Prior to gentrification, residents stated that they could not even go outside or walk down the street for safety reasons. It feels disorienting to see white residents now walking around the neighborhood. When you search for “Historic Filipinotown” on Google, the description reads: “Largely residential, Historic Filipinotown offers a mix of *traditional and trendy* Filipino eateries, plus *stylish cafes and hip cocktail lounges* on Beverly Boulevard and W. Temple Street. *Indie cultural spaces* include the multidisciplinary Bootleg Theater and the Gabba Gallery, which has brought vivid street art to several local alleys. A large mural in Unidad Park *celebrates Filipino-American history and culture*” (emphasis added). The description reflects the juxtaposition of new and old and focuses on its cultural appeal to draw in “hipster” crowds.

On Beverly Blvd, across the street from Unidad Park where a large mural depicts Filipino-American history, is HiFi Kitchen—a newer Filipino restaurant that is inspired by Hip-Hop and the culture of Los Angeles. The menu combines classic Filipino dishes (like chicken adobo) with L.A. staples (like tacos) to make delicious chicken adobo tacos, with the mission of introducing people to Filipino food through vehicles they are familiar with. The owner, Justin, sees gentrification as an opportunity to welcome people into the neighborhood and educate them about Filipino culture. In essence, his mission is to preserve Filipino culture and history and make it more visible. He tells the story of how he started the restaurant. As a long-time resident of Historic Filipinotown, he attended a recent town hall meeting where they were discussing possibly changing the name of the neighborhood—a major sign of gentrification. They were proposing something along the lines of “South Echo Park,” since HiFi is geographically south of Echo Park, a popular area that has already been heavily gentrified (See Figure 2). As

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in the area. Although this topic is something I am interested in and that Josh is very passionate about, it is beyond the scope of my research.

an act of resistance, the owner decided to open up HiFi Kitchen in 2018 and painted a mural inside that says “This is Historic Filipinotown.” Both the name of the restaurant and the painting inside it are ways for him to preserve the presence of Filipino culture and history in the neighborhood. Even if they were to change the name of the area, the restaurant would serve as a reminder and monument of Filipino history in L.A.

Furthermore, Justin observes that even though the neighborhood is called Historic Filipinotown, Filipinos and Filipino culture remain invisible in the area. Besides the large mural in Unidad Park, the historical monuments, dispersed Filipino restaurants, and official signage, the Filipino community is not really visible. Part of this could be because the geography of the neighborhood lacks a “center” or gathering place. Given the history and politics of urban planning, this might be understood as intentional to prevent a strong sense of community, mobility and connectivity. The infrastructure and design of the area thus not only suppresses the visibility of the Filipino community but also the potential political power of collective organizing. Yet, we know that Filipinos have been and continue to resist political suppression and displacement. For example, in an effort to fight against erasure of the community with the process of gentrification, Filipino residents successfully rallied for a large new luxury apartment complex to contain the word “Bahay” (“house” in Tagalog) in its name. Situated in the center of HiFi, the developer claims to be located in Echo Park and originally called the building “Alexan South Echo.”<sup>8</sup> This real estate move is a tactic of gentrification and the attempt to rename the neighborhood through this building would effectively erase or marginalize the existing community. By forcing the developer to rename the building “Alexan Bahay,” Filipino residents attempt to reclaim their neighborhood and preserve its culture.

The owners of Tribal Cafe and HiFi Kitchen represent conflicting views and experiences with gentrification for Filipinos in the neighborhood. While they understand it is not something they can control, they are, along with Filipino residents and leaders, doing what they can to preserve and empower the Filipino community in their own ways.<sup>9</sup> Thus, more research needs to be done on Filipino resistance as well as on the historical and contemporary relationships with Black, Latino, and Asian communities in Los Angeles. Given the current political climate of intense anti-black violence and increasing

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8. On the development process of Alexan Bahay, see “Alexan South Echo,” *Urbanize Los Angeles*, Accessed June 27, 2022, <https://la.urbanize.city/tags/alexan-south-echo>. Based on the cost of rent, it’s safe to say that existing residents of HiFi would not be able to afford to live here.

9. For example, in 2022, the City of LA built a half-million-dollar gateway arch on Beverly Blvd as an official entrance into Historic Filipinotown. Some residents are unhappy with the design as it does not reflect the true spirit and culture of Filipinos, but rather privileges City Hall officials’ design over the artists’ vision. In response, Filipino residents and leaders are organizing to address this misrepresentation.



economic disparities in the U.S., it is important for Filipino-Americans to understand our shared, *yet fundamentally different*, histories of displacement and discrimination and work in solidarity with other people of color to fight for freedom for everyone. In other words, Filipinos and Filipino-American studies need to address anti-blackness in the field and within our communities because when Black people—specifically Black women—are free, everyone else will be free.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1. Map of movement from Little Manila to Bunker Hill to current location.<sup>11</sup>

10. “The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977),” *BlackPast*, Accessed on June 27, 2022, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>.

11. Google Maps. “Screenshot of Downtown Los Angeles City Center Area.” Accessed April 13, 2022.





Figure 2. Map of HiFi in relation to Echo Park and the locations of Tribal Cafe and Hi-Fi Kitchen.<sup>12</sup>

12. Google Maps. "Screenshot of Historic Filipinotown." Accessed April 13, 2022.