

Amanda Altobano

Mar 10, 2022

CRD 152

## What's in a Name?

### Community Presence & Connection Among the South of Market

#### **Introduction**

In San Francisco, there are various neighborhoods, communities, and districts that come to create and mark key moments throughout history among the Bay Area. One of those neighborhoods in the city is known today as the South of Market (SoMa) neighborhood. How did the South of Market come to be? What contexts are overlooked in the SoMa? What was the transformation of its communities and the name of how it was remembered as among individuals? Why does the SoMa today have such a large Filipinx community presence rich in culture and history?

The SoMa has deep histories, stories and accounts that root in Asian American organizing, and activism during the mid-1900s, being a major significance to how the SoMa is today. The SoMa neighborhood, from its past to present, continues to be a bustling hub of culture among locals. Despite the impacts of gentrification in the city, efforts in preserving and flourishing the culture and histories of the SoMa are persistent, as the SoMa community continues to cultivate meaningful spaces for residents in receiving support and aid in various ways. As a local SoMa resident myself, the SoMa neighborhood has been an important part of shaping my identity, story, and involvement for my loved ones and the community.

## **Early Landscapes of the SoMa – A Brief History**

The origins of how the South of Market came to be roots back to the demand in labor, industrialization, and commercialization in the early 1900s. The SoMa was a hub for industrial use in manufacturing, warehousing, and wholesale business. Many locals consisted of “longshoremen, warehousemen, merchant mariners, day laborers, immigrant farm workers, and other manual workers who contribute to the prosperity and economic development of the West” (Page & Turnbull, 2009, pg. 1).

San Francisco attracted various groups of people and was booming with economic growth and development. SoMa was known to be the light industrial district for commerce and was an opportunity for immigrant workers to make money. Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians were among the first set of workers aligned in this work in the nineteenth century. Then followed were groups of Greeks, Eastern European Jews, Ukrainians, and Japanese in the twentieth century that offered their labor too. The increase in economic activity led to the creation of diverse communities and neighborhoods in the city as Central Americans, African-Americans and Filipinos began to arrive after World War II.

It is important to acknowledge that before the SoMa came to be, the land it was on was indigenous to the Ramaytush Ohlone tribe. Native American tribes in the San Francisco Bay had a key presence in the early contexts of the land before European settlement and colonization that arrived from 1776 to 1846. The land was originally made up of mountainous sand dunes, narrow valleys, tidal streams, and estuaries (Page & Turnbull, pg. 3). The Ohlone people lived through daily practices such as hunting, fishing, gathering and basket weaving and traveled around the bay waters in wooden boats and tule rafts.

In the late 1800s during the boom of the Gold Rush led to the major increase in population in the city, displacing indigenous Bay Area Tribes.. The SoMa during the Gold Rush was treated as a squatter settlement camp for miners and traders. The SoMa at the time was termed as the “Happy Valley” because of the sunny weather where a variety of “small shops, trades, sales, articles, and liquor” tended to gather (Page & Turnbull, 20). The trading hub and settlement camps laid out into the area led to the forming of the South of Market to essentially turn into a permanent residential neighborhood, leading to the acknowledgement of the SoMa hub as one of the many official districts of the city.

### **From Settlement Camps to Residential Neighborhood: SoMa Slowly Takes Form**

The early background history of the creation of the SoMa neighborhood—from a sand dune mining settlement camp to a residential neighborhood—relevantly leads to the forming of immigrant worker communities. As industrialization took form and the rise of economic activity came to be in developing the city, various groups from all over the world were attracted to San Francisco. Urban communities would start to take form and be the base for culture, especially among Asian American immigrant workers in need of jobs.

The SoMa community has important historical roots in the large presence of Filipino immigrant workers coming to San Francisco, essentially leading to the formation of the local Filipinx community. The influences of Spanish and U.S. colonization of the Philippines shares an important connection and relationship as to why there is a large historical presence of Filipinos in the SoMa district. The psychological, colonial and intergenerational traumas Filipinos have received, along with the concept of the American Dream, made Filipinos travel to the United States in hopes of improving their lives. The colonial relationship of Filipinos immigrating to the

U.S. is complex, as it impacts the formation of Filipino culture and community in San Francisco. The city has been a popular destination for Filipinos to immigrate in alignment to their desires of improved lifestyles and conditions. My story and identity are influenced by the Filipino presence and immigration of the SoMa neighborhood, as my grandfather immigrated to the city during the mid-1900s in order to support his family in the Philippines. The interconnected relationship of the SoMa to the Philippines emphasizes the diasporic Filipinx culture and community that would come to make important history in the United States.

### **The Filipino Community Presence: SoMa, Manilatown & the *Manong Generation***

The first generation of Filipinos to migrate to the U.S. in the 1900s are known to be the *Manong & Manang Generation*, as they were the pillars in forming the Filipino community in San Francisco and taking residence in the South of Market. The importance of Manilatown, alongside the SoMa neighborhood, is an important community relationship among the history of Filipinos and SoMa's historical Filipino presence.

Manilatown was a Filipino-American neighborhood from the 1920s to 1970s, located close to Chinatown and was north of SoMa. Unfortunately, Manilatown was demolished due to urban renewal and displacement. Although one historical landmark, the International Hotel (I-Hotel), persisted due to the support, organizing, and activism among Filipino and Chinese communities. They fought in protecting the hotel from the displacement of Asian-American workers and residents from their homes. The solidarity and protection of the I-Hotel assisted the Manong Generation. "Manong" in Tagalog translates to an elder male relative, while "Manang" translates to an elder female relative. Asian-American activism in support of Manilatown, "became a place of unity with cross-sectional activism" from 1968 to 1977 (Martynovych,

2017). BIPOC communities and allies came together in the heart of the city's downtown streets to fight for the preservation and thriving cultures that were present. Many allies and supporters included "labor leaders, anti-war and anti-imperialist activists, organizers for district elections, religious spokesmen and their congregations, advocates for gay rights, and Civil Rights activists all collaborating in resistance to a massive capitalist development that would engulf Manilatown, replacing a once thriving Filipino community with skyscrapers" (Martynovych, pg. 16-17). The actions and histories of this movement would take form to inspire and preserve culture strongly in the SoMa, additionally making history to the Housing Rights Movement and Third World Liberation movement (Habal, 2007).

### **Gentrification in the SoMa: Resistance to Cultural Displacement**

The aftermath of the urban renewal and replacement of Manilatown came to be after the 1970s and the resistance of gentrification of the Filipino community in the SoMa continues to persist today. Evident impacts of the demolition of Manilatown a few blocks away from the SoMa neighborhood, were early signs of the immense wave of gentrification that was going to displace working-class and marginalized communities in San Francisco. The rise of technology, urbanization, and innovation, more popularly known for the "Dotcom Boom" phenomenon, led to the displacement of thousands of residents in the SoMa. Those residents were primarily Asian and Filipino-Americans, minorities, low-income, and the working-class. A historical context statement from Page & Turnbull (2009) states that an estimate of "4,000 people and 700 businesses" were displaced due to the approval of the Yerba Buena Center Plan act.

Gentrification took form through the construction of large commercial buildings, corporate businesses, and spaces for entertainment and commerce in San Francisco. Efforts to

resist displacement continued from the support of intersectional organizing, cross-cultural solidarities, and allyship. In my personal experience living in the SoMa as a Filipinx, my family has faced financial hardship due to the expensive costs of living that have increased throughout the years. High costs of rent, necessities, and other household expenses have been difficult as a low-income family living in San Francisco. My parents immigrated to San Francisco and have lived in the SoMa since the 1990s where gentrification would surely take place in various neighborhoods in the city, affecting marginalized communities of color apart from my own. Growing up in the SoMa, the Filipinx community was a key part of my everyday life, as most of my friends, teachers, and programs at my school identified with the Filipinx diaspora. As a youth I went to Bessie Carmichael for both elementary and middle school, it was also known as “FEC” which stands for the Filipino Education Center. The relationship I have with the SoMa and Filipinx community relates to the community values, care, and involvement I have for my neighborhood and home.

### **Community Involvement in the SoMa: Filipinx Stories, Experiences and Cultural Contexts**

Despite the effects of gentrification and displacement, grassroots community efforts today continue to cultivate and nourish spaces for locals and the Filipinx community to take space and engage in our culture and histories. From the Philippines to the Bay Area and into the heart of SoMa, community relationships are deeply connected transnationally. The South of Market goes beyond its physical place, as it makes a presence with diasporic activism among Filipinos. Places in the SoMa such as the Bayanihan Equity Center, Kapwa Gardens, Balay Kreative, and Mint Mall are local spaces among the Filipinx community. These centers of culture and history inform about the diversity in culture among Filipinos in the diaspora and the

presence Filipinos have had in San Francisco since the 1900s. Empowering Filipinx spaces give accessibility, resources, and opportunities for and by Filipinx to organize and host events around art, dance, food, and much more. Community participation and engagement in the SoMa today continues to grow beautifully. I am grateful to be a part of these community spaces and help take part in the cultural cultivation of the SoMa. Filipinx organizations such as Kapwa Gardens and the Filipino Mental Health Initiative are frequent spaces where I am involved in, working alongside other Filipinx in facilitating conversations around mental health and well-being living in the Bay Area. Community conversations and oral storytelling is an important resource for the community and is a form of nurturing with the community.

Following up on the history and legacy of the South of Market, in 2016 it is officially recognized by the City of San Francisco for SoMa to be known as the “SoMa Pilipinas Cultural Heritage District” and is cited as the “cultural, social, arts, and service hub for Filipinos throughout Northern California” (SOMA Pilipinas, 2021). Intergenerational activism and organizing is a major influence in the SoMa Filipino community as it helps to understand stories from past movement leaders. Experiences and upbringings from the Manong Generation to Filipinx diasporic youth activism today in the Bay Area, not only allow us to “see ourselves in history” but they also provide lessons that we can use to understand our present, and imagine new futures. Ericka Martynovych, a fellow Filipino-American, effectively captures the meaning of place attachment in relationship to the SoMa: “in *Space and Place* Yi-Fu Tuan describes the neighborhood as a concept and claims that emotions are what creates the experience of place in a neighborhood. The Filipino community has cultural history connected to this space and continue to work together to keep it” (2017, p. 26).

The connection the Filipino community has in the SoMa roots in care, emotion and investment for the resources the community needs and aspires for. Various programs and services are offered to members of the community in attaining the resources and necessities that they need to support their daily living. Both organizational and direct services offered to the SoMa community are from the efforts of resilient community organizers such as Filipinx activists Raquel Redondiez and Claire Amable. These women are two key leaders who organize and advocate for the safety and accessibility for SoMa residents through a variety of services run through groups such as South of Market Community Action Network (SOMCAN). Examples of services include the Tenants Rights Program and Youth Organizing Home and Neighborhood Action. Services such as these listed provide resources to the SoMa community and are helpful in bringing the community closer together.

### **Personal Reflection: Conclusion**

The community relationship to land and belonging as a Filipinx growing up in the South of Market molds my values and identity. The South of Market continues to grow and transform among the Filipinx community in San Francisco. There are many ideas and dreams of progressing the SoMa as the Filipino Cultural District, and I look forward to seeing the ways in which we nurture our roots and values while holding accountable in addressing the issues of gentrification. The presence of diasporic activism and transnational mobilization created in the SoMa is empowering and unifying. Canlas describes transformation as a metamorphosis as, “Filipinos across the Bay Area are uniting into one whole community, or *sambayanan*, which becoming linked to a central plaza – *kabayanan* or heart of the community which is strategically located in South of Market” (2002, pg. 46).



To be in unity and culture in SoMa Pilipinas, deeply listening to the stories and histories of the organizing efforts and activism from fellow Filipinx is deeply inspiring to me in continuing to grow in relationship to my culture, roots and self-preservation. Being in connection to a space and working to coexist with both grief, hardship yet also abundance, gratitude and motivation, has helped me in engaging with the communities I grow to be a part of. The histories of the SoMa, the struggle and hardship for liberation, equity and accessibility for BIPOC residents in San Francisco continues but the efforts of everyday locals continuing to organize, cultivate and protect our communities are a part of the daily collective work. Healing, care, rest and culture is a form and an act of resistance against oppressive colonial and imperial systems. The histories, contexts, and movements among Filipinos in the diaspora have emphasized the importance for youth organizing to find space and processing in understanding one's personal and collective identities among the community.

### **Summary of Revisions:**

The revision process of my paper mainly focused on in improving the continuity and flow throughout my essay. I realized that many sentences were long, choppy and full of information all at once. I worked on improving my paragraph structure throughout my paper as what most of my peer feedback suggested. Furthermore, I also discuss more information about the Ramaytush Ohlone tribe in San Francisco and their significance in influencing the landscape before the SoMa neighborhood came to be and formed from its man-made impacts. I have also made my introduction a bit more engaging and interesting in order to draw the reader in and concretely introduce my audience into what I will be primarily focusing on in my paper. A "roadmap" in my introduction was included to attract the reader into wanting to know more and develop questions

while interacting and reading this paper, going along with the theme of centering social transformation through personal experiences and storytelling.

### Sources Cited

Canlas, M. (2002). Tabi Po, Respect for Those Who Came Before: Filipinos in South of Market, San Francisco. *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, 9(1), 44–46.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41554347>

Habal, E. (2007). *San francisco's international hotel : Mobilizing the filipino american community in the anti-eviction movement*. Temple University Press.

Martynovych, E. (2017). The Intersection of Culture and Activism in the Filipino Community in SoMa. *Master's Theses*. 1270.

<https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1270>

Page & Turnbull, Inc., (2009). Historic Context Statement, *South of Market Area*

[https://sfplanning.s3.amazonaws.com/archives/documents/372-SOMA\\_Historic\\_Context\\_Statement\\_06-30-2009.pdf](https://sfplanning.s3.amazonaws.com/archives/documents/372-SOMA_Historic_Context_Statement_06-30-2009.pdf)

SOMA Pilipinas, (2021). *History*

<https://www.somapilipinas.org/history>