

HYPERALLERGIC

When Students Went on Strike to Overturn a Eurocentric Curriculum

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Patrick Martinez, "Struggle and Progress (Frederick Douglass)" (2018), neon sign (all images courtesy of Southern Exposure, photos by Minoosh Zomorodinia)

SAN FRANCISCO — *Knowledge is power.* It's a hashtag, a [Schoolhouse Rock slogan](#), and a quote imperfectly attributed to both Sir Frances Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, yet it retains a fundamental truth: If we know our history, we know ourselves. This is the thrust of [Solidarity Struggle Victory](#), a timely exhibition on view at Southern Exposure in San Francisco.

Curator and educator [PJ Gubatina Policarpio](#)'s group exhibition commemorates the fruits of the tide-turning [134-day strike](#) at San Francisco State University (SFSU). Starting in November 1968, members of the Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front called for a strike, voicing frustrations that festered on campus: the conduct and

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rising body count of the Vietnam War, the firing of SFSU faculty member and Black Panther [George Murray](#), the university's discriminatory admissions policy. Most offensive, and what students vowed to overturn, was a curriculum that favored and exclusively reinforced Eurocentric and settler-colonist history and culture. Protestors refused to return to classes or allow the university to function until their [demands](#) were met. In late March 1969, interim president Dr. S.I. Hayakawa announced preliminary plans for what would become the university's celebrated [College of Ethnic Studies](#). This hard-fought victory, realized after violent clashes between students and police and roughly 500 arrests, represents a giant step in an ongoing march toward equitable higher education.

One of three pieces by Los Angeles native Patrick Martinez puts visitors on notice as they enter the gallery. Fabricated in purple and green neon, "Struggle and Progress (Frederick Douglass)" (2018) draws from the revered abolitionist's [1857 speech](#) that began with the phrase, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." Co-opting a ubiquitous visual form that is directly associated with consumerism and can be a welcoming sight, Martinez's neon sign undermines that familiarity with a hard truth. Students and faculty who participated in the SFSU strike understood that without struggle the progress they demanded of their school and society overall would never come. Though the clashes erupted all over campus and made local and [national headlines](#), they are not represented in Jerome Reyes's evocative "the horizon toward which we move always recedes before us (San Francisco State Quad)" (2018). In this context, the eerily empty public space suggests calm before the tumult that consumed the university and forced a long overdue national conversation about race, representation, and education.

Perhaps more radical than a student strike, at a mostly blue collar commuter school in northern California, was the students' simple demand: the right to learn about themselves. Demian DinéYazhi's towering vinyl piece "Untitled" (Radical Indigenous Queer Feminist Bibliography)" (2016) portrays books that help form a corpus of critical writing on queer and Native American experience. DinéYazhi's formidable work evokes the thousands of titles that capture histories and celebrate cultures outside the narrow confines of the white, Western, heteronormative "ideal," and the profound affirmation that is felt when we connect to our roots.

Fifty-one years have passed since the SFSU strike, but the struggle for equality that overtook the university has not passed. Student protests across the globe challenge xenophobic nationalism and confront economic and environmental insecurity, carrying forward the spit and vinegar of 1968 protests in Paris, Warsaw, Prague, and Mexico City, as well as San Francisco. Gridded screen prints produced by [Dignidad Rebelde](#), a collaborative project by Oakland-based artists Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes, illustrate how seemingly disparate campaigns overlap and enrich one another over time. Images of icons including Angela Davis and Steven Biko that visualize the late 1960s revolt resolutely accompany contemporary messages of solidarity with indigenous rights movements at Standing Rock and in occupied Palestine. Policarpio selected pieces from Barraza and Cervantes's robust poster series, decisively connecting historical and contemporary struggles and emphasizing intersectionality as the universal thread that binds them.

High above the gallery floor, three pieces from Dylan Miner's *This Land Is Always* (2018) series of hanging banners drive home the message that knowing our history is not only a right, but a responsibility. Two banners — "This Land Is Always" and "Indigenous" — remind visitors in block letters that the land on which the gallery stands is stolen, as is California and the rest of the United States. We are occupiers. If that knowledge is discomforting to those of us who are not Indigenous, it should be. But rather than succumb to settler guilt, consider a more productive journey, one that begins under Miner's third piece, a banner entitled "Meet You Here." From there, the journey begins toward understanding what spurred SFSU students to insist that their stories, and their people's history, struggles, and triumphs be treated as fundamental narratives.

[Solidarity Struggle Victory](#) continues at Southern Exposure (3030 20th Street, San Francisco, California) through November 9. The exhibition was curated by PJ Gubatina Policarpio.