INDIGENOUS PEOPLE’S DAY 2017 DECLARATION

RENAME — Many U.S. cities have chosen to do what is just and renamed Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Why is New York not among them? There is no reason for holding out any longer. It’s time for the Mayor and City Council to stand on the right side of history. New York City sits on the territory of the Lenape, and over one hundred thousand Indigenous people live on this territory today—more than any other city in the United States! Let’s honor the persistent presence of Indigenous Americans, despite attempts toward their elimination and reject the celebration of imperial conquest. This public holiday must be relaunched as an occasion to respect our Indigenous brothers and sisters and no longer commemorate a figure widely associated with exploitation and enslavement. American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) officials have told us that they will neither advocate for nor enter the public conversation about renaming Columbus Day. Their position of non-advocacy functions as an action against Indigenous peoples. Now is the time to reconsider and rename.

REMOVE — The equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt on Central Park West outside the AMNH has often been cited as the most hated monument in New York City. It’s easy to see why. Flanked by figures that appear to be Native and African stereotypes in a position of subservience, the statue is a stark embodiment of the white patrician supremacy that Roosevelt himself espoused and promoted and is an affront to all who enter the museum. Statuary is not forever and a monument that glorifies racial and gender hierarchies should be retired from public view. The movement that began in the South with the removal of Confederate flags and generals from public display has come to New York. The statue is city-owned and sits on land managed by the Parks Department. The Mayor’s commission to review “symbols of hate” should prioritize its removal and City Council members should all agree—it’s time to take it down.

RESPECT — Why do Indigenous, Asian, Latin American, and African cultural artifacts reside in the AMNH, while their Greek and Roman counterparts are housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art across the park? Because New York’s premier scientific museum continues to honor the bogus racial classification that relegates colonized peoples to the domain of Culture and Science. It’s time to accept that the Hall of African Peoples does not belong in the same exhibition framework as the Akeley Hall of African Mammals, and that Indigenous or Asian peoples cannot be represented in ways that are akin to the display of fossils and meteorites. These arrangements should be reviewed and reconceived by representatives of the “exhibited” populations. Human remains, sacred things, and objects of power stolen from Indigenous peoples should be placed under the authority of their descendants. The museum, which receives $17m of public funding annually (a sum greater than that allotted to the entire borough of Queens), has long been an embarrassment to New Yorkers and tourists. It needs a serious renovation, to be undertaken by a diverse range of curators drawn from the populations featured in the museum.

Recently, the museum leadership announced plans to renovate the Northwest Coast Hall, its first cultural gallery, largely untouched since it was built at the turn of the twentieth century. While we welcome this long overdue initiative, the false and degrading representations in the rest of the culture halls remain as a present reminder of inaction and colonial violence. AMNH must immediately begin a formal institution-wide decolonization process that addresses the saturated colonial infrastructure of the museum as a whole. An independent Decolonization Commission must be established to assess the colonial mentality, past and present, that presides over the institution. A full-time Decolonization Officer must be appointed, an internal decolonizing working group must be established, and town hall meetings must be scheduled to allow those affected by the racisms perpetuated in the culture halls to speak publicly. Moreover, the educational guides provided to teachers and docents fail to properly acknowledge present day peoples. They perpetuate racist stereotypes and demeaning representations, which inevitably reflect back on the exhibits themselves. It is shocking that, in 2017, school children are still subjected to this level of institutional violence in the name of education. This kind of violence should no longer be tolerated. With more than 2 million children visiting the museum annually, the NYC Department of Education should initiate its own independent assessment of the AMNH. This review should evaluate how the museum is addressing and rectifying the harmful effects of misrepresentation, incorrect information, and structural racism upon New York’s diverse school populations. As a publicly subsidized educational institution, the AMNH must be required to uphold the dignity of all peoples in this city.

NYC Stands with Standing Rock // Decolonize This Place // Black Youth Project 100 South Asian Solidarity Initiative // Eagle and Condor Community Center
We begin today by acknowledging that we are standing on the ancestral territory of the Lenni Lenape. This was, and is, their land—a reality that all of us who have come here must acknowledge. Our action today, at its most fundamental level, stands in solidarity with the Lenape, and all Indigenous peoples, whose land was stolen to create the settler states and who continue to live under siege, surveillance, and colonial structural violence on their own occupied land. We stand with our comrades advancing Indigenous resurgence and decolonization through ongoing settler colonial oppression. We stand in support of the return of their lands. This is where we must begin.

Removal Statement

Decolonize This Place

First Floor

Giant Sequoia Tree

THEODORE ROOSEVELT MEMORIAL HALL

Theodore Roosevelt was not a noble man of science. He viewed land, territories, animals and people as to be controlled, as he was to be destroyed. As a "frontiersman" he proclaimed, "I don't go so far as to think the only good Indian is the dead Indian but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth." His devotion to conservation is celebrated in this hall, but it was driven by a desire to dominate Nature. His ethnically cleansed wilderness parks were conceived as places of refuge and recreation for elite White Anglo Saxons Protestants. As governor and as a president he expanded U.S. empire into the Caribbean and the Pacific with Big Stick diplomacy. He justified direct U.S. intervention in the affairs of other American nations if it was in this country's interest. He advanced white supremacy in the domain of law, science and state power. Today, this museum still stands as a testament to his vision, and the statue outside is its embodiment. It cannot be separated from the museum. It causes daily damage by perpetuating stereotypes of the Indigenous and African figures obedient at his feet. The public celebration of white male imperial rule has no place in this day and age.

DIORAMA OF CHIEF ORATAM & PETER STUYVESANT

In 1600 there were 7000 Lenape Indians in what is now Manhattan, what they called "Manhatta." By 1700 there are 200. Where did they go? Rather than account for their death, relocations and current lives, this diorama represents a meeting between the Chief Oratam and Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant in 1680 and refers to what is now the Bowery as a "meeting place." Oratam signed the peace represented here after two years of the Dutch waging a vicious war against the Lenape and the British. The Lenape are denied their history, their present, and their role as caretakers and owners of this territory. Why is the diorama here in this hall? Because Roosevelt’s family can be traced to their Dutch ancestors who came to New York around the time this supposedly amicable meeting took place.

AGRICULTURAL SETTLEMENT

Indigenous people! We were here in “The Forest Primeval,” cultivating and communicating with the land in ways that left no scar. We raised forests and planted corn. The land was not ‘untouched’; we were here. We were here in 1790 when settlements spread; we were here in 1840 and 1870 despite broken treaties and forced removals. We were here in the 1950s when agriculture was ‘perfected’—as a calculation for converting land into the purest profit possible. Like the land, we have been cut apart, colonized, commodified. But we are here still. In 1700, and Columbus “discovered” Orinoco River in South America in 1500. In a decolonial museum, these dates would tell a different story and different histories. It would acknowledge Indigenous life in the forests of California, the clear-cutting of Redwood trees by agricultural speculators, the ransacking of lumber for settler homes and towns, and the growing threat to these and other trees of drought stress from global warming. Where fire management in forests was once a sustainable pre-contact practice, forest fires in California are “fought” today by incarcerated people who are predominantly African American and who are compensated a dollar per hour. As we look at the rings of this Sequoia, let us also think of the genocides and ecocides, and movements and struggles, that we hold within our skins like the bark of a tree.

VIVA PUERTO RICO LIBRE

Roosevelt ascended politically as a General in the Spanish-American war. He was crucial in establishing the United States as a colonial lord over of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, Hawaii and Guam. Let us acknowledge the people of Puerto Rico, a colonial territory of the United States annexed by Roosevelt. And let us honor their work of mutual relief and collective resistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria as the colonial government leaves them to fend for themselves. Viva Puerto Rico Libre!

HALL OF NORTHWEST COAST INDIANS

Osborn, the most formative of the museum’s presidents, was central to the community of eugenicists who met regularly within these walls to plot how to “save” the national gene pool from dilution by lesser African figures obedient at his feet. The public celebration of white male imperial rule has no place in this day and age.

PLAQUE FOR HENRY FAIRFIELD OSBORN

The museum finds it important to highlight that Napoleon conceived as places of refuge and recreation for elite White Anglo Saxons Protestants. As governor and as a president he expanded U.S. empire into the Caribbean and the Pacific with Big Stick diplomacy. He justified direct U.S. intervention in the affairs of other American nations if it was in this country’s interest. He advanced white supremacy in the domain of law, science and state power. Today, this museum still stands as a testament to his vision, and the statue outside is its embodiment. It cannot be separated from the museum. It causes daily damage by perpetuating stereotypes of the Indigenous and African figures obedient at his feet. The public celebration of white male imperial rule has no place in this day and age.

THE STATUE

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THE TEAM

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This exhibit is devoted to what is now known as India. The British are sometimes praised for unifying India through the construction of an artificial unit. As a colonizer, the British actively fostered the conformity of religious and gender roles to religious orthodoxy. So-called unification was carried out to more efficiently extract massive amounts of wealth for the Empire. They also used the tactic of divide and rule to control the people, and exploited fault lines between castes, classes, religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities.

Mahatma Gandhi is heroized here as a leader of India’s independence struggle against the British. But as with the “founders” of other communities—including the United States—the heroization of Gandhi ignores his reinforcement of structures of oppression. He is often cited as an inspiration for civil rights advocates, but Gandhi’s legacy of racist attitudes towards African peoples is well documented, and he was an upholder of the caste system in India.

The Hindu caste system is a hierarchical ranking of people where so-called “lower caste” communities are regarded subservient, underscoring of basic rights. Dalit today is a term of empowerment claimed by oppressed communities formerly called “untouchable.” “Lower caste” communities have used the term Bahujan as they represent the actual majority of the population. Although caste discrimination is outlawed in the Indian constitution, Dalits and Bahujans are often persecuted, forced to live separately from the rest of the population, sexually assaulted, and killed while the upper castes perpetrators of these acts remain unpunished. Refusing this systemic oppression, a massive movement of Dalits now exists in India. As Dalit anti-caste revolutionary Babasaheb Ambedkar said, “caste is not a division of labor. it is a division of laborers.”

These are the words museum educators have students learn before they take class trips to the Hall of Asian Peoples. “Dynasty”, “divination”, “down”, “ancestor worship”, “shamanism.” This hall showcases the museum’s imagination of life in Asia before European contact. It ignores the history of centuries of Asian nations and their contact with the erstwhile colonizers from the West. In these dioramas, you see a small selection of the Museum’s 60,000 cultural artifacts plundered during colonial expeditions in Asia. One such object is the Chinese Wedding Chair. It depicts a Chinese bride with her face and body hidden within the confines of the ornate carriage. Curators explain Chinese marriage as a sexist tradition rooted in the superstition of bad luck. This framing omits the role of patriarchal structures in creating the stereotype of East Asian women as exotic and submissive. Such portrayals invite the ongoing sexual violence against and exploitation of Asian women.

Palestine, the museum amplifies the non-indigenous Zionist claim to a land while simultaneously ignoring the indigenous Palestinian population—whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—who have always been there, long before the violent creation of the State of Israel.

This exhibit gives priority to the name (Jivaros, or “Savages”) the Spanish gave to the Shuar people after they successfully resisted the conquest of their Amazonian lands. The Spanish were driven out, but the predators keep coming back. Today they lust after the reserves of gold and other precious metals that are in contention between the national government and Chinese mining corporations. We are the Shuar peoples. Guardians of the Amazon, protectors of Mother Earth, her sacred medicines and ancestral truths. We rise, we reclaim, we rename, and we heal.
HALL OF AFRICAN PEOPLES

Look around. The vast multiplicity of African social and cultural life is positioned outside of modern time, in the past tense. With such a cacophony of sounds and colorful costumes, there is little space to ask: How did all these artifacts and costumes arrive here? And how do they perpetuate primitive stereotypes which continue to feed discriminatory treatment of diasporic African populations today? Consider the German genocide of the Ovaherero/Mbanderu and Nama people, from 1904-1908. 100,000 people died -- half of the Nama. Heads of victims were severed and sold to collectors of race science and medical students. Just last month, it was reported that one such collector later sold four skulls to this museum, where they were just discovered. In storage. Currently, representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama are calling both for a genocide memorial in the museum and repatriation of the remains. This is what a decolonial demand looks like.

SLAVERY IN AFRICA & THE AFRICAN TRADITION IN AMERICA

This short corridor, which occupies less than .003% of the entire space of the museum, leads to nowhere. This is where the museum accounts for slavery in Africa and the African Tradition in America. Here we are offered a scant overview of how slavers coerced pre-colonial African communities into participating in the trade of captives. Yet absence is any reference as to how slavery on the African continent inflicted harm on indigenous ways of living and weakened resistance to the coming European colonization. Here, slaves are recognized as human only insofar as they carry artifacts and costumes arrive here? And how do they perpetuate primitivist stereotypes which continue to feed discriminatory treatment of diasporic African populations today? Consider the German genocide of the Ovaherero/Mbanderu and Nama people, from 1904-1908. 100,000 people died -- half of the Nama. Heads of victims were severed and sold to collectors of race science and medical students. Just last month, it was reported that one such collector later sold four skulls to this museum, where they were just discovered. In storage. Currently, representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama are calling both for a genocide memorial in the museum and repatriation of the remains. This is what a decolonial demand looks like.

HALL OF AFRICAN MAMMALS IN AMERICA

As they forcibly extracted resources from African peoples, so-called naturalists and explorers like Carl Akeley collected a variety of animals across the continent. Their activities led to species’ endangerment, the flourishing of the fur and ivory trade, and widespread deforestation. Akeley was a hunting companion of Teddy Roosevelt and intimate of Belgian King Albert I, who succeeded King Leopold II as the arch-colonizer of the Congo. If you roll up this flyer and put it to your eye, you are looking down the scope of Carl Akeley’s gun. This is a way of seeing. Each of the dioramas you have visited is a snapshot of domination; remember this when you look through the glass to see a human on display.

 Decolonize This Place

RESPECT THE ANCESTORS

RENAME THE DAY