

# PUBLIC LETTER ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES DAY, 2018

On October 8th, we will be returning to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) for the third year in a row. Unlike the guided anti-Columbus tours of previous years, the next visit to the museum's dusty cultural halls will be fully participatory and will culminate with a People's Assembly. Why the change of plan?

Since our first action in 2016, the concept of "decolonizing museums" has entered the mainstream of public opinion. Awareness about the topic has also gone international, impacting museums in the UK and Europe faced with similar challenges to the AMNH. Clearly, the public appetite for pro-active change has grown in scope and urgency, and museum officials have been scrambling to respond. Despite our city's preferred self-image as on the cutting edge, New York's major museums have barely registered this seismic shift, and the AMNH, which has the most heavy lifting to do, risks being left even further behind—solidifying its reputation as a chronically outdated institution, crammed with deeply colonial and faulty representations of culture. While the framing of these contents is firmly rooted in the distant past, the exhibits perform the daily work of reinforcing racist legacies that reside in the minds of the AMNH's visitors.

So, too, the closed room conversations we have conducted periodically with AMNH curators and officials seem to have run their course. Those we meet with are usually always in agreement with us about the need for a decolonization process (with full attention to demands for reparations and repatriation of human remains and sacred objects) but we feel the oppressive weight of institutional inertia in the room, and the responses are too measured and painfully slow in coming. In a recent correspondence with us, the AMNH acknowledged the problem: "We recognize that the Museum's 150-year history and that of its collections are embedded within the larger history... of western colonization... We also recognize that some aspects of the Museum's cultural halls are out of date and include presentations and treatments that do not accurately represent either the cultures presented or the values and perspectives of the Museum today." Accordingly, the AMNH has finally begun its overhaul of the Northwest Coast Hall. But, at the current rate of progress, it will take another fifty years to re-do all of the cultural halls. In the meantime, the cultural violence will continue, and generations of young people will be exposed to the harms generated by degrading representations as they pass through the museum.

As part of our children's education, they have a right to know the full story behind the collecting and the exhibiting of the museum's contents. They should be told how and why the AMNH was the center of the eugenics movement in the early part of the twentieth century. They should learn about the real Teddy Roosevelt, strenuously driven, as he was, by the ideals of male chauvinism and white supremacy, and how those socially destructive values were, and still are, embedded in the museum's classification and framing of materials. They should be informed about the ongoing contribution of these misbeliefs to present-day racism, sexism, and homophobia. They should be prompted to ask why the museum only exhibits the culture of non-Euro/settler peoples i.e. the colonized populations of the world. And, ultimately, they should be encouraged to consider why such cultural halls belong in a museum of natural history at all.

The AMNH likes to describe itself as an educational institution, but there is nothing in the museum that would inspire schoolchildren to ask such questions, even though hundreds of thousands are required to visit annually as part of the New York public

school curriculum. As for higher education in the AMNH's would-be peer institutions, the museum tends to feature only in college curricula as a case-study in colonial nostalgia. In our universities, course syllabi are constantly being amended to reflect new schools of thought and breakthroughs in historical knowledge. By contrast, most of the museum's dioramas and exhibits have not been altered in many decades, and many are untouched since they were installed a hundred years ago.

Nor has the museum lent its influential voice to the two other causes we have brought to its doors.

1. It has been silent on the issue of renaming Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples Day, and it has yet to move forward on the acknowledgement that its building sits on occupied Lenape land—a decision wholly under its own control. We have condemned this position of non-advocacy and this reluctance to adopt a Acknowledgement as aggressive actions against Indigenous peoples. We have demanded that the museum take immediate steps to remedy the harms.

2. In the course of the debate generated by the Mayor's commission to review "symbols of hate" in New York City, the AMNH made no public comment on the fate of the equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt which greets visitors to the museum on Central Park West. The commission was split over the decision to remove the monument—a full half of its members voted for its relocation. Given how integral the statuary and hagiography of Roosevelt is to the AMNH, the museum should have taken on its share of responsibility for addressing the Monument's future rather than punting the decision wholly to the City. Its officials have privately described to us their shame at having to pass by the monument every day, and the time is now long overdue for them to address their "Roosevelt problem." We have demanded that the AMNH leadership publicly state its resolve to rethink this deeply flawed adoration of Roosevelt, which confronts visitors at the entrance and which is further imposed on them inside the museum itself, in the lavish homage on display in the Theodore Roosevelt Rotunda and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall.

The museum is not a private institution, it relies heavily on public funding (upwards of \$17 million annually), and so we all have a right to insist on accountability. As people gather on October 8th, we will ask them to help reclaim the space of the halls through self-organized tours and to imagine a different kind of institution. The assembly to follow will feature reports and testimony from these tours. We will acknowledge the decolonial proposals presented over the last two years, and consider the museum's responses, as outlined above. With these in mind, the assembly will formulate new demands, for adoption by those present. Participants will pledge to pursue these demands with the AMNH's senior officials and board members, and with elected city officials who are ex officio trustees.

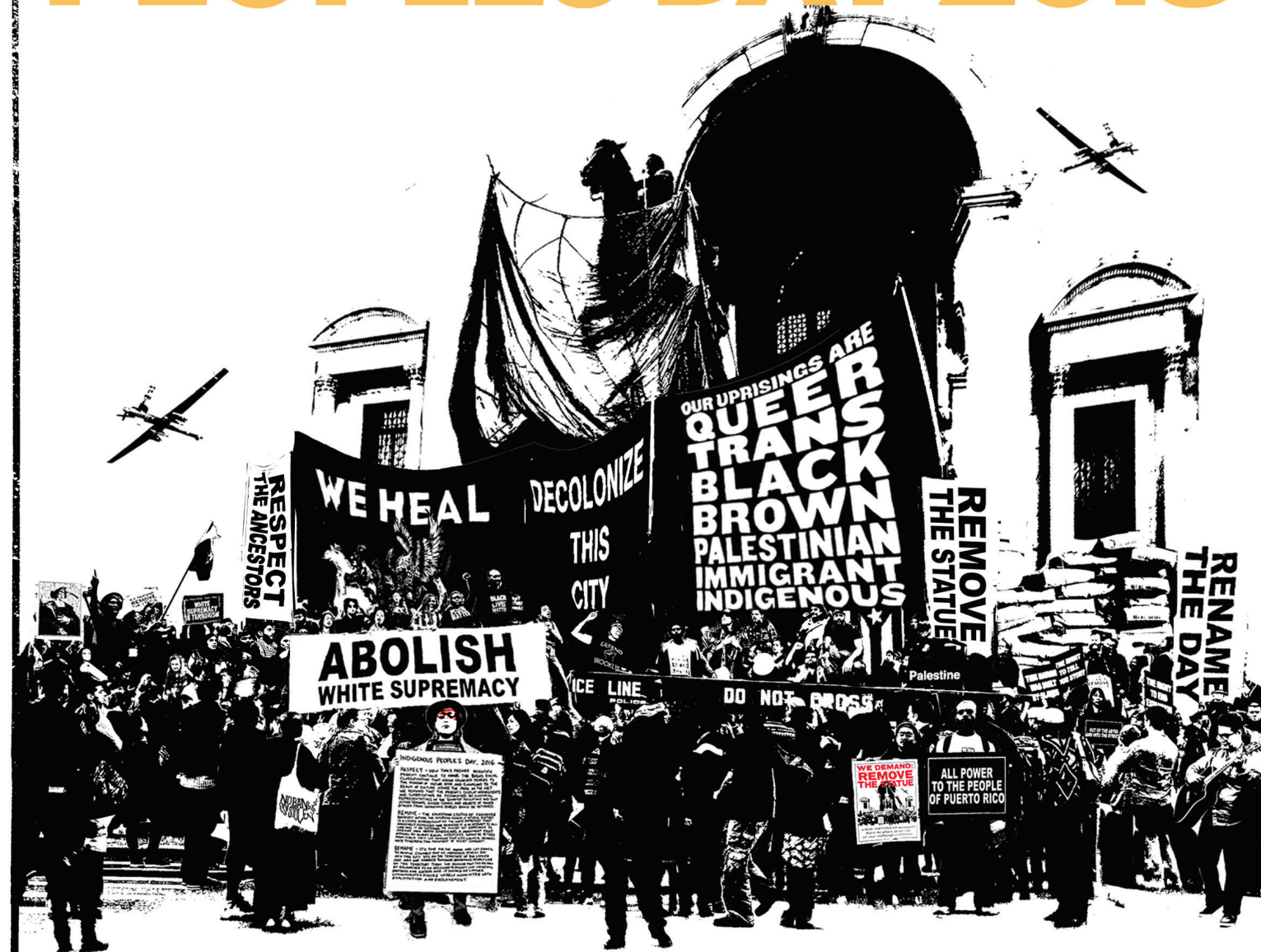
Decolonize This Place

NYC Stands with Standing Rock

Signatories: American Indian Community House, Black Youth Project 100, South Asia Solidarity Initiative, Chinatown Art Brigade, Take Back the Bronx, The People's Cultural Plan, Working Artists and the Greater Economy

#decolonizethisplace

# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES DAY 2018



# DECOLONIZE! RECLAIM! REIMAGINE!

#decolonizethisplace

# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We begin today by acknowledging that we are standing on the homeland of the Lenape, which is, and always has been, a place of Indigenous movement. Our action today, at its most fundamental level, stands in solidarity with the Lenape and all Indigenous peoples, here and beyond, whose land was stolen to create settler states, and who continue to live under siege, surveillance, and colonial structural violence on their own occupied land. We stand with all those advancing Indigenous resurgence and decolonization in the face of colonial oppression. We stand in support of the return of their lands. This acknowledgement is a call to commit, and to take on the responsibility, to dismantle the ongoing effects of settler colonialism. This is where, together, we must begin and persist.

**REMOVE THE STATUE · RENAME THE DAY · RESPECT THE ANCESTORS**

## THEODORE ROOSEVELT MEMORIAL HALL

Theodore Roosevelt viewed land, territories, animals and people as objects to be tamed, controlled and, at times, destroyed. As a "frontiersman" he proclaimed "I don't go so far as to think that 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 his ethnically cleansed wilderness parks were conceived as places of refuge and recreation for elite White Anglo Saxon Protestants. As president, he expanded U.S. empire into the Caribbean and the Pacific with Big Stick diplomacy, and he advanced white supremacy in the domain of law, science and state power. His corrosive legacy haunts the AMNH, from the monument outside, with its vile, racializing stereotypes, to the adoration of his repellent ideals in the museum's Rotunda and Roosevelt Memorial Hall.

## DIORAMA OF CHIEF ORATAM & PETER STUYVESANT

As a result of two years of pressure from Decolonize This Place and its allies, museum officials have begun to recontextualize select dioramas in the AMNH cultural halls. In the plaques around this diorama you will read a critique of colonial representation as it applies to the depiction of Lenape people in this purported meeting between the Chief Oratam and Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant in 1660. These are baby steps, but consider how easy they are to undertake--no more than the work of one afternoon. Imagine how quickly all of the exhibits in the cultural halls could be reconceived. Imagine how you would do it!

## 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 overlord 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 rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Maria, and after the colonial government left them to fend for themselves. The resistance continues. Viva Puerto Rico Libre!

## PLAQUE FOR HENRY FAIRFIELD OSBORN

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 breeds of men and women. A close associate of Roosevelt, Osborn's belief in the racial superiority of Nordic peoples helped to close the immigration "door" in 1924, and it has shaped the arrangement walls and display of the museum's collections down to this day.

## PROGRAM

**3:30**

Welcome and Orientation / Meet in Theodore Roosevelt Hall

**4:00**

Self-Guided Walks / Follow the Pink on the Maps

**5:00**

Decolonial Gathering / Meet by The Grand Canoe



### How to Contribute to the Snapchat Story!

1. Snap throughout Indigenous Peoples Day Action
2. Publicly post snaps to the Snap Map by sending snaps to "Our Story" and/or "Our Story: AMNH"
3. Wait. Snapchat will add all snaps to the Snap Map
4. After the action, open Snap Map + enjoy!

**#DECOLONIZETHISPLACE**  
**#DECOLONIZETHISMUSEUM**



@decolonizethisplace



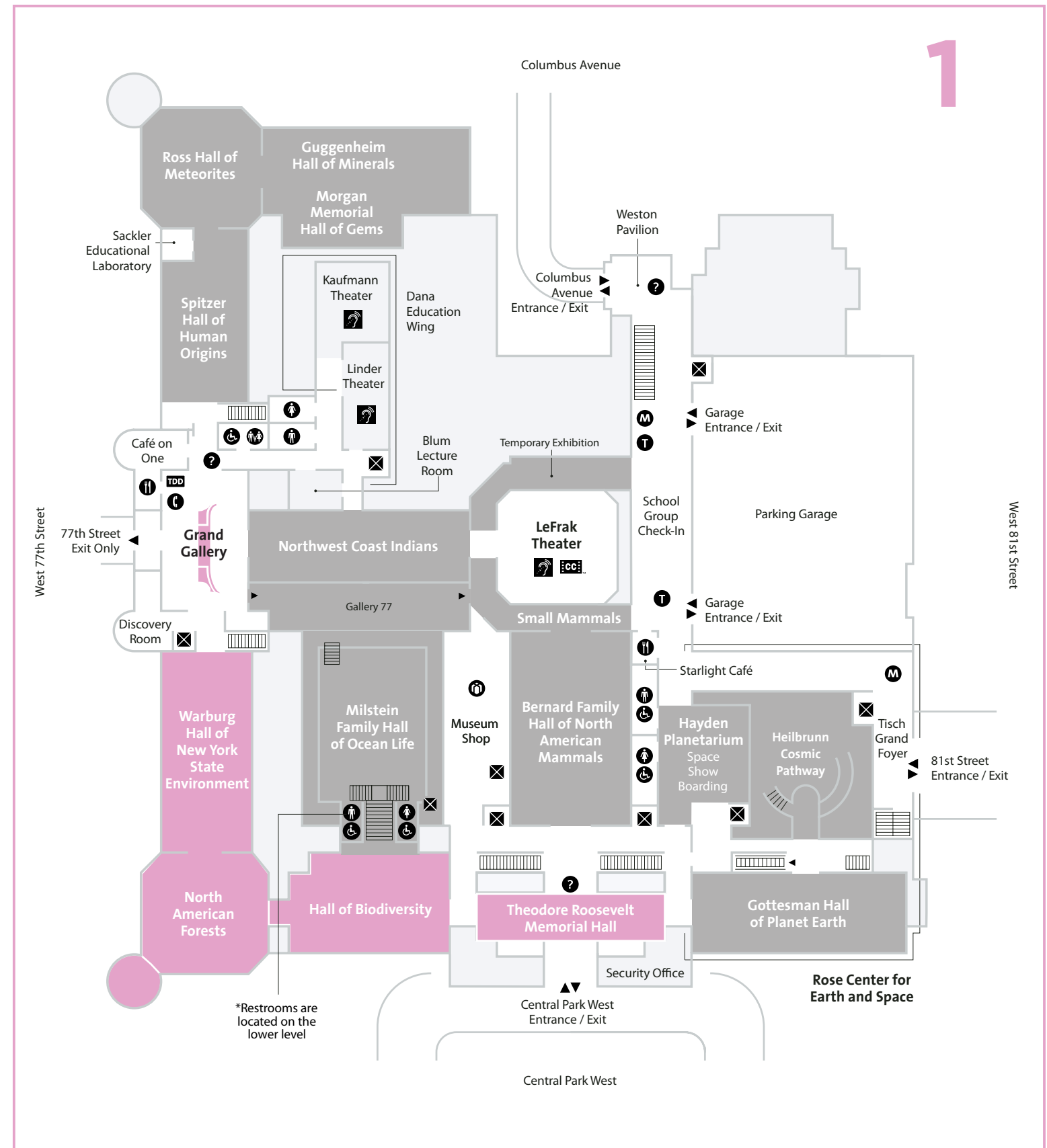
@decolonize\_this



@decolonizethisplace

## Actions Throughout the Day

- Distribution of the "Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions" begins a process for committing museums, archives, libraries, and universities to recognizing and respecting Indigenous homelands, inherent sovereignty, and ongoing survivance. Access the guide at <http://landacknowledgements.org/>
- Liberation Drum Circles will perform songs of resistance and collective liberation produced in community workshop at the steps of the museum.
- Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) will intervene in the liquid space of the museum's finances, demanding decolonization on monetary terms.



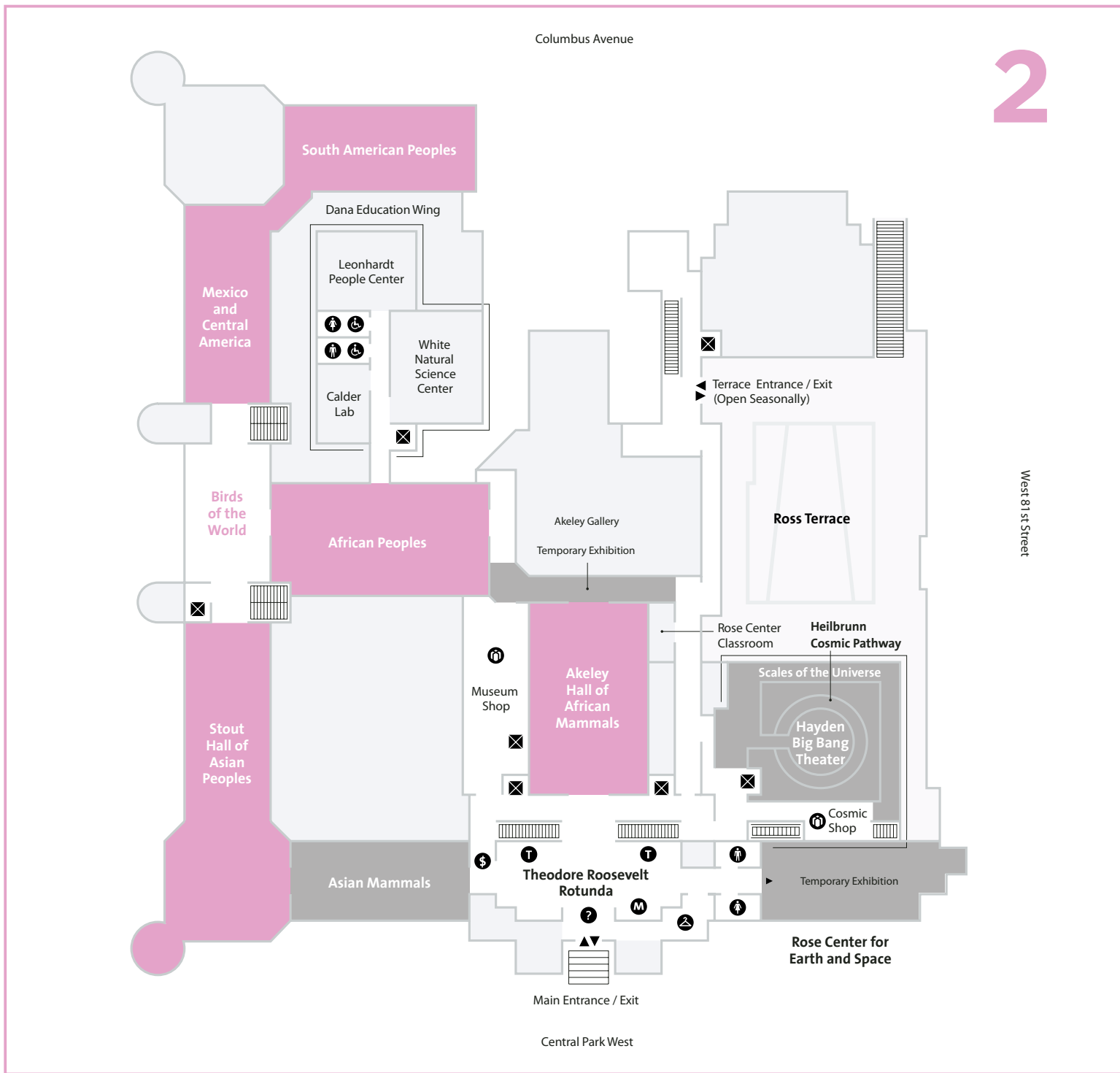
## FIRST FLOOR

### Hall of Biodiversity People's Cultural Plan

The People's Cultural Plan will dissect the roll-call of major AMNH funders (and 1910 Trustees) and show how connected these donors are, historically and in the present day, to slavery, imperialism, genocide, theft, worker exploitation, and fraud.

### Hall of North American Forests NYC Shut It Down

NYC Shut It Down will illustrate how deforestation and climate change are impacting endangered or extinct forest species and will bring awareness to the record of Missing Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Noting how the land informs human embodiment, we will also call attention to the violence inflicted by fracking and other extractive processes.



**SECOND FLOOR**

**Hall of African Peoples & Akeley Hall of African Mammals**

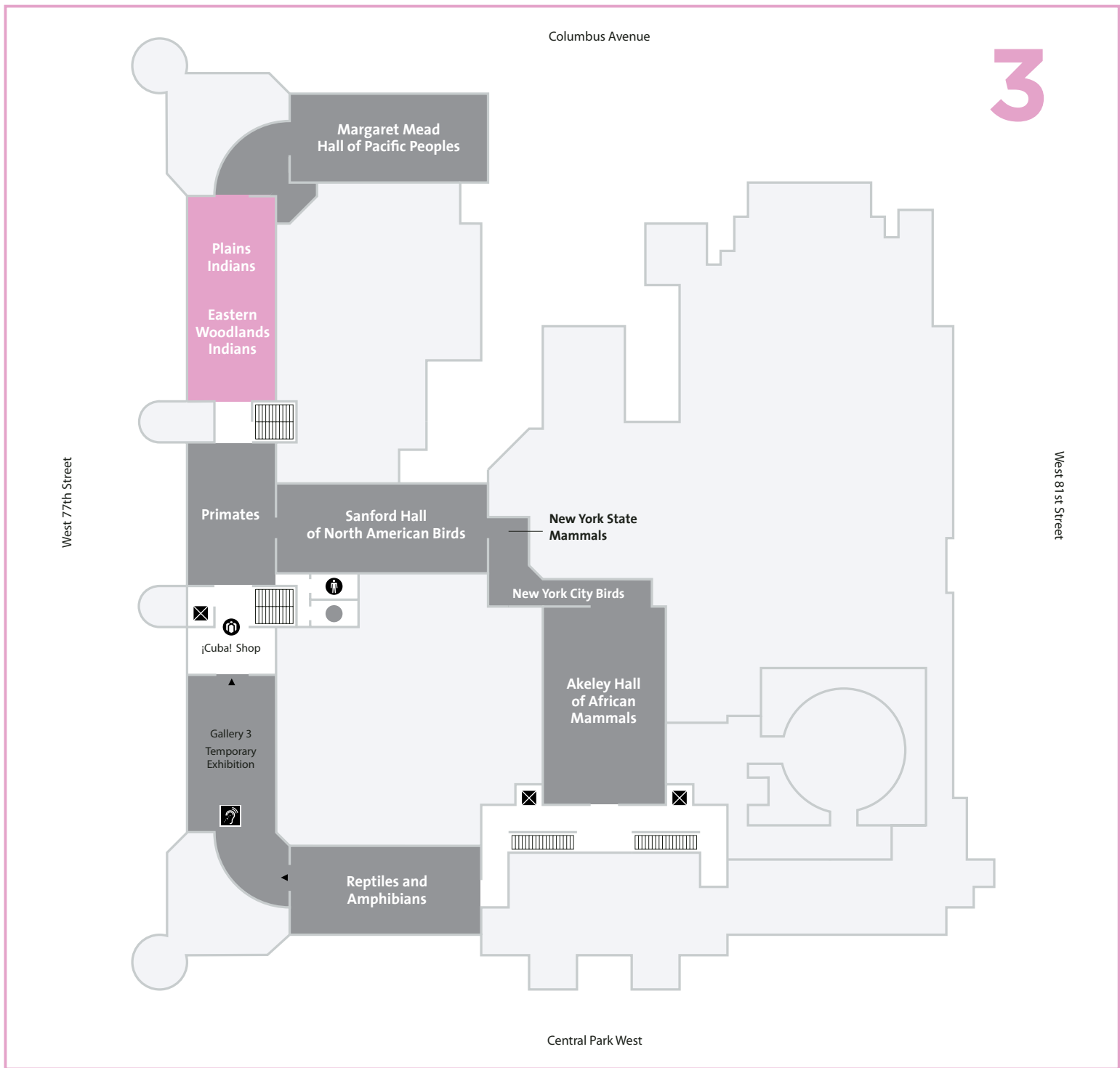
**Black Youth Project 100**  
 Byp100 NYC will engage in a holistic turn up on the Hall of African Peoples and Hall of African Mammals. We will highlight the continuity between the halls' racialized and ahistorical displays and the oppression faced by Black peoples today. Calling attention to the violence perpetrated against Ota Benga by the AMNH we will create a space for healing and truth telling.

**Hall of Asian Peoples  
 Chinatown Art Brigade & South Asia Solidarity Initiative**

In an intervention that will transform the Hall of Asian Peoples, Chinatown Art Brigade and South Asia Solidarity Initiative will highlight the history of colonial occupation and violence in our homelands.

**(Jews of Asia) Hall of Asian Peoples  
 All Your Genocides Are Connected**

All Your Genocides Are Connected will haunt the museum and its archive of stolen human remains with ghosts, skulls and other creatures. They will lead you on the Genocide Trail from the Jews of Asia exhibit in the Hall of Asian Peoples around the Hall of Africa and the Americas.



**Hall of Mexico and Central America  
 The Semillas Collective**

The Semillas Collective will host a collective action of healing through movement and sound. They will honor ancestors by invoking bone and blood memory through motion, and decolonize body and language through song and trauma release.

**Hall of South America  
 Condor Canta Ceremony by NYC Andinx Community**

Sudacx and Shuar Community of NYC will be holding a ceremony dedicated to Andinx Womxn who led and continue to lead the struggle to protect and decolonize the land and the people. We call upon others to join us in remembering the spirit of our Ancestors on Indigenous People's Day

through cleanse, song, a people's history, sharing of our current struggles, and ritual.

**THIRD FLOOR**

**Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians  
 Nishnaabekwewag Negamonid**

Members of the Anishinaabe women's hand drumming group, Nishnaabekwewag Negamonid, will be joined by native and non-native women-identified accomplices in the Hall of Eastern Woodland Indians. Together they will use movement, language, and sound to disrupt the colonial space of the museum and speak to prior, persisting Indigenous presences.

OUR ANCESTORS ARE WATCHING



JUSTICE FOR OTA BENGA

THEY TRIED TO BURY US THEY DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE SEEDS



GENTRIFICATION CUTTING DOWN



COMMUNITIES LIKE SEQUOIA TREES

REPARATIONS AND REPATRIATION

OTZ WTOWSZ WAZO

WTOWSZ MOWS