

Changing the course of history

Thembi Mutch introduces our special section

In September 2019, a dramatic decision was taken by several key cultural institutions in the UK. National Galleries Scotland, Southbank Centre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre all announced they were ending their relationships with British Petroleum (BP). Tate Modern and Tate Britain had done the same back in 2016. Notably absent from the list are the Science Museum and the Royal Opera House, as well as the British Museum, where an exhibition of Iraqi artefacts was the target of some very colourful and inventive protests. (See page 32.)

These actions are an important part of the decolonisation movement in Europe, a movement that involves breaking ties with corporations that profit from neocolonial extractive operations, causing social harm and ecocide. Decolonising has been happening for a long time globally: in South Africa it's focused on education, in Australia on land rights and Indigenous patents, and in the UK largely on cultural institutions.

So, what is decolonisation? Historically, decolonisation is the challenging of settler occupancy of land, institutions and legal structures. The term was used by the Martinican philosopher and writer Frantz Fanon in 1961, and picked up by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1986. Initial work centred on critically evaluating the detrimental effects of schooling in colonial languages in Algeria and Kenya, and the importance of reinstating Indigenous systems of thought, legal processes, learning, being and doing.

During the Rhodes Must Fall events in South Africa (2014 to the present), students and academics alike tore down statues. In New York, protestors from 20 community groups occupied the Brooklyn Museum to highlight the gentrification of Brooklyn and the appointment to another new director position of an Ivy League 'WASP' (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant). They argued that there were more than enough excellent contenders from other backgrounds.

At the other, softer, extreme we need to insert more stories, consciously striving to promote marginal voices and diverse role models, recognising our own unconscious biases, and challenging the rising rhetoric of depoliticisation that argues that social problems are private individual ones that can be sorted through mindfulness, diet and meditation. R

Thembi Mutch is an award-winning environmental journalist specialising in reporting on Africa.

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