

# Negotiating, Navigating and the Neoliberal University

## A Conversation with Rosemarie Buikema

### **Bethany Gum**

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**BETHANY GUM:** Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today, Rosemarie. Your role at the university has many layers; you are professor of Art, Culture and Diversity at Utrecht University (UU), chair of the UU Graduate Gender program and scientific director of the Netherlands Research School for Gender Studies (NOG) to name a few. Could you tell me a bit more about what these positions entail for you in terms of responsibility?

**ROSEMARIE BUIKEMA:** Well, chairing the Graduate Gender Program means that, first, I'm responsible for the quality of the local curriculum, the wellbeing of the students and the personnel. Chairing NOG entails coordinating the national programs in Gender Studies, and being a professor of Art, Culture and Diversity entails that, next to these managerial responsibilities, I developed a research profile as a Gender Studies scholar in the Arts. All these roles are of course very much executed in the context of different kind of teaching and research teams. Therefore, we have all kinds of structures in place both as a local and a national team to make things work. In the Graduate Gender program, for example, we have individual coordinators for the Research Master, the Master, and the Bachelor program. Consequently, we have a so-called *korte lijnen overleg*,<sup>1</sup> which is the daily government of the program. This consists of the full professors and the program coordinators that meet every six weeks. Together we keep track of the scheduling of the program, the workload, and the well-being of the teachers, making sure they can do their job in such a way that everybody has a sort of equilibrium in being able to do research next to the ongoing teaching tasks. So, when you ask, 'what does it entail being the chair of the Graduate Gender program?', it means that you need to listen, but you also need to delegate. As the one who leads a program, you need to have a good structure in place for giving responsibilities to others and to invest in good relationships—to make sure it's very easy for teachers to report whatever needs to be reported. A transparent flow and exchange of information is crucial for the well-being of everybody in a program.

The other side is that I, as the responsible program leader of Gender Studies, very much take care of our position as a field, not only in the department, but also in the faculty and in the university. This includes lobbying for the program so that we can do more than simply hire additional teachers to teach the program. For example, now with COVID-19, we have had to take care of the students in a different way and curricular changes in response to students needs and requests involved talking with Deans and, ultimately, the Rector. So as chair, you're the link between the program and the university as a whole, and you must make sure that things run as smoothly as they possibly can. What is also very specific to this position is that we, as feminists, have a very specific ethics of care both for students and for each other as colleagues, and a concomitant feminist pedagogical ethics. In this respect, I have to do some lobby work to make that known to other parties in the institution who sometimes have a different, mostly neoliberal and pragmatic, way of dealing both with personnel and with the students.

One of the things I, for example, have been very much invested in is the diversity policies at the university. But, well, we have all read Sara Ahmed, and at our institution it's not radically different: diversity threatens to remain cosmetic, falling within a neoliberal scheme. Diversity sells well at the moment, but for us as decolonial feminists, diversity entails structural efforts and change. In these circumstances, I have to do quite a bit of lobbying to remind the powers-that-be that if you want to do diversity politics, you have to invest in positive action. For example, when we spot someone fitting the diversity criteria whom we would like to apply for a position in our department, we must go that extra mile to make it possible.

Navigating the university in a diplomatic way is something I had to learn over the years. We in Gender Studies are very much used to being activists, if not anarchists, but that's not who you can be in an institution like this; you won't be received well, which as such should not be your priority concern, but you risk being kicked out of (or more likely: not being invited to participate in) decision-making bodies. That's also something which comes with this responsibility: negotiating between the activist and the mainstream, balancing between principles and pragmatics, between being the killjoy and the one who is aware of and respects conventions. The majority of our Gender Studies teachers have an activist background. They are not afraid to say, 'no, we don't want to do it this way'. I nearly always agree, but I also sometimes have to respond by saying, 'I know you can say no, and I understand this position, but if we stick to this then we might miss the boat'. So, I have to find a balance in changing what we can change and accepting a break when the walls are still too high or too thick. It has, of course, everything to do with the content of what we're doing and with the kind of political engagement we have. We are all fully aware that we're navigating a system that is based on our exclusion. That political awareness has

implications for the process of knowledge production and for thinking through the relationship between knowledge and power. This makes my position more than just being the manager of a program, it makes it more or less into a way of being.

**BG:** I imagine that must be a challenge.

**RB:** Yes, and because this navigation of neoliberal power of definition is very much a global struggle, it also means that you are in touch with other directors of gender programs in Europe and the world. Through GEMMA<sup>2</sup>, ATGENDER<sup>3</sup> and RINGS,<sup>4</sup> for example.

**BG:** Fantastic. It really gives you a sense of solidarity in that respect. Scholars can share ideas and challenges navigating the university from all over the world. When you do have to negotiate and work with the neoliberal system, what do you find most challenging? I'm thinking about how the term 'decolonizing' is used as a buzzword by institutions without any real structural change. How do you work with that challenge and what issues have you been confronted with?

**RB:** I think that all these words risk becoming empty signs. Concepts like diversity or equality or inclusion, they don't mean anything anymore if they circulate in particular political contexts. The neoliberal use of these words for example has emptied or simplified their meaning, and now it has become common knowledge—at least in our circles—that these diversity policies sell and serve the neoliberal agenda. Everybody knows that you have to have some women around the table in order to be trustworthy and, slowly, society is starting to understand that you also have to have some people of color at the table. But, talking from a Gender Studies perspective, that's only the beginning and not the end of the project. For us, it is a no-brainer that you need a diverse group of people to work with.

It is precisely about understanding and explaining diversity in mainstream contexts that I have to explain very often. The issue is: how are you going to listen to these people that might not *a priori* agree with the traditional rules of the game? For me, there are three dimensions to every practice of inclusion. The first is that you need the subaltern to be present; but then, instead of saying, 'these are the rules, and you have to play the game according to them', you also need to listen to what the subaltern voice has to say. Having listened to what other voices have to say, you then need to re-define the issues that are on the table. For example, in the context of peace negotiations, war or conflict resolution, you would ask: what does the conflict consist of, to whom and why—and who is affected by the conflict in what way? How is violence defined? Does violence in a geopolitical conflict only concern those who populate battlefields or are we also thinking of the

socio-economical losses of those who stayed home? So, the third step in practicing diversity is very much a redefinition of concepts. This means that the problems that have to be solved might take a different shape and, if you listen to other voices, you might have to develop a different conceptualization of the solutions that need to be implemented. This final step, which includes rethinking the existing structures of power, is still very much an obstacle in our current attempts to implement change.

So, what decolonizing the institution means is not only that you add people to the staff, or that you add different students to your classes, but that you also analyze the fact that the entire system is built on the exclusion of these Others. Then, when you include the Other, you need to redefine what knowledge is, which knowledge matters to whom and why. In the end, I think decolonizing the university means that you have to build new diasporic knowledge networks and that you have to open up the relations between the knower and the known. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to do away with white Eurocentric knowledge, but you can read the canon differently, analyze the situatedness of the relationship between the knower and the known. You have to trace where knowledge comes from, because a lot of European knowledge is not even particularly European—it's just white-washed.

**BG:** Absolutely, I understand. Decolonizing has to mean more than simply implementing policies or 'adding' students and staff. There are also a number of scholars that are critical of the term 'decolonize'. Nayantara Appleton argues, similarly to you, in favor of adopting other terms, not just the term decolonize. Her definition of 'decolonize' is situated in a very American context, in the context of settler colonialism and she argues that the use of other terms might create more meaningful change. What do you think of this? Do you think more the use of more succinct terms might be more beneficial than the term 'decolonize?'

**RB:** If you use the term 'decolonize', it might also be very polarizing in a lot of contexts. The term 'decolonize' is common amongst us as critical thinkers, but most other people don't see it in the same way and would say: 'decolonize? We are not colonizing!'. You lose a lot of energy explaining yourself. I don't think the fact is that we have to defend the term 'to decolonize' just because it raises a lot of questions. The issue is more that it challenges so-called universal truths and knowledge claims—recognizing that these may be exclusionary and serve the power of definition of some while erasing others. The power of definition, that is to say, the right to claim what is important and what is not, is executed by a very small group of people, and we know exactly who these people are—middle class, able-bodied, white men. Our feminist epistemological project is very much that of understanding the engineering of power, and the

relationship between power and knowledge. What I think is one of the main challenges for feminists and decolonial or post-colonial thinkers is being able to make more accessible the power of definition, which is the political and epistemological assignment of a university. The question is very much about how knowledge is constituted. How is it mashed up with power and with exclusion? And if you want to call that decolonial, then colonial also becomes a little bit of a metaphor.

**BG:** I see, yes. Power plays such a crucial role into how knowledge is constituted, in the epistemological element of the university, but also the ontology of the university and the practical day-to-day environment. Power is held by those who decide what we see around the university and whose names are memorialized. Mbembe argues in favor of removing statues and changing colonial building names. I think it is relevant that they are removed, but what do you think these more practical, tangible changes mean? Do you think that removing statues and names is a way to outwardly present the university as making change when really no structural transformation has taken place?

**RB:** Yes, that is comparable with doing diversity superficially. You bring people in; you remove signs of imperialism; and then it's done. But I do not think that Mbembe's decolonial strategy was limited to that when he addressed the #RhodesMustFall movement. First of all, we all know that Cecil Rhodes was a colonial imperialist, but the issue is that in the course of time, Rhodes has become very much intertwined with excellence. His colonial wealth became intertwined with the set-up of prestigious knowledge institutes. The University of Cape Town is built with money he left. One building at the University of Oxford campus has been built with money from the Rhodes legacy and is consequently named the Rhodes building. Additionally at Oxford University there is a scholarship system in place called the Rhodes scholarship fund that even former President Clinton profited from. Thus, being a Rhodes scholar has very much become a symbol of excellence.<sup>5</sup> This is also why Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, does not want to change its name: it is very much linked, not to an imperialist racist ideology, but to academic excellence.

This is just one example which illustrates that decolonization entails more than changing names or removing statues.<sup>6</sup> You cannot just get rid of these representations by removing them because those *signs* have travelled, and they have become indexes of how much patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism have been intertwined into our academic system. However, following Mbembe, removing statues such as those of Cecil Rhodes in a country like South Africa, where 70 percent of the land has been owned by only 13 percent of the people is not a frivolous act. Removing

imperial legacies is an act of reclaiming public space. The apartheid system legitimized indigenous peoples being pushed back into the hinterland, so to speak, so claiming space is very relevant and not at all a solipsistic issue. But again, it's not the end but the beginning of the struggle to be included in the power of definition. The same is true in the context of Black Lives Matter concerning the removal of statues.

The removal and placement of statues is an issue that raises questions over who owns the public sphere and whether this space is open to everyone. For example, just before the COVID lockdowns, I was at Central European University in Budapest, and all of a sudden, I was struck by all these statues of horses and men around the city. I did not know who they were, but they started to get on my nerves. I mean, it was not my city, nor my personal history, but there I imagined, 'how intimidating can this be?' This is also Mbembe's starting point. This affect of being blown away and marginalized in a public sphere is only the beginning of the thought process.

At the end of the day, I do not think that this should be what the university is about; about organizing riots to claim the public space, etc. A university is a knowledge fabric, so it should be possible to focus on the enterprise of decentering knowledge; decentering the canon; and opening up new knowledge perspectives. It should also center the creation of new knowledge networks, and, of course, the empirical consequences that you hope will be taken up by politics and social movements. We must not precisely define the difference between academia and activism, but the academy is necessarily closely connected to the centering act or combating epistemic violence, and governments consequently need to inform themselves accordingly and take care of securing access to civil rights for all.

**BG:** Just in the interest of centering the Netherlands more, how do you think Utrecht University is making steps towards decentering white, Western knowledge production?

**RB:** Very recently, I think that there has absolutely been a tendency, a willingness at higher levels, to move towards decolonization. It has not been very long since I was last asked not to use the term 'decolonizing' when speaking of the university's curricula in public—for example, in the context of the UU #ReThink movement.<sup>7</sup> At the time, the UU administration thought it was offensive, while now I think it has become common knowledge that we have to decolonize curricula. But, of course, you have counter-movements everywhere.

However, our task primarily is to talk and work with those people who acknowledge that there is an imbalance in who has access to what in the academy. We first need to work with allies in order

to keep the project going. But at the level of implementing change, there is, of course, a difference in sensitivity or a difference in awareness, in how to apply and epitomize concepts like situated knowledge. For those of us in academia not raised in critical theory, for those that must still ‘sacrifice’ the universalist idea of the subject, these concepts are still difficult to process.

In terms of diversity within the university, like most of its partners institutions, UU had installed a ‘diversity officer’.<sup>8</sup> I think that the UU diversity office could still profit from the knowledge and expertise available in the Graduate Gender Program and the Gender & Diversity Hub. We are working on facilitating this cooperation. I think that the awareness and the political insight that gender studies provides into how complex, sensitive and difficult it is to be inclusive and to do diversity is really important to take into account when developing diversity policies.

I think I have grown a lot in this respect over the past 20–30 years. Every day, I had to change something or recognize a blind spot because for every generation of students, new things come up to be aware of and that need to be considered when producing knowledge. I think that what you must never do as a teacher—or as a human being—is to become defensive when being made aware of such a blind spot. I think that is what a lot of institutions, especially predominantly white, male institutions tend to do. ‘Yes, but listen, we are doing our best’; ‘you have to be patient’; ‘I hear you, but we cannot organize this overnight’. When people say these kinds of things, they disregard the fact that, for example, black lives matter here and now, and not only somewhere and at some point in the future. For example, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford, made some infamously defensive—or perhaps offensive—comments when black students and their allies in Oxford were protesting against the dominant presence of Rhodes at Oxford, in terms of portraits, statues and Rhodes house. Rhodes is indeed everywhere in Oxford. However, instead of acknowledging the problem, the Vice Chancellor said to those students: ‘if you don’t like it here, you’re free to go wherever you want’. The connotations of this, ‘you are an entirely free person’ *adagium* are: ‘you are at Oxford University now. *This* is Oxford. You, a student of color, should be happy that you are allowed access to our elite fortresses but do not dare raise your voice, let alone to be critical.’ That, I think, is very much an element which we encounter in these endeavors. Be present but don’t speak up.

So what I never try to do is be defensive. Instead, I always try to think, ‘ah okay, I didn’t think of that. What would that look like?’ Because we’re all situated, nobody can think with everybody in mind, nobody has all-encompassing wisdom. Really listening, I think, is rare. I don’t want to say that I have mastered really listening, but at least I am aware of how difficult it is. This, I think, is

one of the crucial steps we need to take towards decentering white, Western knowledge production.

I think this is one of the things the powers-that-be might have to develop further. In case of Utrecht University, we may assume that they most often want to do the right thing. But really sharing the power of definition too often appears to be a bridge too far. This is a paternalistic power relation that you often find yourself locked in, making you have to say, ‘thank you, I’m very grateful that you allowed me in’. This idea of men being the savior of the assumed weak—that is a difficult cultural conundrum which our culture is not aware of very often. Blatant sexism, racism and so forth is, in a way, easier to detect and condemn than these hidden assumptions and blind spots.

**BG:** What a difficult situation for a feminist to be in, indeed. It must have taken you some time to navigate your way through those kinds of environments and conversations—which is more than challenging!

**RB:** Yes [laughs]. But the thing is, the older I get, the more impatient I become. When you’re young, you tend to think: ‘Oh, my whole life is in front of me, my time will come, there are many of us willing to fix the system’ etc. But now, after 30 years of it, it’s more like: oh my god, how much longer do we have to swallow this ignorance? All these micro-aggressions and humiliations? Anyway, I apparently still have to endure this paternalistic behavior for a while.

**BG:** It must be very tiring.

**RB:** It is very tiring sometimes! But it also provides food for thought and, of course, I have high hopes for every new generation of engaged students. There is something to build on, really!

**BG:** Now, to zoom in on the Gender Studies program itself. Your role in liaising with people in positions of higher authority involves a lot of negotiation and careful navigation, but how does this happen within the Graduate Gender Studies program? Do you have a bit more flexibility to implement changes that you think will benefit the university, or at least the discipline of Gender Studies, in terms of diversity and inclusivity?

**RB:** There are different kinds of diversity and what I, as the director, have very much focused on is the question of representing different generations of feminists amongst our teachers. As a team we have organized the gender department so that we have, in every decade, younger to middle-aged teachers. That way, there is a career path for those who are slowly growing into

senior positions or moving on to somewhere else. Also, by doing this, there is mobility within the team and sustainability for the program.

There is a wide representation of gender identities—cis, trans, nonbinary—in the UU Gender Studies team, which I think is very important. There are different sexualities, there are different religions, social classes and ethnicities. Obviously, the majority of the team is still white. We are now in the process of an application procedure where we spoke to 10 different people with very diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity is something which is very high on the agenda, but sometimes you need to go the extra mile—which is precisely what I'm also working on with the diversity office. Because indeed, you cannot say, 'you have to be patient', 'this can't just change overnight', forever. My approach is to say: 'no, change is needed here and now. So how are we going to organize this—here and now?'

We recognize that we are usually the most radical in the institution. It can be quite a double burden for teachers to be *so* aware of these kinds of questions while also working in a neoliberal environment. However, we were a very small department when I started. We were a very, very small group of politically committed people, who were certainly very marginal in the university. Over the past decades, we have become so large that we are entirely mainstream in terms of student numbers and research output. We have a *numerus fixus* in the research master's program. This is also where it gets difficult: how do you do that—becoming part of the mainstream, without losing your principles and your vision?

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1 *Korte lijnen overleg* translates to 'short communication line meetings'. These are direct meetings with the chair/manager/director of the program and those within the team.

2 GEMMA is a two-year Erasmus Mundus Master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies run by 6 institutions in Europe: University of Granada (Spain), University of Bologna (Italy), Central European University (Vienna, Austria), University of York (United Kingdom), University of Łódź (Poland), University of Oviedo (Spain) and University of Utrecht (The Netherlands).

3 ATGENDER is a European association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation founded in 2009. It brings together academics, practitioners, activists and institutions in the field of Women's, Gender, Transgender, Sexuality and Queer studies, feminist research, sexual and LGBTQI rights, equality and diversity.

4 RINGS is an acronym for The International Research Association of Institutions of Advanced Gender Studies, an international organization that links together gender research institutions across the globe. Rosemarie was an active member for many years, and still is, and Bethany was completing an internship with the organization at the time of this interview.

5 The Rhodes Scholarship is a postgraduate award given to students to support their study at the University of Oxford. Established in 1903, it is the oldest international graduate scholarship programme in the world. The scholarship covers the all fees and a stipend for two to three years. According to the Rhodes Trust, 8,000 students of the scholarship program have served in high-levels of government, in education, the arts, NGOs, commerce, research and more.

6 See Rosemarie's book chapter as she traces the signs of Rhodes in academia: Rosemarie Buikema. 2021. '#RhodesMustFall and the Curation of European Imperial Legacies' in *Revolts in Cultural Critique*. Rowman & Littlefield: London.

7 The #Rethink movement in the Netherlands addressed the need to rethink epistemological foundations within academia and knowledge production to consider ways in which they had upheld racialized and gendered roots.

8 In 2020, Utrecht University's Diversity & Inclusion Taskforce became the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Steering Committee (EDI) and therefore permanent. The aim of the EDI is to have a more diverse population of staff and students, and a more inclusive curriculum. According to the Diversity Dean, Janneke Plantenga, the EDI programme aims to cover issues such as the accessibility of buildings, improving training courses, and facilitating healthy debate.