

## **A Lesson in Decolonisation:**

### **An interview with Anthony Bogues**

How can universities decolonise themselves? Should they change the curriculum? Should they diversify and internationalise their staff? Or should they perhaps make universities inclusive, safe spaces for everyone? Should they transfer knowledge and participate in exchange programs with countries in the 'Global South' and former colonises? We hear critical colleagues and students repeat these questions es. Decolonisation/decoloniality/decolonising, etc., are echoed especially by concerned students in the Netherlands, where the indelible stain of colonial history marks its academia. Universities' histories and international affiliations crawl into the conversations in the spirit of decoloniality. I notice a suffocating silence falls over the conversation. The passionate desire for change turns to hopelessness when students realise that "critical" academics at the Universiteit van Amsterdam reside in the very same buildings as the officials of the Dutch East India Company who unleashed its evil over the world, or that the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam maintained connections, contacts and implicit support of the apartheid in South Africa. However, it awarded an honorary doctorate to Martin Luther King.

But someone usually stands up to ask ask, *how we should decolonise*. I don't know any formula, but I know if decoloniality is supposed to inspire change, then I think it must include a practice of undoing histories that universities reflect and make histories of their dark past transparent. In conversations with Professor Dr Anthony Bogues, at Brown University, we learned that revisiting the histories of universities can be the stepping stone to begin dreaming about change and manifesting it into the university of future. This is an abridged version of an interview conducted by Susan Legêne (SL), Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach (MK) and Anna Haeusler (AH) when Anthony Bogues (AB) visited VU in January 2023. The interview ended with a long discussion about public history; in this abridged version, we only focus on the rationale and process of investigating the history of a university. Revisiting the history of universities has opened new dialogues and critical spaces in some parts of Dutch academia. The Decolonial Dialogues@Humanities at UvA began in the notorious VOC-zaal is a good example. Therefore, we hope this interview inspires, provokes, calls and invites those who dream of university-otherwise to join us at the Migration and Diversity Research Center to practice change and ask the university board to initiate a democratic platform, such as the experience of Brown University, to look into the VU's past rather than relegating VU's history to just a project for historians.

Younes Saramifar

Convenor of the Migration and Diversity Research Center

SL:

Tony, thank you for this interview, which is intended for the VU community, and for our discussions about the institutional history of the Vrije Universiteit. Why did Brown University<sup>1</sup> start the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (now the Simmons Center), ten years ago? What happened, and why was it decided?

AB:

I think there are several reasons. There's never one reason for any major thing to happen historically. You as a historian would know that. It's usually a couple of several reasons that come together which creates a specific moment. In the United States there was at the time a growing debate about reparations since the 1990s and early 21st century. It was not an extensive debate but an influential one around reparations with a couple of African-American lawyers, one in particular, Charles Ogletree (1952-2023), trying to think about how should America deal with the question of its long history of anti-Black Racism, first beginning with racial slavery, then through Jim Crow segregation, and then in the contemporary moments, the ways in which black folks are treated. At the heart of that debate was the unresolved question of *how should America deal with anti-Black Racism* and how should America begin to think about the history that caused anti-Black Racism, the relationship between racial slavery, in particular, and anti-Black Racism in general. Whether or not the institutions of the country and the Ivy League institutions, Brown University being one, -- Harvard, Brown, Princeton, Yale and the University of Pennsylvania —as really critical tertiary institutions within the American, social and educational landscape of the United States, understood this issue.

The other reason is that Dr. Ruth Simmons came into Brown as the president in 2000 and she became the first African American president of an Ivy League university. She was the daughter of a sharecropper from a poor family in segregated Texas. She grew up knowing segregation, knowing anti-Black Racism firsthand as a child, while growing up in Texas. She went to Dillard University, a historical Black College<sup>2</sup> in New Orleans then she went to Harvard, for her graduate work. She went into higher education, thinking, “OK, what is it that I

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<sup>1</sup>For more information see: Walter Bronson, the History of Brown University 1764-1914

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/dillard-university-1869/>

can do in higher education that is important for the country?” and while a graduate student focused on Aimé Césaire, one of the foremost Black intellectuals from the Francophone Caribbean and co-founder of négritude school of literature and thought. So there was this atmosphere where the general talk about reparations, and this question of how American institutions tackle this question of anti-Black Racism at its heart. So considering that atmosphere, I think the presidency of Ruth Simmons, her own history and the actual moment in which she became the first African-American female president of an Ivy League, combined to make her think, “OK, what is the history of Brown University?.” She said in an interview with me in 2021, ‘I kept on asking that nobody could tell me what's the real history or the accurate history, to put it another way, of Brown University.’<sup>3</sup> So she said, ‘well, let's find out’ and so she established a steering committee. I was on that committee with other faculty from different departments, students and staff such. She charged us to research and tell whatever story we needed to tell about the history of Brown. We spent three years engaged with it.

SL:

The members of the committee, did they volunteer?

AB

No, we were all chosen. None of us volunteered. We were all chosen by Dr. Simmons. The entire committee met for three years. We met in the dean's office every Monday morning, and we debated with each other. The set of debates ranged from why are we doing this; some people saying this is another nonsense, [...] to some students saying, yes, you should do this, but the committee needed to focus on the ethics of the university, its investment in places like Israel and so on; some also argued that we needed to pay more attention to the contemporary moment of the university and their interests as students. We debated each other and there were some very fierce debates in those mornings. We weren't rude to each other, but I think we were vociferous in our arguments. I remember Professor Omer Bartoy, Professor James Campbell, myself and Professor Arlene Keizer wrote the report as we became the writing team during the process later on. We also had huge public programs from right across the board, from people who were against reparations and people who were for reparations.

SL:

Was all the work and meetings funded by the university?

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<sup>3</sup> The accurate quote is “when I started at Brown, I heard this question: What was the University’s relationship to the transatlantic slave trade? And so I dutifully began to look into it to see if I could get some answers. I found no answers. The official histories of the University were silent on this question’

<https://slaveryandjusticereport.brown.edu/essays/simmons-bogues/> accessed 05/09/2023

AB:

Yes, it was funded by the university. Dr. Simmons gave us funds to do this. We also had courses, research courses in which we asked students to join us in doing some of that research. In fact, a lot of the research was done by students, graduate and undergraduate students, funded by the university. So, it was a project which cut all across the university. In other words, the aim was to create an atmosphere on the campus where there were debates and discussions around this matter.

One more contextual thing happened just when we were about to do this, that I think is important. David Horowitz, who was a former sympathizer for the Black Panther Party, and who had been a progressive editor of a newspaper/journal, Ramparts, but who had now taken a turn to the right, began to argue and develop nationally a set of positions that reparations and racial justice. He argued, were not necessary in America because whites died for Blacks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Civil War. He went around to many universities and placed ads in the student newspapers about this matter. He also did in the Brown student newspaper. Consequently, a group of students seized the newspaper at the point of publication so that it could not be distributed that day.

SL:

This was when the debate was already happening?

AB:

Just about, just before the commission began. The student action caused a great debate on campus on academic freedom and free speech, and so on. The way Brown University works is that if you break the student code of conduct, you are tried, but you can bring faculty in to act as your counsellor, almost like your solicitor. For the student, a white student in Africana Studies, who was the leader and the organiser of the seizure of the newspapers, I was his counsellor in the disciplinary hearings. Whether I agreed or disagreed didn't matter. I said yes, I would do this, which I don't think it made me popular among some of the faculty members. Anyways, he had a right to be heard, even if we disagreed about what it is that he did as far as I was concerned. I'm telling you that because it gives you the atmosphere that was also on campus. Horowitz was really trying to agitate as a set up a series of conservative currents on campus and to then lay the ground for people to say, OK, the conservatives are not being given freedom of speech. So that's the kind of gambit that he was playing with.

In that context, Dr. Ruth Simmons made a point to set up a democratic commission. Therefore, on the commission, you had folks who would fundamentally disagree about certain things, about the centrality of racial slavery to America and to the American historical experience. We finally had to do a commission report.

The four of us I just mentioned were the writing team, a Jewish historian, a black literary theorist, another historian and myself. We spent our entire summer writing it, quarreling with each other as well, as we wrote it and then we had to take it back to the commission to whether they agreed. There we had another set of debates around it. One of the major points of the debates was, could we call this racial slavery in America a crime against humanity? And if you call it a crime against humanity, what did that mean? In that particular process, the Jewish historian Omer Bartov was really important in terms of helping us thinking through certain things and what was similar, and what wasn't similar when talking about crimes against humanity, why when you call something crime against humanity, what it is, what does that mean?

SL:

So this was a few years after 2001 when at the Durban conference the UN declared slavery a crime against humanity?<sup>4</sup>

AB:

Yes, this was right after Durban. So, there was an argument in the commission that said, if you do that you're also following Durban. Do you want to follow Durban? So we had a whole argument about Durban and what it is that we were doing. But if you read the document, you would see that we call racial slavery a crime against humanity but we are also very careful in trying not to create an Olympics of oppression, not comparing, but trying to make it very clear what is the distinctive nature of racial slavery as a form of domination.

SL:

And did you talk about reparations?

AB:

We talked about reparations, but we moved away from reparations into reparative justice. Once that report was presented to the university after we all agreed, it went to the president. The president then wrote a response to the report, and then it went to the corporation of the university, the governing body of the university.

There are three things that might be important consequences and general outcomes pressing for reparative justice based on the report: Brown University, as a rich Ivy League university, cannot exist in Providence where it has the worst public education system in the area and do nothing. We recommended the university should pay attention to the public school system in Providence, where Brown is located . Providence is a city of

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<sup>4</sup> The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, South Africa, 31 August to 8 September 2001).

black people, immigrants, and poor white working class, and it has one of the worst public school systems in the entire country. So we had to find a way in which we could intervene within that public education system. We did not say that Brown University could cure it, but the university had to recognize the context in which it operated. Secondly, we already had an Africana Studies Department, which is the study of people of African descent, and it was important that Brown funded that department and paid attention to it. Finally, we recommended setting up the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. The Commission Report was in 2007 and the Center was formed in 2012 because some of us argued that we should find people outside of Brown University to head the centre and that you shouldn't take people who are part of it. But in the end that didn't quite work out. And so I was asked, as a professor and director to head it.

One thing that the report did not do: We did not think about the Indigenous people. We had a couple of sentences in the report about them. Brown University sits on Indigenous people's land and the very first slavery in the New England area was not the slavery of the Africans. It was actually the slavery of the Pequot, of the Indigenous people and we didn't pay enough attention to that. We focused a great deal on racial slavery which we should have. It was necessary for us to do that since it was our mandate by the university and, its president.

SL:

Is that because the anti-Black Racism was the first spearhead?

AB:

It was the first spearhead, yes. Indigenous dispossession and genocide, and racial slavery are two original founding planks of America, related to British and Dutch colonialism, the Dutch had New York and the French had Louisiana, and so on. We focused on one; racial slavery. Intellectually, we actually missed the latter.

SL:

Could you have thought it at the time?

AB:

I think we could have, but we were so focused on this question of anti-Black Racism that we didn't think it through. I mean, there are sentences in the report that allude to indigenous dispossession and genocide but we didn't pay enough attention. This has come back, quite frankly, to haunt the university because the indigenous people then began to make a claim about the university. One of the things we now work at, at the Center is that we also acknowledge the indigenous and the dispossession of their lands. The university now has also set up an indigenous program.

So in short, a lot of initiatives around reparative justice have come from below. They've come from the student body or demonstrations. But this initiative to investigate the university's past came from the top, the president. What is interesting about it is that it was a top-down effort which was democratic. The ethos of this thing was supremely democratic because of the instruction we were given. Dr Simmons has said this many times, if we as a university cannot resolve this problem democratically, then can you tell me how America is going to resolve it? So democracy was at the level of the discussions but was also at the level of who was participating in the commission.

SL:

And nobody was right beforehand. Nobody's view was privileged over other views.

AB:

No, not in the discussions. That's why the writing process became important. The subcommittee didn't just write and say, OK, this is it. Every single sentence was subject to scrutiny, discussion and debate because we needed consensus. So, we sat down for days after that, months, in fact about a year after that, every single sentence was scrutinized.

SL:

But then it's even more puzzling that even in this very long extended process one missed that Indigenous land dispossession element.

AB:

Yes, yes. But I think, sometimes pioneering documents can only have one focus. Perhaps that's what we were doing. I mean I'm a key member, was a key member of the committee, and I don't feel good about that myself. But I'm not quite sure what we could have done at that point in time. My view therefore is that the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice now has to make sure that we include the Indigenous because the Indigenous were the first people to be actually enslaved.

SL:

Can we ask more about the centre itself? Why has the centre an exhibition space?

AB:

We have what we have called an experimental art space, which we use a lot.

SL:

So why is it important?

AB:

It's important because one of the Center's focus of work is in public humanities.

SL:

Would you tell us what public humanities is?

AB:

The question of slavery, of racial slavery, is not only an academic one. It is a question about which the American nation needs to grapple with it. There has to be a national conversation around racial slavery and Indigenous dispossession if America is to think about a future in a progressive way, in a much more humane way than the imperial America in which we live. We decided that we could not just do academic historical research and just leave it at that and publish papers and so on. We had to catalyse a public discussion where possible around this question of racial slavery and its legacies and inheritances and anti-Black Racism in the United States.

We then did a series of research projects, and we identified that one of the areas in which people learned their history was in museums. After that research we decided to have an exhibition space, where we could present exhibits and have an artist in residence program. Also, very importantly, we decided that we needed to have a project with museums. With the Center as a catalyzer, the first conference we had, was a conference of nearly 300 people on the public history of slavery.. And I'll tell you what led me in the end to agree on this and not just focus on research. One of the presidents of the American Historical Association, his name is [Ira Berlin](#), gave a presidential speech and he said, that they had founded the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database Project.<sup>5</sup> They set up a meeting with a group of historians to discuss the project then unexpectedly black people joined the meeting. They came in their buses, from their churches and so on to join the meeting. They said: this meeting can't be done without us. They were not historians. It stuck with Berlin, but it also stuck with me. This experience taught me racial slavery is of a foundational importance to America, but moreover of foundational importance to the Black people.

That experience, plus the research on museums led us to create the Global Curatorial Project .This is a project with several major musuems in the world to collaborately think about decolonial curatorial practices related

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>



to exhibitions around slavery and colonialism. The animating questions are, A, how do you exhibit slavery and colonialism? What are the curatorial practices you are engaged in? And B, how can you then have decolonial curatorial practices if at all possible? And C, what are the new archives and what are the ways in which you can begin to tell the stories of slavery and colonialism [...]? What are the ways you can tell the stories of slavery and colonialism from the point of view of the enslaved and from the point of view of the colonized? All the exhibitions we surveyed for our research were not from that perspective. They rather had a kind of institutional way of thinking about colonialism or institutional ways of thinking about slavery. So we sat down and we had discussions with all these museums from here, Museum director and VU professor Wayne Modest, other people from Brussels, the Central African Museum, people from Iziko, South Africa, people from Senegal, from the Liverpool Museum of Slavery, people from the Public History Museum in Nantes, and the Smithsonian National African American Museum of History and Culture.. At the end, I think, we had about two years of discussion and came up with the idea of an international traveling exhibition around slavery and colonialism. We have been working on it since then, and it's now scheduled to be launched in Washington at the National African American Museum of History and Culture in December 2024 then it will travel to the partner institutions. The exhibition is being co-curated by the us at the Simmons Center and the National African American Museum of History and Culture.

So public humanities, for us at the centre, consists of two aspects: it consists of public history and the archives that have not been included in history. The public history that we present is not a translation or interpretation of the historical research that we as historians might do and then say, OK, let's then get it out to the public, which is one way of thinking about public history. We also think about public history as thinking about what are the new archives that exist, that we don't tap into; what are the archives of memories, for example, in Senegal? What are the archives of people in Liverpool? What are the archives of the people of the Khoisan and the Xhosa people in South Africa, Western Cape?

SL:

These are projects from the Center by the Center. How do they impact the curriculum or the research program of others at Brown?

AB:

Well, it will now. The research clusters impact the curriculum. The public history that we are doing impacts the curriculum only because students come to us; subsequently people including nonacademic personnel recognize us as doing this exciting work. Eventually, after several years, the Center has now been approached to launch a public humanities program, which is going to change the curriculum. So in other words, what we have done has actually demonstrated how central and critical this kind of work is. Part of Public humanities is

about public history. It's also about museums, obviously, about curatorial practice and also about thinking about the humanities in a different way. The humanities in the American academy are very much about the western canon. We have attempted to transform that into thinking about the humanities that would include Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil, and the experiences of Black people and of the Indigenous. The curriculum is now going to become a little different and to do that or to get to that position, we had to demonstrate. We couldn't just advocate, we had to demonstrate. We had fellows who were working with us and they began to get jobs, then the university began to take notice because it noticed that fellows from other universities were not getting such jobs

SL:

It seems to me that actually what the Center did, was working along two lines. On one hand involve faculty from other domains who do work in the programs of the centre, in a way they do not need to fight with their colleagues in medicine or whatever, but they could do this in the safe space of the Center. On the other hand, the Center developed its own program with a special focus then on public humanities. Am I right that these are the two lines? And moreover, is your focus mainly on Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil, maybe Latin America even more broadly, and the USA, as a geographical space which also has a historical dimension? From our location, in the Netherlands, the empire in a way stretches out in all directions, East and West, Global South. So when I try to translate the Brown initiative into our institutional context for the VU it starts from a Dutch and a European history, institutionally and in terms of academic science, that is also connected to the complicated history of the EU and imperialism.

AB:

This is why one of our projects is with the ISSH, International Institute of Social History, VU and IISH professor Pepijn Brandon. We stress that there is the Atlantic slavery, but there's Indian Ocean slavery as there's colonialism in Indonesia and so on because to tell a global story about the making of the modern world intellectually, where we do begin? What is the making of the modern world? How does the modern world constitute itself? What are the forms of domination and labor regimes? What are the ideas, systems of classification and so on that operate? Then we have to find a way in which we can reach out to Indian Ocean. This is why I came to the Netherlands, because it is at the heart of that system, before the British, before the sun never set on the British Empire, the sun never set on the Dutch Empire. Therefore, we have found a way in which that conversation can happen and will result in a volume which will be produced by the Centre and the ISSH, about the remaking of the modern world and all the complexities that I've just talked about.

Actually, this was one of the things about the Center which we wrote in the commission report: slavery and colonialism actually were global phenomena and should be approached globally.

SL:

When you started, when the committee, when Dr. Ruth Simmons' question about the history of Brown University started, it was clearly focused on this issue of racial slavery. At the time that was not just a first start in order to come to the broad understanding that the Centre now has; the question about the history of Brown University and its own slavery past was leading. I'm always thinking about what a good starting point for us at would be for us at VU? You started with the institution, with Brown University, in a top-down initiative, and after establishing the Centre for the Study of Slavery and Justice, you're opening it up to the broader program directed at research in different disciplines, as well as developing a public humanities program. How do we start in a place like Amsterdam,? As historians, we know what historical research is needed, but as an institution where do we start? One of my ideas would be that maybe the VU and the topic of apartheid South Africa might be a good start. It is very concrete, there is a demarcation in time, there has been and still is a clear commitment, engagement of the university with all the stages of developing apartheid ideology up to the abolishment and its afterlives. So in terms of university history, it is a concrete focus point. But maybe it's just one historical topic and would not address institutional histories?

AB:

I don't think apartheid can be seen separately from colonialism. So while it is important to have a concrete thing that might gather people to think about it, and it becomes important -- because the Dutch have a particular set of conceptions of themselves as a tolerant nation, without recognizing that they were deeply involved in the formation of apartheid ideologically and practically -- that it may allow you to begin to think about Dutch colonialism itself. One can't think about the apartheid and the pass laws, et cetera, and the 'colored population' and the Indigenous population in South Africa without not thinking about Africa and not thinking about the Dutch colonial empire and the movement of people from Indonesia into the Cape Colony.

SL:

That's why I think that it might offer a very good starting point because as historians of course we know colonial history, we have a practice of global history, critical thinking about all this. But critical thinking doesn't land in the university as an institution. It's part of the historical curriculum, of the historical research program, but it's not about the institution.

AB:

But wasn't the institution involved, were there not the ideologues in the institution? I mean, Mr. John Brown at Brown was a philanthropist who was involved in the slave trade. So that was the starting point, but we then found out that the governor of Rhode Island, Stephen Hopkins, owned slaves and he became chancellor of the

university. He wrote one of the most important pamphlets for American independence, *The Rights of the Colonies Examined*. So, you might want to think about your institutional history and the Dutch colonial project to see if there is a connection.

MK:

So the Center was formed, and then you did institutional history?

AB:

No, Brown attempted to rewrite institutional history after the Report was published. But that did not work,

MK:

So that relates to the question of the two strategy lines of the Centre. The critical institutional history could only happen once the Center was formed, and from there, you were reaching out? Because that is that other understanding of historiography, which is: being trained together as a group, as an epistemic group, an epistemic group which has a clear understanding of another decolonial historiography. Then from there you can do global history, but also internal, institutional history right?

AB:

I think after the committee's Report, Brown's institutional History should have been written in a different way. Let me just leave it at that.

SL:

Still seems like a kind of chicken and egg question: do you start with a specific institutional history that needs to understand a problematic thing of the past, and from there will come a wider understanding? Or do you need to start with other intellectuals?

AB:

You have to start with where you are. You have to say this is the institution, this is the historical legacy and heritage of our institution. *How do we do repair at this particular moment?* That to me is, the question. Repair requires the decolonization of the curriculum, etc. etc. etc. and why you should do repair. So for me, that's where you start.