**Interview with Rich Watts**

**“Activating the Risk of Failure: Translation as Public Scholarship”**

ANNIE DWYER: Welcome to *Going Public*, a podcast dedicated to exploring public scholarship and publicly-engaged teaching in the humanities. My name is Annie Dwyer and, at the time of this recording, I am the Assistant Program Director of a Mellon initiative at the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities.

The initiative's name is *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration*. Since 2015, two successive Mellon initiatives by this name have supported public scholars at the University of Washington–both faculty developing new graduate seminars in the humanities with public-facing components, and doctoral students pursuing public projects in the humanities. The episodes of *Going Public* consist of interviews with Mellon-supported public scholars after they have launched their projects or taught their public-facing seminars.

Please do check out our companion website, which includes faculty fellow syllabi as well as doctoral student fellow project overviews, artifacts, and other ephemera.

The podcast, along with the website, is intended to serve as a resource for scholars interested in developing similar projects and seminars. You can find the *Going Public* website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic). You can also find the link in the description of today’s episode.

Today’s episode, “Activating the Risk of Failure,” is an interview with Rich Watts. Rich is an Associate Professor of French in the Department of French & Italian Studies at the University of Washington. In the summer of 2018, Rich received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities, and over that summer developed the course “Translation and its Publics,” which he taught in the spring of 2019. Our conversation explores, among other things, the role of failure in publicly engaged scholarship and teaching, the imperatives of departmental transformation, and, of course, translation as a public practice.

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ANNIE DWYER: Thanks so much, Rich, for joining me.

RICH WATTS: Thanks for having me, Annie. I'm really happy to be part of this conversation.

ANNIE DWYER: I'm wondering if we can begin with your course concept “translation and its publics.” A way to introduce listeners to your pedagogical aims might be to elaborate how foregrounding publics or the public good might change the way that one conceives of or approaches the work of translation. Just as an opening question, what happens when the public dimension of translation is front and center as it was in your class?

RICH WATTS: Thanks. That is the key question because I think that there are many different ways to approach the pedagogy of translation. There are entire graduate seminars devoted to translation theory, essentially as cultural theory. There are other seminars that are much more oriented toward the practice of translation and literary translation in particular. In a way, both of those models stay *intra muros*. They're oriented almost strictly and certainly primarily toward academic audiences for translation or the education of future literary scholars who work perhaps in a tangential way in translation studies. But it always struck me that this was a huge missed opportunity to exploit the possibilities of translation, which is one of the most potentially public-facing aspects of humanities scholarship.

My thinking about this started a fairly long time ago–I would say about fifteen years ago–when I taught a mixed grad-undergrad seminar in translation studies at Tulane University, to which I attached a service-learning component, which ended up being students working on translations of letters written in the 17th century by Ursuline nuns. This was, of course, New Orleans….this is the kind of archive that you'd have. It was a very interesting experience. It was valuable for the archivist at the convent. This was public humanities 1.0; it was service-learning. In the end, what was happening, what ended up being the case, was that it was a one-way street.

ANNIE DWYER: Is that how you would characterize the difference between service learning and public scholarship? Or how would you—

RICH WATTS: Yeah, that's exactly right. I thought that it was a good first experiment but I was always troubled by the fact that it was this model of university expertise, going into the community, providing a service, and then withdrawing just as quickly. And what the scholarship in public humanities showed me…in fact that there are a lot of folks associated with the Simpson Center who've done great work in this field (yourself, Rachael Arteaga, Miriam Bartha, and others, Bruce Burgett, as well)...that convinced me that what needed to happen for translation to have a true public-facing dimension would be to establish relationships with the community…so that there could be mutual sharing of information, imparting of wisdom, exchange around the practices, the ideals, and the theories of translation.

With that in mind, I happily applied for the summer seminar in public humanities and then developed this course that I ended up teaching in spring 2019. I'll freely admit, right at the beginning, that there were certain ideals that I had going into this version of the course. Not all of them were realized. But I will say that the work that I've done around translation studies since then has been a more effective, more authentic form of public humanities around translation.

ANNIE DWYER: There's so much to dig into there. I'm wondering if we can start by talking a little more about the class and the vision and some of the scaffolding that you did, some of the assignments that you created to reflect this robust understanding of translation as a public practice. Tell us a little more about the logistics of the course or the scaffolding of the course.

RICH WATTS: There is a simple one sentence response to the question and then I can provide some more details. But the simplest shift in orientation came in asking students as they pondered what their final translation project would be to consider the public good that their translation would generate. It doesn't seem like much, but typically the way these projects are framed in an advanced translation seminar, undergraduate or graduate, is: find something that hasn't been translated, that you're passionate about, that presents some challenges. All this–pretty inward looking. Simply shifting the terms in very simple way, the terms of the assignment, to say “This is about the impact”–and I use the phrase ‘public good’ intentionally–gets students thinking about the publication possibilities, the venues for dissemination of the work that they're doing, and what kind of dialogues they're able to establish through their work in translation studies. That's one dimension of it. That therefore made the selection of texts…I don't want to say more fraught, but a higher-stakes activity.

So, we spent the first three weeks pondering this question: “What is the public good? How do you define it? How does translation contribute to the public good?” But it meant that the stakes of the selection were much higher and they had to think about what kind of work their translation might do…and also to think about the voices that are being muffled or entirely suppressed and how to bring those voices into an English-language public sphere. This is where introducing the concept of language justice was really critical.

But then also another dimension of the seminar was the creation or at least the imagination of a translation collective. We looked at examples of existing translation collectives. There's a great one…well, it just shut down, but for about ten years it was a fantastic one housed in both Houston and Los Angeles called Antena that published works in translation, published manifestos around translation. But the heart of their activity was both militating for and enabling language justice, which allows these voices, these languages that don't have a place in the public sphere to participate. It was clearly too ambitious in the context of a 10-week seminar to create such a translation collective made up of graduate students who have multiple, overlapping commitments.

But the mere exercise of imagining what that would look like, the work that it would do, having a conversation about this with local professional translators–that was also important because we got a lot of pushback. We got pushback because, to put it bluntly, we could be seen as eating the lunch of people who don't have much lunch to eat in the first place. There's so little work to begin with and it's so poorly remunerated that a tension developed. That was also really, really instructive.

ANNIE DWYER: Really, really interesting. You almost anticipated that–not that precise problem –but what struck me in looking at the assignment prompt for this is the admission of the risk of failure. And I think that's so fascinating. Because so often when we teach we use words and phrases like success, students success, as the metric for whether or not something good is happening in the classroom.

RICH WATTS: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER: I wonder if you have thoughts about the place of failure in pedagogy and public pedagogy, in particular.

RICH WATTS: It's a good way of putting the question. I've thought about it, but not exactly in those terms. This question of failure comes up in public-oriented teaching in a way that it might not in the hermetic space of a seminar that's just looking inward. I'm exaggerating a little, or making too sharp a distinction between the "traditional graduate seminar” and “a public humanities graduate seminar." But I do think those are the broad tendencies. As soon as you think about the work that the translation will do in the world, you are activating the risk of failure. It's important to talk about, and it's important for students to feel authorized to take that risk…but also, to responsibly mitigate against it. These are questions that don't come up, or they don't come up in quite the same way, when you don't have this public-facing orientation.

I'll just give one quick example. I think about the way I used to teach translation. The measuring stick was really the proximity of the target language text, the translation, to the source language text in terms of semantics, stylistics, the old benchmarks of translational fidelity or whatever you want to call it. That's still a part of the way in which I try to help students improve their work in translation. But the way in which my assessment of translations has changed is that I think more about the publics. I ask students as they're designing their projects to identify the public. That then allows a different kind of assessment. If what you're trying to do is do a translation for an NGO, for the content of a website that appears originally in Estonian, but should have this other life in English or some other language, then you have to be attentive to questions of register. Rather than having a stylistic ideal in mind when assessing translation, this becomes much more about this situated assessment. What is this target language text, this translated text? How does it resonate within the niche where it's meant to land? That’s useful feedback–more useful feedback for students than the feedback that starts from some idealized notion of clarity, fidelity, and so on.

ANNIE DWYER: That's such a useful reframing. One of the things that also strikes me about that is it's a collective assessment. That was the other thing that struck me about your course—the workshop model of the course and the way in which one of the objectives even if it was sometimes more implicit than anything was this will to create a community of practice and a kind of collaborative network of translators. I'm curious how that played out in your class, if you saw that happen, and, if you did, how you did this, why you did this. Why was this teaching of collaborative work or collective work so important to the work that you were doing in the class around public translation?

RICH WATTS: You may have to cut me off on this point because this for me was the great success of the seminar and something that I'm so enthusiastic about and that I have reproduced in basically every translation course that I've taught since then. I've taught a number of them in the last couple of years. Clearly, we were working in English because that was the shared target language. Students came to the seminar with some of the usual suspects: French, Spanish, Italian. But there's also Hebrew, Chinese, Arabic. Then, there were multilingual texts that students were working on. One had a combination of Spanish, French, Tagalog, and occasional phrases in Arabic. A highly multilingual space.

If I had done this according to the traditional model where the students submit their work, I assess it according to some standard of universal clarity in English; English becomes the measuring stick. Whereas even if we're all working together in English, if students who have a variety of first languages–about half the students had a language other than English as what they considered their first language–it meant that the insights were coming from very different linguistic perspectives. This pushed English out of the center of the frame. It was so very useful. We would have these cacophonous discussions. I'd pair students off every week. They would do a peer review offline and then we'd devote one hour of the seminar to discussing collective insights around the work that had been done in the previous week. We would have these conversations that would get kind of noisy and would be taking place in several languages at the same time.

But the point was we were explaining to each other structural differences in language, differences in connotation or register or particular words–how a word lands, even if it's a cognate, how it lands differently across several different languages. That was transformative. It meant that when the students were done with the work, they had…I mean, every utterance in English, for instance, has behind it a number of languages. The obvious ones: German, French, Anglo-Norman, whatever it is. But in our highly creolized societies there are many other languages that inhabit English even if we pretend they don't exist or they’re masked. By the end the students had a much more, how should I put it?...we all had a much less nationalized understanding of language and of the disciplines. It’s something that translation enables. But often the way translation is taught is within a particular language dyad. I've done a lot of this, where I teach French-English translation as part of the French major. It's rewarding and it's a good language-learning tool. But it does reinforce certain bounded notions regarding language.

Mixing up all the languages in this way…it doesn't always lead to the most obvious point A to point B translation. It leads to an understanding of the work of language and the work of translation that's much richer. Since that time, pretty much all the work that I've done in translation studies has been way more collaborative and across languages.

ANNIE DWYER: I'm just wondering if you can speak a little bit more to how you create equitable, reciprocal relationships with community-based translators. If you've made any missteps in the process, too. I think that can also be really useful for people to think through and about.

RICH WATTS: Yeah. I'll start with the failure. The big misstep was, in the context of that spring 2019 graduate seminar, assuming that graduate students forming a translation collective would be welcome news to the professional translators of the community. I learned a pretty important lesson there: make sure that, before you do something in the classroom, the pieces are really in place. The pieces were in place but in a loose way. What I needed to do was be more explicit when talking with my community partners about what I had in mind and what this might implicate for them.

But what has worked subsequently is identifying these moments of crossover between academic translation studies and the lives and labors of freelance translators working in the Seattle area. Some of them are freelance literary translators. So there, it's pretty easy. That’s one obvious point of contact between community partners and ourselves, those who share this interest in literary translation. When these events go well, it's because we have structured them in such a way that the stakes are relevant for both groups. Relevant for faculty and graduate students and undergrads as well. But also for our community partners. This means kicking ideas around about how to organize such events and co-sponsoring. We've now co-sponsored close to a dozen events with NOTIS, with the Northwest Translators and Interpreters Society. This means that we're not risking treading on each other's toes because we're designing these events together from the ground up. That's been very successful. Freelance translators like everyone else–they have limited free time.

So, my hopes for a stable mentorship or internship program–those have been a little harder to realize. But the students now know where to go if they're looking for such mentorship. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes a professional translator will connect with a student around a particular project and that's been gratifying. But I hope at some point that we'll be able to give this a more systematic quality.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that would be so fantastic.

RICH WATTS: Yeah.

ANNIE DWYER: Even in the interim, graduate students can be pretty resourceful. So, the work of putting them into contact with freelance translators is so useful.

RICH WATTS: Yeah, and I think, too, normalizing this connection between the university and community partners is critical.

ANNIE DWYER: As we’re talking about possibilities like internship programs, normalizing and formalizing relationships, I’m tempted to steer our conversation towards larger structural changes in graduate education. You, Rich, are someone who has held key leadership roles in your department, among them Director of Graduate Studies. You are well-poised to speak to graduate education reform on a larger scale, whether that’s oriented towards integrating public scholarship, or preparing students for multiple career paths. What are the larger-scale changes beyond the classroom needed to realize these goals? How can we move forward?

RICH WATTS: Well, the work that the Simpson Center has done in this regard has made all this so much easier. So that the Melon project around public humanities has been transformative for a number of colleagues. I do think, though, that there's a structural impediment, although there are ways around this structural impediment. But there are a lot of–in the humanities in particular–small somewhat atomized graduate programs, some of which were formerly MA and PhD programs and are now just functionally MA programs. It's become–and this is partly a function of numbers but also a function of orientation–unimaginable at this point for me to teach a graduate seminar that would be strictly in French with just a French prefix. I can't. I don't know how I would do it.

What we really need are spaces such as those provided by the Simpson Center, where these collaborations can take place and be fostered. The problem is sustainability. And I'm heartened by what appears to be the early success of the global literary studies program at the undergraduate level, another Simpson Center-sponsored project. It seems as if the prospects for creating these division-wide programs–in the case of global literary studies, a division-wide undergraduate major–are better. For those of us trying to beat the drum of translation studies, this gives us hope. This gives us optimism; there are now models. At this particular institution, for better mostly, sometimes for worse, top-down change just doesn't happen. What we need is to have these spaces where a coalition of the willing can come together and foster these cross-disciplinary, inter-departmental, both graduate and undergraduate programs.

ANNIE DWYER: I love that, the coalition of the willing. I think that is usually the way that things get done.

RICH WATTS: Yeah. Although, I will say that the ostensible naturalness of our current departmental structures in the humanities is something we need to think about. There's nothing natural in French and Italian Studies. This is not a pairing that has a strong intellectual rationale. It's an administrative convenience, conceit. I do hope that this movement toward more division-wide majors can also free up the curriculum at the graduate level. I do think that the public humanities will have an easier time establishing themselves in broader disciplinary formations than in departments organized around one, two, three languages. A larger grouping of these languages with more colleagues modeling the possibilities of public humanities would have a greater chance of success.

ANNIE DWYER: I think so often we talk about collaboration, at least recently as a kind of end of graduate education, a skill set that people should develop in their classrooms, but not always as a means to transforming graduate education. So, I think that's a really useful way to end. Thank you so much for talking today.

RICH WATTS: Thanks Annie for having me. Good luck, I think this is great.

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ANNIE DWYER: This episode of *Going Public* was made possible with help from the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities staff, particularly, C. R. Grimmer, who is also the Communications Manager at the Simpson Center; our sound editor, Oliver Gordon; and of course, support from The Mellon Foundation. The Mellon initiative at the Simpson Center, *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration* was led by Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Mellon initiative, Director of the Simpson Center, and UW Professor of English; Rachel Arteaga, Assistant Director of the Simpson Center and Associate Program Director of the Mellon initiative, and myself, Annie Dwyer, Assistant Program Director of the Mellon initiative. We hope you check out additional episodes of *Going Public* on our website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic) and wherever you get your podcasts.