

An Interview with Douglas Robinson

Fahim: Thank you very much, Professor Robinson, for joining us today. It's great to have you with us again here in New Zealand. So as the first question, tell us a little bit about your latest book *Transgender, Translation, Translingual Address*. What inspired you to write it?

Douglas: The reason I'm here is that I was inspired to write it here at Victoria University of Wellington, and I wanted to launch it at the place where it was inspired. In 2017 Marco Sonzogni invited me as a guest lecturer for a conference, which I thought was a Translation Studies conference—Michael Cronin and I were both invited—but the very first session was a transgender session, and I thought "That's strange. How is this connected to translation exactly?" But it was an extremely interesting and even exciting session. And as it progressed, I began to realize: transgender and translation both begin with "trans"; both are about acrossness, about moving across boundaries; and by the time the two-hour session was over I had the idea for this book.

Fahim: And what do you hope to have achieved from writing it?

Douglas: Well it is a rather strange topic in a way. Certainly, in my research agenda, I wasn't planning to write about transgender in translation. And so, one of the first things I did that I began to work on it was to ask myself that question: "Why do I want to write it? What do I hope to gain by it? What do I hope to achieve with it for other people?" and my first chapter is called something like "Why Should Cis-gendered Translation Scholars Care About Transgender?" Why should it matter? Why should anybody care? And I give five answers to that. And the first answer is *it's being done*. I trace the history of gender-oriented Translation Studies from feminist studies to gay and lesbian studies to queer studies to transgender studies. [00:02:23] There are transgender studies of translation. So I'm not the first one to deal with this. The second answer is the normative hierarchies of attention. What we pay attention to is to a large extent what we take to be our experience, but also we are programmed, conditioned to pay attention to certain things and to ignore certain others. And queerness, transgender and a lot of other non-normative phenomena and experiences are normatively ignored. We're taught to ignore them. And so my second point is that it's good for people to pay attention to things that they've been taught to ignore. The third and fourth answers are very much New Zealand-oriented because I deal with not just colonial epistemicide, the colonial attempt to teach colonial subjects, the colonized, not to be able to know things, but specifically New Zealand, the Māori, because at that session here at Victoria

University Elizabeth Kerekere gave a very interesting presentation on Takatāpui. And in my third and fourth answers I put that discussion, her discussion of Takatāpui, and then a Canadian scholar's discussion of Takatāpui, into dialogue. So that Chapter 1 is very much oriented towards New Zealand, towards Māori and the whole question of the difference between knowledge as regulation, which is dominant in academia, versus knowledge as emancipation, which is clearly what Elizabeth Kerekere is doing. David Murray is interested in knowledge as regulation—getting the truth, without any kind of activism. Elizabeth Kerekere is attempting to overturn colonial epistemicide—to restore the ability to know, to learn, to embrace new cultural phenomena, and so on.

Fahim: Was it a difficult book to write?

Douglas: It was difficult in many ways, precisely because I am cis-gendered, I'm white, I'm an American—I don't belong to any of the excluded groups to whom I am trying to call attention, so I had to overcome a lot of the same epistemicide in myself, the hegemonic pressure not to know certain things, not to pay attention to non-normative things. And then you know there is the delicacy required to write from a position of hegemony, cultural hegemony, to write about resistance to hegemony in sensitive ways. And I was very fortunate after I had written the book and submitted it to Bloomsbury academic for publication to get too extremely critical but also extremely caring peer reviews. People who said “I very much want this book to be published, it is wonderful in many ways but there are many many lacks, Professor Robinson needs to pay attention to di di di di with a long list of things. He needs to read these 30 books and so on ...” And I was extremely impressed and even touched by the caring that these two people showed in their peer reviews, and I took them very seriously. I spent six months working through everything they recommended very carefully, and I think it's a much better book as a result.

Fahim: How long did the process take?

Douglas: About a year.

Fahim: The synopsis of the book says “the theory of translation mobilized in the book is not the traditional equivalence-based one.” Could you elaborate on that?

Douglas: Yeah. The problem I had was if I take translation in its traditional sense as interlingual equivalence, then the only application to transgender that one can imagine is how to translate transgender terms.

Fahim: That's right.

Douglas: And there are studies like that but that didn't interest me. That's boring. And so I decided to use Callon and Latour's sociology of translation, which basically rethinks translation as speaking for somebody else. Acts of persuasion and acts of violence in speaking for somebody else, which is clearly connected to translation, but is a much broader sense. So it's basically rhetoric. I understood it as doing things to people with words—and with a connection to violence, epistemic violence.

Fahim: Well the next question is a bit controversial, but I've noticed throughout the book the use of some rather unfamiliar pronouns in an attempt to be inclusive. They were using such pronouns like "ze" and "zir". Could it be argued that they remove any individual identity for a person who does identify as a cis male or female?

Douglas: Definitely, yes. There are tradeoffs. Normally, yes, a person who identifies as male and uses "he"/"his" pronouns would want to be called "he" and "his," right? And I don't do that. There are many many males, cis-gendered males that I cite in the book, that I don't refer to with "he" and "his"—I use "ze" and "zir." There are also cis-gendered females who would use "she" and "her" pronouns and I call them "ze" and "zir" as well. That is a loss for them, yes—but it is a counterhegemonic loss. The normal loss is usually suffered by non-normative people right? People to whom the normal gendered pronouns don't fit. They would normally be assimilated to either the male pole or the female pole and they may not like that. That's a problem.

It would be their loss since people with normative binary genders are in the majority and are in positions of power. It seems like the normal thing to do to let the non-normative people lose and the normative people win. And I'm just flipping that on its head. But also the major language that I translate from is Finnish, so I draw on several Finnish transgender novels in the book, and I translate passages from them and discuss them and so on. In Finnish, as in Chinese and I believe Turkish, there are no gendered pronouns at all. In Finnish there is just "hän," which is "he" and "she."

Fahim: For male and female?

Douglas: Male and female.

Fahim: Same as Persian.

Douglas: Oh: Persian is the same! I see. And in fact in colloquial Finnish people use it—"se"—for everything. "He," "she," and "it" all become "it." And so that made "ze" and "zir" that much more attractive, because that usage fit that connection with Finnish. However, as I say at one point there's a big difference because "hän" or "se" in Finland is normative—that's the right way of saying things. "Ze" and "zir" in English are non-

normative and therefore weird. And that makes “ze” and “zir” more interesting to me, because they’re weird.

Fahim: Makes perfect sense. And as a last question. Tell us if possible about what you're working on now or your next book.

Douglas: What I'm working on right now is kind of strange. Douglas Hofstadter the American cognitive scientist has a theory of strange loops—he first developed it in his 1979 book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and developed it further in his 2007 book *I Am a Strange Loop*. And he is also a translator, and has written about translation—has written one long 800-page book about translation and a 100-page second sort of half book about translation—and yet has never considered the strange loops of translation.

That's what I'm doing.

Fahim: That is awesome. Thank you very much for joining us once more.

Douglas: Well thank you for inviting me. I enjoyed this.

Fahim: Very good. Thank you very much.