



interview | entretien



## Jason Blake / Joe Blades

### Better developed critical Canadian Studies? An Interview with Poet and Publisher Joe Blades

Franz Kafka wrote that Mother Prague has claws and won't let you go. Perhaps the image can be adapted, made more optimistic, and extended from the capital of the Czech Republic to include all of the lands covered by the Central European Association for Canadian Studies. Many Canadian academics and artists have forged strong and happy ties with the broader CEACS region, and their interest, attachment and observations are ever-illuminating. For them, Central European claws have become arms, the firm hold, a warm embrace.

This interview – between poet and publisher Joe Blades and me (Jason Blake, your new Editor-in-Chief) – is the first of what should become a regular feature in *The Central European Journal of Canadian Studies*. Joe, who has spent time in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Serbia, and who makes his home in Fredericton, New Brunswick, is in a key position to tell us something about Canadian studies in our part of the world and to inform us about an often-neglected part of Canada.

> *What got you interested in this part of the world? Was it through translating?*

I was at a BookExpo Canada publisher's tradeshow in Toronto, back in 2004, and attended a meeting with a publisher's trade mission from Serbia and Montenegro who extended invitations to all of us to participate in the Belgrade Book Fair, the largest cultural event in Central Europe. I was the only one who accepted, which kind of surprised me. There was one Québec publisher of nonfiction who went to Belgrade that year, but I was the sole English-language publisher from North America. There were no publishers from the USA.

> *That is surprising. Do you sense that Canadian publishers want to look beyond Canada – that is, do you find a certain provincialism in Canadian publishing circles?*

I honestly think there is a provincialism on many levels; micro-regionalism too. Fredericton is not Halifax; Windsor and Ottawa are not Toronto; etc. When the daily newspaper in Moncton refuses to review books by Fredericton authors because they are not “local,” one wonders how local “local” is – a 100-mile diet, perhaps?

In Canadian publishing, there’s a little star circle that is watched all the time. Even when Ondaatje and Atwood and that generation have stopped writing, everyone will continue to look to them. I don’t know if it is because so much of Canada’s publishing and the media industry is in Toronto, that it is so provincial and localized while proclaiming to be national. There is a real focus on Toronto, so there could be expectation that to be a successful national writer in English Canada that you feed the city and be fed by Toronto, even if that city runs on caffeine and adrenaline! I think they picked it up from the New York art world: If you want New York to commit to you, you have to commit to New York. I know that was the situation in New York from when I was a curatorial intern at a museum there in 1987.

> *In publishing terms, does Toronto operate as a springboard to other places?*

Any place can be a springboard. I see people/writers who have never been to Toronto, but many here in the Atlantic Provinces do not want/think to go to Toronto or to look anywhere beyond where they are.

> *This brings us to translation and Broken Jaw Press. It is fascinating to see all these books coming out of Broken Jaw Press in translation because – despite the French-English nexus – Canadians do not translate as much as Europeans do, and the translation situation in North America is dire. What was the original attraction to translation?*

That is one of the things I am still trying to sort out! The very first “real” trade book that Broken Jaw Press published in 1994 was a translation/bilingual edition. It was a collection of poems by the late Expressionist poet Georg Trakl from Vienna, translated by Robin Skelton, in Victoria, BC. This book was eventually course-adopted at New York University and Johns Hopkins University. Ironically, or not, that is where I started as a trade publisher. I then had a book of essays by David Adams Richards, mostly essays that had appeared in newspapers, entitled *A Lad from Brantford* – but the trade program started with a translation.

Other people the press has published in translation include Vladimir Tasić, originally from Novi Sad, Serbia; and many books written and edited by Nela Rio, originally from Argentina. They both live in or near Fredericton, so that’s slightly different from publishing Trakl (who



is deemed an ineligible author by the Canada Council for the Arts). We have also published book translations of Pablo Urbanyi, Serge Patrice Thibodeau, and Parliamentary Poet Laureate Pauline Michel. More translations are in the works! Our largest book by far, with 126 women poet contributors, 621 pages, is an all-Spanish anthology, *El espacio no es un vacío, incluye todos los tiempos*, released last year as an eBook.

> *I have heard that Vladimir Tasić and Nela Rio, two authors you publish, do not consider themselves really Canadian Studies material ...*

Vladimir does not consider himself a Canadian author. He does not do readings. He is generally reclusive. He moved from Fredericton to a tiny, little village slightly downriver, where his wife has a pottery studio.

Nela Rio I know a lot better from almost daily e-mail contact, as we have many projects on the go. Nela has come to recognize this Canadian Studies thing. She had not for years. She was active in Latin American Studies and Women's Studies, then she got asked to do a circuit of Canadian Studies Centre readings in South America, and that is what opened her eyes to Canadian Studies.

> *You're teaching the Canadian publishing industry about translation, at least by example. What do you think that Canadianists in Canada can teach Central Europeans?*

Other than something out of our own experience? And I think that we do have a different experience, because it is probably a milder experience, than in the States ... even our colonial experience. Most of the people who came to Canada did not pick up weapons to go fighting the rest of the world. I think that we have a different viewpoint, North America-wise.

I have repeatedly met people from the United States who travel the world with Canadian pins on them, and then they confess that they are not really from Canada. They do this because at times they have been given a negative persona from the rest of the world, though it is really their government ...

I think it is not so much a question of what Canadianists in Canada can teach Central Europeans but how we can enable the learning Central Europeans want from us, while we learn to see Canada differently.

> *Do you think that this "milder experience" comes through in Canadian literature?*

I think that is why we have such incredible writing from Thomas King, and Thomson Highway and other native writers. Especially in writing novels they' blossomed. In the States there are

perhaps fewer examples of Native American authors, Louise Erdrich is one, but I don't know of a whole community of great Native authors.

Some Canadians, who I feel are too narrowly nationalistic, claim that Ondaatje and Vassanji, for example, are not really Canadian because they came here from elsewhere and are not always writing about Canada. I feel that writing about or set in Canada is not a citizenship requirement! Writers write out of their experience and imagination; possibly with Canadian context or perspective, possibly not.

The USA is a glue pot; they call it a "melting pot" but really they want everyone to merge and be anonymous and go to some ordinary norm, to drop their roots ... whereas Canada says, come here and be anything you want, be yourself, wherever you come from.

There are an incredible number of people who came here (my family included) from somewhere else. Very many write about Canadian, European, and South Asian experiences. We have room for that; we have a great deal of room for that.

> *It is almost as if you have to go outside Canada to get a sense of Canada. How do you assess the current atmosphere Canadian Studies in Canada?*

Here at the University of New Brunswick, there is not much in the way of Canadian Studies, certainly not a Canadian Studies Centre or Chair. In the Faculty of Education, I am often introduced as 'our Canadianist.' This year there was an inaugural Atlantic Canadian Studies lecture series in the Faculty of Arts, but it was mostly history-focused: that is Canadian Studies at our university. In fact, many people in the English Department who study Canadian authors do not consciously consider themselves Canadianists. Could be a lack of perspective?

> *In Central Europe there is plenty of cross-over in Canadian Studies simply because there are not all that many of us, compared to in Canada. This means that the literature scholars will be more inclined to talk to the history scholars and so on. Do you see isolation and fragmentation among Canadian studies people in Canada?*

Yes, campus silos are pretty entrenched here. However, a few years ago several marginalised and small language departments merged to form the undergraduate Culture and Language Studies Department, separate from the English Department in the Faculty of Arts. Now these professors are approaching the English Department for inclusion and cross-over interests. It is as if they suddenly realized that we are all here from somewhere else. I am very conscious of this fact, that we are all here from somewhere else.



> *Do you see much of this in Fredericton, which was part of the British Loyalist tradition?*

Nova Scotia, where I'm originally from, is pre-Loyalist with a heavy Loyalist influx. New Brunswick became New Brunswick because of the Loyalists who came here after the American Revolution/War of Independence. There is still an Old Loyalist Graveyard in town ...

> *But there are no Union Jacks being flown...?*

Oh, yes, Union Jacks are flown. There is a real perception that this is an old blue-blood town. A lot of people are in denial about how multicultural we are, and not just on campus. The campus has a large Muslim community; we've got students from Iran, Iraq; many from Africa—Malawi, Nigeria, Algeria—and a strong South Asian community. Almost a third of the graduate students are non-Canadians. We are in Asian Heritage Month now [April]; there are dances and festivals and presentations; feasts of Korean and Philippines food and culture. Heritage month can “take over” the Playhouse, which you do not use because you expect 50 people, but because you will have 500 to 700 people there.

Yet, there is still a notion that we are a blue-blooded town!

> *What is it that makes Fredericton so alive, culturally speaking, with a population of 50 000?*

There is more going on academically and socially than in Saint John. In Moncton there is a denial that the other half of the population is French/Acadien (and I am far more actively involved with Acadian arts and culture).

> *New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual province. Is bilingualism a living cultural reality, even in Fredericton?*

Bilingualism in Fredericton need a lot of work, even personally... Officially, there are about 5000 Francophones in Fredericton, one in ten. It is not a balanced mix but the vibrant and vital Centre communautaire Saint-Anne with école K–12, *Bibliothèque*, CJPN radio station, Galerie des Bâisseurs, theatre, daycare, and more, contributes so much to the quality of not just Francophone culture and life in Fredericton.

Last year, I was doing government contract work up in Caraquet, on the North Shore of New Brunswick. There I was working with a lot of people who do not speak much or any English. That is the dynamic that we have in this province.

> *Is it very much politicized? One has that impression because every little story about linguistic friction is bound to be a major news item in Canada.*

Well, there are some individuals who are against bilingualism, who even hold protests and parades as such. They're big on parades! The Anglo Society of NB recently protested for the removal of the Acadian flag outside Casino NB in Moncton but the instantaneous Acadien protest over its removal was stronger so the drapeau Acadien is once again proudly flying there.

I heard an interesting lecture last year at St. Thomas University [Fredericton, NB] about the potentially self-destructive risk that New Brunswick has assumed by entrenching distinct school boards – French and English ones – that could be to our detriment. This was from a Fulbright scholar, looking at our education system from an American perspective.

Also, most of the arts/culture societies are less well-organized provincially than in Nova Scotia, despite all the positive things that have happened since Louis Robichaud was premier of New Brunswick. For example, there is not a unified New Brunswick writers' federation that includes all writers, French, English and more, from New Brunswick. We see separateness—WFNB [Writers' Federation of New Brunswick] and AAAPNB [l'Association acadienne des artistes professionnels du Nouveau-Brunswick] are prime examples. Unlike the New Brunswick Crafts Council/Conseil d'artisanat du Nouveau-Brunswick, which is across the board and open to all qualified craftmakers, regardless of language or cultural-origin, so they have a great, wide mix of coverage/integration.

> *Let's finish off by moving away from New Brunswick and Canada and looking at things from another direction: What can Canadians and Canadianists in Canada learn from CEACS scholars, from outsiders studying Canada?*

I am intrigued when I see conference calls from the region. There was one conference in 2010 called "Postcolonialism / Postcommunism: Interactions and Overlaps," which is something I feel you would never get in Canada. You might not even get a conference like the "Metafictional Canada" one in Baie Mare in 2010 in the "Unconventional Canadianists" series.

I have been astounded by the themes and interests in Central European conferences. I see strong interest by Central Europeans to critically and comparatively examine the lived experience and contributions of their people/relatives who had emigrated/moved to Canada ... strong research motivator.

I have also noticed that in Central European conferences you hear what I would call more critical thinking/discussion about Canada, such as about Native Canadians ... I have colleagues in



Education at UNB who are doing their PhD studies in their 60s who endured the Canadian residential school system yet it seems that it would be a tough sell to convince them of their empowered role potential in Canadian Studies.

It seems Central Europe has better developed critical Canadian Studies generally than here in Canada.

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Joe Blades lives in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where he is an artist, author, editor, educator, publisher, and a graduate student in Education at the University of New Brunswick. He is the editor of ten collections, and the author seven poetry books including *River Suite* (Toronto: Insomniac Press), *Casemate Poems (Collected)* (Ottawa: Chaudiere Books), and *Prison Songs and Storefront Poetry* (Victoria, BC: Ekstasis Editions) with several book translations published in Serbian editions. He has a new book translation forthcoming in Bosnia and several book translations into Spanish in the works. Blades, who was until recently President of the League of Canadian Poets, is President of the Union of Graduate Student Workers–PSAC 60550 as well as President–Publisher of his Broken Jaw Press Inc. established in 1984. [www.brokenjaw.com](http://www.brokenjaw.com) / [www.joeblades.com](http://www.joeblades.com) / <http://brokenjoe.blogspot.com>

