



Chaudiere Books

2423 Alta Vista Drive, Ottawa, Ontario Canada K1H 7M9
chaudierebooks.com / chaudierebooks.blogspot.com

The Calgary Renaissance: an interview with Derek Beaulieu

this interview was conducted by rob mclennan over email in August 2016

Derek Beaulieu is the author of the collections of poetry *with wax*, *fractal economies*, *chains*, *silence*, *ascender / descender*, *kern*, *frogments from the frag pool* (co-written with Gary Barwin) and *Please no more poetry: the poetry of derek beaulieu* (Ed. Kit Dobson). He has also written 4 collections of conceptual fiction: *a a novel*, *flatland*, *Local Colour* and *How To Write* (Nominated for the W.O. Mitchell Award). He is the author of two collections of essays: *Seen of the Crime* and *The Unbearable Contact with Poets*. Beaulieu co-edited bill bissett's *RUSH: what fuckan theory* (with Gregory Betts) and *Writing Surfaces: fiction of John Riddell* (with Lori Emerson). He is the publisher of the acclaimed no press and is the visual poetry editor at UBUWeb. Beaulieu has exhibited his work across Canada, the United States and Europe and is an award-winning instructor. Derek Beaulieu was the 2014–2016 Poet Laureate of Calgary, Canada.

Q: How long have you been in Calgary, and what first took you there?

A: I've been in Calgary since 1976; my parents arrived here for work, driving from Montreal with a tent-trailer, a toddler and apprehension of what it would mean to live in Calgary, so far from the cultural (and family) centre that was Montreal at the time. Our family lasted only a year away, returned to Montreal in 1977, but found that the culture and politics had shifted so significantly that perhaps Calgary was a good idea after all. In 1978 we stayed — I've lived here ever since.

Q: How did you first get involved in writing, and subsequently, the writing community in Calgary?

A: After doing a BA in English at the University of Calgary (1991–1995) I began to see inklings of the types of conversations happening under Fred Wah's tutelage (and in online communities), but it wasn't until I joined the *filling Station* collective in 1997 (and founded housepress that same year) that I really learned the depth and breadth of Calgary's literary community.

Q: I know, since that period, you've been seminal in helping establish and encourage the answer, but what do you see happening in Calgary that you don't see anywhere else? What does Calgary provide, or allow?

A: Calgary hasn't had an abundance of literary presses or long term magazines — so the community has had to be dedicated to DIY aesthetics (a mindset that has worked very well); I think that the community also had very few older mentors (i.e.: people to come to the city to be students and then return home, but also many tended to retire and move away), so it was — and remains — a youthful community that is open to radically, risk and experimentalism. Despite the small size, strong communities of writers flourished which centred on fiction, spoken word, lyric writing — and the very vocal, boisterous community of experimental writers.

Q: I've always been curious about that Alberta divide: Calgary appears to host the bulk of the literary journals and micropresses, and Edmonton hosts the bulk of the trade publishers (NeWest Press and University of Alberta Press, for example). Why do you think that is?

A: To be honest I haven't the foggiest. Perhaps Calgary has historically been so focused, as a city, on business/industry while Edmonton has the centre of government?

Q: The purpose of our work on *The Calgary Renaissance* has been to acknowledge some of the literary work done over the past two decades-plus, but has anyone attempted to catalogue any of the publishing history throughout the city? With a few decades worth of ephemera, where does one go to find out anything on what has emerged from Calgary's numerous small presses?

A: As far as I know there hasn't been a history written of Calgary's community, nor is there a central archive of the decades of small press and magazine traffic. I know that Simon Fraser University in Burnaby BC has an ongoing record of my presses and of *filling Station*, but there is a lot of research and archival potential for further study and discussion for sure.

Q: Have any of your projects responded directly to your engagements there? How did the city and its community, if at all, change the way you approached your work?

A: I don't necessarily write with community as my subject matter, but over the years Calgary's literary community has been a laboratory for attempts, drafts and risks — a place to premiere new work — it has formed lasting friendships, critical readers and a way of making writing something for community.

Q: Given, as you suggest, Calgary has a certain percentage of presses that come and go, for a variety of reasons and lifespans, what and who has emerged over the past year or so that has caught your attention? What new activity should we, perhaps, be aware of?

A: Calgary's community has built in waves, moments of more prominent development and publishing followed by quieter periods. I never know what's going to happen next.