Rachel Zolf

Janey's Arcadia (Coach House, 2014)

reviewed by Sarah Dowling

When I was seventeen, my family drove up north from Regina, Saskatchewan, to the farm that had been our ancestors' homestead. It was about four hours away, a nice drive. We took the six-car cable ferry across the South Saskatchewan River at St. Louis, and my dad and I got out to chat with the ferryman. We spoke in French; he answered in Mitchif. We understood each other, sort of. Well enough to talk about the weather, the journey across the water, to say thanks, bye, see you later, have a good one.

Mitchif is the language spoken by some Métis people in Canada. It was formed through the combination of French and Cree, using the grammatical structures of both. There used to be another language spoken by Métis people, though: Bungee. It was formed from Cree, Scots English, Gaelic, and French, and by the late nineteenth century, it was the native language of some 5,000 people, who were called "countryborn." But by the 1980s times had changed and only a few elderly speakers remained. Bungee is now extinct.

It's interesting, then, to see Bungee featuring so prominently in Rachel Zolf's new book *Janey's Arcadia* (2014). The second poem in the book, "The Red River Twang," begins, "Chistikat, I forgot my clé," and carries on quoting language fragments from anthropological, historical and ethnographic studies of the Red River Colony, the first European settlement sanctioned by the Hudson's Bay Company in what was then Rupert's Land and what is now Manitoba. The poem reads almost as a list of different figures of speech: "When things settle down, but / I'm dying for a cigarette, but / A bugger to work and clean things, but" (10). Cree loan words like "kawiinachini," "neechimos," "apeechequanee," and "chimmuck" appear throughout,

alongside non-standard pronunciations like "shtop," "messidze," "haird," and "din't" (10-12). The voices in the poem occasionally answer back to this collection process, resisting their own inscription: "I guess I talk like a Bungee, yes / Oh, don't write that down now, you" (10), and the poem ends with "With another frog in his mouth" (12).

Bungee is a language that points to a historical moment very different from our own, one in which settlers "render[ed] themselves ... intelligible by means of ... their Indian mother tongue[s]," as one settler Zolf quotes in her afterword wrote in 1871 (118). That is to say, these settlers were using their mothers' language and mixing it with their fathers', because Bungee was formed in communities where Indigenous women married Scottish men. This may seem like historical minutia, but by today's standards, the settler Zolf quotes is making an incredible statement: in 1871, settlers, the Europeans at the Red River Colony, had Indian mother tongues. They used these languages to make themselves intelligible to each other. Rather than speaking English or French, Zolf explains, "the *lingua franca* at the Red River Colony" was Cree (118). Maybe it's not just the Bungee language that's dead, then. What emerges most strongly in *Janey's Arcadia*, like a ghost or a revenant, is the idea that we settlers ought to adapt ourselves to the Indigenous cultures upon whose land we are living and whom we are living among.

The central persona in this book, Janey Settler-Invader, is almost a foil to this idea. She appears on the cover as a wholesome apple-cheeked white lady, waving and smiling in front of her storybook farm, chubby baby in her arms. Bountiful bushels of golden wheat surround her, and she waves into the middle distance while the kid sucks its thumb. This incarnation of Janey represents the "nicey-nicey- / clean-ice-cream-TV scraps" (9) version of Canada, the "Utopia, Ltd." (17) seen on the immigration brochure from which her image is borrowed, and the one that to this day rears its head in U.S. liberal discourse.

As nice as she looks in pictures, though, Janey is the polymorphously perverse lovechild of Kathy Acker's foul-mouthed teen sex addict Janey Smith, and first-wave Canadian feminist Emily Murphy's Janey Canuck, a plucky post-Victorian settler headed west. Once you crack the spine, you're greeted with all the ugliness that these three Janeys can produce. As the persona and guide figure, Janey's settler-invader characteristics set the tone: the sequence "Concentration" quotes from hate-speech lobbied at Theresa Spence, chief of the Attawapiskat First Nation, during her six-week hunger strike protesting sub-standard housing on the reserve in 2012-13; from the corporate-speak of an evangelical organization targeting Indigenous teenagers in Winnipeg's North End; and from historical texts justifying conversion of Indigenous children to Christianity in residential schools.

Zolf's historical mish-mash traces continuities of genocidal logic across at least three centuries—including the present one—and demands a reckoning. "Concentration" also quotes from an 1824 memoir in which the author describes taking "sixty-two / boys" and "sixty-four / girls" from one "tribe" in order to educate them (38), a precursor to Canada's genocidal residential school system, which wrenched 150,000 children from their home communities from the 1880s to the 1990s. While Prime Minister Steven Harper apologized for residential schools in 2008 (and then promptly declared that Canada has "no history of colonialism"), Indigenous studies scholars such as Dian Million remind us that the predominant frameworks for addressing historical injustices such as these are absolutely continuous with the work of colonization. It is the settler state that convened the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and it is the state adjudicates the injustices that the state itself perpetuated. Moreover, as the recent murder of fifteen-year-old Tina Fontaine in Winnipeg reminds us, it is the state that continues to remove Native children from their families and communities and take them into the notorious un-safety of foster care in disproportionate numbers, in the U.S. as well as Canada.

In addition to its consideration of the cataclysmic history of colonial educational policy, then, Zolf's book is intimately attentive to the ongoing crisis of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada, of whom there are 1,200. At several moments in the book, there are lists of women's names, printed by hand, each one in a distinctive script. These are the names of just a few of the women, primarily those with connections to what is now Manitoba. Each name, each different hand, seems to beg that this individuation could help us see, to recognize each woman or girl, could make us do something or care about her. But Zolf's use of Optical Character Recognition (OCR), a software program used for turning archival documents into digital text that is notorious for its glitches, errors, and misreadings, prompts a deeper consideration of what it means to "recognize."

In his essay "Subjects of Empire," Glen Coulthard argues that Native people ought to reject the colonial politics of recognition, in which limited cultural rights are granted ("recognized") so that the dominance of the colonial state can be solidified. Zolf's poem "What Women Say of the Canadian North-West," one of the final pieces in the book, uses OCR software's misreadings to stage a dramatic display of the false promises of recognition. Zolf juxtaposes a list of settler women's names taken from a nineteenth-century brochure against the names of the murdered and missing women that cycle through her book. The original brochure was designed to attract settlers from Britain, so most of the settler women interviewees comment that they "have no fear of Indigns, for I never see one" (110). Their inability to "see" is made concrete in the OCR software's misrecognition of "Indian" for "Indign," a misprision that draws attention to indignities suffered as well as indignant resistance. Alongside the settler women's confident assertions, though, the murdered and missing women's names are crossed out and juxtaposed with treated text from police reports and press commentary on their deaths. The juxtaposition produces a tally of fearless settler-invaders, whom we might picture as Janey's descendants, as ourselves, blithely happy in our lives, and "never see[ing]" the people whose land we/they are living

on. Alongside our/their unafraid existence another group of women is quietly crossed out, remaining unseen and without recourse to justice.

As Zolf writes in the afterword to her book, "a one-week span lies between the hanging of the Métis revolutionary Louis Riel and the last spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in November 1885, inextricably linked events that wrenched open the 'Canadian North-West' to mass European immigration" (119). My family settled right around that time, and Riel was hanged just a few blocks from the house where I grew up. When I was in high school, the government awarded our extended family a plaque for having farmed continuously in the area for over 100 years. This is what it means to be a settler: we got a prize for being the beneficiaries of land theft and dispossession. But it's not enough to get "another frog in [your] mouth" and feel guilty. Rather, Zolf's book looks to the historical example of Bungee and asks what kinds of new relation might be possible: how can settlers change what we're doing in order to halt the work of colonization, in order to actively decolonize? "It is we who are hopeless?" she asks (99). I think so, but I hope not.