During his introduction for a conference session on urban American Indians at Princeton University in 1970, Dakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. suggested that the “literature regarding off-reservation Indians is incredibly bizarre.” He was not kidding. Scholars at the time either took for granted or seemed determined to prove that Native people could not survive in the city—that they could not board buses, operate elevators, set alarm clocks, or even figure out when to eat lunch. This problematic trope reified lingering stereotypes that cast Indians as naturally pastoral people incapable of negotiating modernity and its myriad gadgets. Much of the first wave of scholarship on urban Indians also seemed to suggest that Native people were somehow tricked into migrating to cities, typically as a result of state machinations. Mostly absent are examples of Native people who wanted to experience cities for their own subjective purposes, to benefit their tribal communities, or both.

Mercifully, the fields of ethnohistory and Native American studies have recently witnessed an important movement of new scholarship on American Indian urbanization in the twentieth century that has begun revising the old narrative in impressive fashion. Rosalyn LaPier and David Beck’s City Indian not only makes an excellent contribution to this emerging trend; it also focuses on the turn of the twentieth century—easily the blurriest period in the history of Indigenous urbanization. Whereas a few recent studies have pushed the narrative of the urban Indian back to this period, this is the first to expand it into monograph length.

Bookended by Chicago’s two prominent world’s fairs (a brief first chapter on the nineteenth century notwithstanding), City Indian picks up with the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, which, just three years subsequent to the grisly Wounded Knee massacre, depicted Indian people as caught in a two-worlds binary. Most fairgoers believed Indian extinction was imminent—either through physical death, as represented by assassinated Hunkpapa chief Sitting Bull’s reconstructed cabin, or through complete cultural assimilation, as demonstrated by the fair’s live Indian boarding-school exhibits.

LaPier and Beck reconstruct a history of Indigenous people both transcending and maneuvering within that two-worlds theme, and not cowering at modernity or drifting off into the sunset. Indeed, nowhere better illustrated the rapidly changing wider world than Chicago— one of the fastest-growing cities in modern history. As the nation’s leading railroad hub, Chicago quickly became a major center of economic and social opportunity not only for industrial laborers and civic boosters, but also for regional Native American people who maintained a muted presence in and around the “Windy City.” As the authors reveal, “City Indians desired to live well in Chicago while not discarding their tribal heritage” (167). In this sense, Potawatomi, Winnebago, Ojibwe, and other Indigenous peoples were not so much reclaiming Native space when they staked their futures in Chicago as they were claiming new ways of belonging on Indian terms, and in a place they never quite relinquished in spirit.
In perhaps the authors’ most intriguing area of analysis, they focus on how urban
Indian activists – both sojourners and permanent residents alike – created education
programs and participated in public events in order to define for non-Indian people
American Indians’ place within modern society. “They worked harder at shaping
and defining this narrative than at anything else in their lives” (159), the authors
assert. This is illustrated in LaPier and Beck’s focus on Potawatomi leader Simon
Pokagon, who, in addition to delivering the scathing “Red Man’s Greeting” (originally
“Red Man’s Rebuke”) during the World’s Columbian Exposition, portended the
“educated Indian activist emerging in twentieth-century America, who retains his
strong tribal roots, but who recognizes that modern society is bringing rapid change
to the Indian world” (18). That Pokagon and his cohort met substantial opposition
from those who refused to appreciate the tenacity and malleability of Indian culture
is, on the one hand, central in that it prefigured future Indian invisibility. But on
the other it is also beside the point. Because what matters most is that turn-of-the-
century urban Indian people resisted passive victimization while doing all they
could not just to shape cultural discourses, but also to command them. They did
not lack voice so much as non-Indian people lacked ears and imagination. In this
respect, City Indian is a nice companion to Philip Deloria’s Indians in Unexpected

LaPier and Beck confess that Chicago’s early twentieth-century Indian community
was burgeoning at best, and often foiled by too much fluidity and a young leadership
that lacked maturity. At the same time, their subjects indicate how early urban Indian
migrants both established a precedent for subsequent urban migrations and anticipated a range of possible outcomes, a point the authors only hint at in their concluding
chapter. Creating new places of Indian belonging, maintaining connections to Indian
country, and advancing a self-determinationist impulse to define Indians’ place in the
modern world would remain the primary agendas of urban Indians. With this in mind,
scholars of not only the vital and maturing field of Indian urbanization, but also activism, education, labor, and modern Indigeneity, should consult this volume and add a
copy to their shelves. It will be interesting to see where LaPier, Beck, and other scholars
of this exciting topic next arrive in their pursuit of American Indian people who were
very much on the move in the twentieth century.

Oklahoma State University

DOUGLAS K. MILLER