Indigenous Urbanities

*Representations of Cities in Native Canadian, Aboriginal Australian, and Māori Literature*

**Frank Schulze-Engler**

In a startlingly brief story with the telling title “A Short History of Indians in Canada,” Thomas King recounts the exploits of a bored visiting businessman in Toronto who, in the small hours of a sleepless night, witnesses a most amazing spectacle in Toronto’s central banking district:

Bob Haynie catches a cab to Bay Street at three in the morning. He loves the smell of concrete. He loves the look of city lights. He loves the sound of skyscrapers.

Bay Street.
Smack!
Bob looks up just in time to see a flock of Indians fly into the side of the building.
Smack! Smack!
Bob looks up just in time to get out of the way.
Whup!
An Indian hits the pavement in front of him.
Whup! Whup!
Two Indians hit the pavement behind him.
Holy Cow! shouts Bob, and he leaps out of the way of the falling Indians.¹

Stunned by the Indians falling out of the sky, Bob comes across Bill and Rudy, whose business it is to take care of the tumbling natives and clear up the city. Bill and Rudy have expert knowledge on the Indians (they have a field guide

that allows them to determine their ethnic origins “by the feathers”), and they provide Bob with a scientific explanation of the dazzling spectacle:

Some people never see this, says Bill. One of nature’s mysteries. A natural phenomenon.

They’re nomadic, you know, says Rudy. And migratory.

Toronto’s in the middle of the flyway, says Bill. The lights attract them.

[...] Bill and Rudy pull green plastic bags out of their pockets and try to find the open ends.

The dead ones we bag, says Rudy.

The live ones we tag, says Bill. Take them to the shelter. Nurse them back to health. Release them in the wild.

Amazing, says Bob.

A few wander off dazed and injured. If we don’t find them right away, they don’t stand a chance.

Amazing, says Bob. (3–4)

The story ends with the wistful comment of the hotel doorman who had suggested to Bob that he visit Bay Street:

Bob catches a cab back to the King Eddie and shakes the doorman’s hand. I saw the Indians, he says.

Thought you’d enjoy that, sir, says the doorman.

Thank you, says Bob. It was spectacular.

Not like in the old days. The doorman sighs and looks up into the night. In the old days, when they came through, they would black out the entire sky. (4)

The crucial irony in King’s story lies in the fact that “the history of Indians in Canada” can indeed be told on three and a half pages: what King is after is, of course, not the ‘real’ history of Native Canadians, but the central tropes that have constituted ‘Indians’ in Canadian history and public discourse from the beginnings of white settlement onwards. All these tropes are there, in a nutshell: Indians belong to nature and to wilderness, they fall organically into different tribes, they are an endangered species that needs care, protection, and social benefits in order to survive in the modern world, and they are a dying race whose greatest moments lie in the past. By the same token, King’s “Short History” also provides a terse account of indigenous urbanity: it is an oxymoronic contradiction in terms, something that cannot exist. While Bob can enjoy downtown Toronto by savouring “the smell of concrete,” “the look of city lights,” and “the sound of skyscrapers” (1), the idea that Indians colliding with the city’s