

Edward W. GIFFORD and Gwendoline Harris BLOCK
**(compilers), *Californian Indian Nights*, (Lincoln, University of
Nebraska Press, 1990, Pp. 323, \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8032-8171-4)**

Lisa Philips Valentine

Volume 13, Number 2, 1991

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081729ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081729ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Philips Valentine, L. (1991). Review of [Edward W. GIFFORD and Gwendoline Harris BLOCK (compilers), *Californian Indian Nights*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990, Pp. 323, \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8032-8171-4)]. *Ethnologies*, 13(2), 131–132. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081729ar>

Edward W. GIFFORD and Gwendoline Harris BLOCK (compilers), *Californian Indian Nights*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990, Pp. 323, \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8032-8171-4)

Despite its unfortunate title, *Californian Indian Nights* is an excellent compendium of stories compiled and edited in 1929 by Gifford and Block, then associated with the University of California Museum of Anthropology. The 1990 reprint edition adds a seven-page introduction by Albert Hurtado which provides biographical information on Gifford and Block, along with an attempt to put the book into the context of "Indian Studies" in California in the early 1900's.

In their introduction, Gifford and Block distill the widely diverse Native cultures in California down to sixty-four pages of surprisingly detailed and interesting summaries of cultural traits in their attempt to "...picture the fabric of native civilizations, upon which the myths and folktales, related in this book, were embroidered" (p. 25). Differences between at least the three basic culture areas, designated "North Pacific Coast", "Great Southwest" and "Central California" in the book, are carefully maintained, although any individual group may be used only once to illustrate any of the many cultural traits discussed. Topics addressed in the introduction include political organization, subsistence, buildings, clothing, implements, weapons, and musical instruments, as well as political and social units such as clans and moieties, and various ritual behaviors such as funeral practices, puberty rites, "cult religions", dreams, visions, and trances. In the final section on storytelling, the story types discussed roughly parallel the organization of the myths and legends presented in the body of the book.

Included in the Gifford and Block introduction are ten photographs, one figure, and a map of California divided by linguistic affiliations of Native groups, presumably at time of contact. The numbers on the map correspond to a listing of language families and dialect groups. Each story in the body of the text is introduced with the name of the group from which the story was collected and the current Californian county in which the group would have resided. Although awkward and laborious to use, the map does provide a means of locating groups to help the reader determine geographical trends.

The bulk of the book is a compilation of English translations of eight-two stories from Native California groups originally recorded and published by other anthropologists. The topically-arranged stories cover the origins of the world, man and death; how people got fire and the world fire; stories about the sun and moon; coyote stories; the land of the dead, stories about monsters; the skyland, star stories and stories about thunder; adventure stories; stories about Yosemite; miscellaneous stories; and end with two "stories with European motives". Gifford and Block edited some of the stories: in particular, "repetition

has been largely omitted in the central Californian stories in this book" (p. 43). Despite the regularizations in the data that they have made and the wholesale omission of the original language data, the stories themselves are excellent. When read together, general mythic themes emerge from the corpus which certainly present a uniquely native Californian perspective.

Had *Californian Indian Nights* been produced in 1991, it would have been faulted for its essentializations of Native traditions, for its zealous concern to separate post-contact materials from that which comes from "pre-Caucasian natives" (p. 13), and for the admitted editing out of Native rhetorical devices. However, on the strength of Gifford and Block's even minimal contextualizations found in their introduction, in the organization of the myths and legends, and in the extremely brief story attributions ("As told by the _____ indians of _____ county"), this book certainly warranted reprinting for a contemporary audience. The 1990 introduction serves to locate the book as an historical document to be read with that earlier anthropological context in mind. We hope that more contemporary studies will also be made available by this press.

Lisa PHILIPS VALENTINE
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

David M. RAYSIDE, *A Small Town in Modern Times: Alexandria, Ontario* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, Pp. 336, ISBN 0-7735-0826-0)

Readers may wonder why a book on Ontario by a political scientist is being reviewed in *CFC*. Part of the answer lies in the interests of the book review editor, who taught for five years in an interdisciplinary Canadian Studies Program and specialises in Ontario's traditional and popular culture. However, this book is of interest to any folklorist, and particularly to those who work in communities; it is ethnographic both in its research methods and in its primarily descriptive mode.

Clifford Geertz's "Blurred Genres" article (1980) was one of the first works to draw attention to the cross-fertilising influence of disciplines on one another. Many prominent recent works combine academic perspectives to create something that goes beyond any one disciplinary "genre". Folklorists refer particularly to those who have linked history and anthropology: Robert Darnton, Eric Hobsbawm, and Nathalie Zemon Davis, to name a few. Though Rayside's *A Small Town* instead draws primarily upon sociology and political science,