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For maids in
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Tensions, triumphs in Golden State form basis for indies' *California* series

Originally published in *Current*, Oct. 31, 2005

By Mike Janssen

A four-part documentary series coming to public TV next spring suggests that for a taste of their country's future, Americans should look west.

The films that make up *California and the American Dream* tell compelling stories of conflict and change in the country's most populous and ethnically diverse state. Asians, whites, blacks, Latinos and Native Americans describe their efforts to carve out solid careers and identities, illuminating the state's complex interplay of economic, social and political forces.

The subjects at times face discrimination and adversity, yet many emerge with their optimism intact and find redemption in the fight for a better society. As one tribal leader says, there is something in California that "lifts people."

Together, the films suggest that as the rest of the country becomes more diverse, its growing pains might come to resemble California's. "We think these stories are important not just for California, but for this country as a whole," says Paul Espinosa, series co-producer and director of an episode titled "The Price of Renewal."

Espinosa is one of several independent producers who collaborated on *California and the American Dream*, joining Jed Riffe and Lyn Goldfarb to serve as a series producer. They recruited a fourth, Emiko Omori, to direct an additional film. Each has produced for public television since at least the late '70s. (Independent Television Service is a co-producer as well.)

In an unusual setup, no one served as an executive producer, and the film is presented independently of a station. Working in tandem required marathon conference calls and multiday production sessions during which the producers, who live in locales ranging from San Diego to San Francisco, crashed at one another's homes—creating a collaborative ethos that reflected the spirit of the docs.

"We really trusted, liked and respected each other," Riffe says. "Amazingly, we still like each other."

In the late '90s the producers embarked on what they envisioned as a very different series, one surveying California's history and pegged to the state's 2000 sesquicentennial. They changed course after learning KCET in Los Angeles was planning a similar project and competing with the station for a grant from CPB's now-defunct Diversity Fund.

Refocusing their series on contemporary issues got them back in the game. Meanwhile, KCET's film fizzled, and Riffe says his team now wants to produce a historical account. "It would be so much more enhanced by everything we've learned," he says.

Each of *California's* hour-long movies examines a different topic. The first studies the phenomenon of Native American casinos, which originated in the state, and how their financial success has transformed the state's tribes.

"The Price of Renewal" looks at the efforts to rehabilitate a poverty-stricken neighborhood in San Diego and the troubling gentrification it engendered. "The New Los Angeles" examines activist movements and the shifting fortunes of the city's Democratic leaders over the past several decades. And in "Ripe for Change," farmers, chefs and biologists discuss the harmful effects of conventional agriculture and the counter-trends that favor organic techniques.

PBS's National Program Service will distribute the films

beginning April 13 [2006]. The filmmakers are now planning promotion, marketing and outreach to extend the life of the series. These efforts might include screening the docs in the communities they feature, Riffe says, furthering the spirited give-and-take they capture.

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