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Follow the 'Dream' Thursdays on KCET

By David Kronke, Staff Writer

California, narrator Linda Hunt informs us in the documentary miniseries "California and the American Dream," is "an Ellis Island for the 21st century," and those of us who live here are "in a battlefield of conflicting needs and diminishing resources." And yet, the series manages to put a mainly happy face on things, as grim as they may sometimes be.

Tonight's first installment, "California's Lost Tribes," examines the extreme reversal of fortunes for American Indian tribes after voters decided to allow gambling on Indian lands. Or, as John James of the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians puts it, "Let the chumps come in and put their money down." Though gambling "gaming" is the preferred euphemism is the fastest-growing industry in California, reaping more money than even Las Vegas manages, the reservations' newfound prosperity obviously has not come without controversy. Locals near casinos have a whole host of complaints, from traffic congestion to fear of moral rot and unsavory characters. Overall, though, the picture seems pretty rosy, though one wonders how much that portrait was affected by the fact that one of the series' major underwriters was an American Indian group.

Next week's episode, "The Price of Renewal," is perhaps the most interesting of the series, examining the saga of City Heights, a San Diego neighborhood once fraught with crime and poverty (Proposition 13 is a recurring villain in the series). Its redevelopment, spearheaded by a cagey combination of benefactors, private companies and the public sector resulted in a miraculous makeover. Yet this feel-good story came with a darker underbelly gentrification forced the original poor residents out of the neighborhood and local entrepreneurs were shut out of the new shopping centers, in favor of national chains. The third installment, "The New Los Angeles," "sets out to challenge everything people thought they knew about the City of Angels," according to the series' press notes. For

residents, it hardly succeeds at that, but neophytes will get an overview of the city's history from Tom Bradley's election to the mayor's job in 1973, through minority clashes the Latino union battle with hotels and the riots of 1992 and Antonio Villaraigosa's victory in the mayoral campaign last year. Oddly, it avoids mention of the East L.A. high-school walkouts that have been evoked in light of the recent similar protests of potential federal immigration policy (perhaps the episode will be updated before it airs). Finally, "Ripe for Change" examines the slow death of the family farm, immigrant farm workers and the grimly ironic fact that America has "the

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cheapest food in the world and the most expensive health care."

"California and the American Dream" is a little on the foursquare, earnest side, yet tenaciously reminds us of just how complex the issues confronting the state can be, not to

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mention the notion of how tricky serving the disparate interests of all residents can be.

CALIFORNIA AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Our rating: ★★★★★

What: Linda Hunt narrates this four-part documentary series exploring economic, social and political change in the state.

Where: KCET.

When: 10 p.m. Thursdays; through May 4.

In a nutshell: Earnest yet insightful.

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