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Book Review - Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, by Min Hyoung Song

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Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. By Min Hyoung Song. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. Bibliography, illustrations, index, and notes. 304 pp. \$79.95 cloth. \$22.95 paper.

Reviewed by Kevin Allen Leonard, Associate Professor, Department of History, Western Washington University.

The Los Angeles riots of April 1992 had a deep impact on many residents of the United States, particularly Korean Americans and African Americans. In *Strange Future*, Min Hyoung Song, a professor of English at Boston College, analyzes a novel, a play, and two films, all of which examine the rioting in Los Angeles. All of these cultural productions are profoundly pessimistic. They draw upon the riots to imagine a troubling future for American society. These pessimistic works, however, do not foreclose the possibility of a future characterized by social and economic justice, Song insists.

Song uses his analysis of these artistic works to challenge what he identifies as the “neoconservative” response to the riots, which demanded more restrictive immigration policies and the growth of police power to protect white people from black and Latino criminals. According to Song, the riots have helped neoconservatives to dominate American political discourse since the early 1990s. Neoconservatives have expressed unwavering support for free-market capitalism and “managed diversity” – the effort to depict the United States as a multicultural nation in which racial differences are superficial and easily ignored – and unremitting hostility toward affirmative action and civil rights efforts. These themes in neoconservative discourse have worked to obscure the results of their policies: an ever-increasing redistribution of wealth to the wealthy.

After an introductory chapter that relies in part upon the work of historians Mike Davis and Greg Hise to examine the racial geography of southern California, *Strange Future* includes chapters that carefully analyze the 1995 feature film *Strange Days*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow; Anna Deavere Smith’s 1994 play, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*; the 1993 documentary film *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women’s Perspective*, directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson; and Chang-rae Lee’s 1995 novel, *Native Speaker*. In analyzing these cultural productions, Song rejects postmodernism’s emphasis on signs and instead relies upon metaphors that emphasize the materiality of the body. He dwells on five metaphors that recur in these post-riot writings, performances, and films: pain, trauma, wounding, injury, and haunting.

Song’s readings of these works are always insightful and provocative. In his discussion of *Strange Days*, for example, he argues that the film’s ending, in which a deputy police commissioner intervenes to stop the beating of an African American, suggests the need for a strong police state in which the “only way to appeal for justice...is in the spectacle of our bodies’ pain; the only outcome for which we can hope is that someone in power will care enough not to remain a spectator” (p. 97). In his discussion of *Sa-I-Gu*, Song challenges scholars in American Studies who have criticized the emergence of a “trauma culture” in the United States. He insists that we must listen to individuals’ stories of traumatic experiences, such as those told by the subjects of the film, in order to understand the social conditions that have allowed these traumatic experiences to occur. The stories told by the Korean women in *Sa-I-Gu* show that the United States is not a “post-racial” society, as

neoconservatives have argued.

The final chapter in *Strange Future* does not seem to fit clearly with the previous chapters. Although *Native Speaker* refers to the Los Angeles riots, it does not focus clearly on rioting in Los Angeles, as *Strange Days*, *Twilight*, and *Sa-I-Gu* do. Moreover, in analyzing Lee's novel, Song focuses more on how we should understand the writings of Korean American authors than on the pessimism associated with the riots.

People who are interested in reading a traditional historical narrative should avoid *Strange Future*. Many historians may find the book difficult to read. It engages a body of theoretical literature with which many historians are unfamiliar. Moreover, some chapters are difficult to follow because they are written in ways intended to reflect the cultural productions they dissect. Although this book may not appeal to many historians, it will be valuable for those with an interest in recent American culture. Although Song's provocative arguments will not persuade every reader, his insightful analysis will encourage every reader to think more critically about race, culture, and politics in recent United States history.

DOCUMENTARY

California's "Lost" Tribes. Produced and Directed by N. Jed Riffe. Beyond the Dream, LLC, 2005. 55 minutes. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Michelle M. Jacob (Yakama), PhD, Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of San Diego.

"Why do Indians have casinos?" "Are all Indians rich from casino profits?" "What do Indians do with all their casino money, anyway?" These are common questions I hear at the grocery store, at ball games, and inside university corridors. Across the nation, but especially in Southern California, there is a palpable curiosity towards Indians in general, and specifically towards the "new" phenomenon of Indian casinos and the imagined wealth that accompanies those enterprises.

Jed Riffe's film, *California's "Lost" Tribes* (part of the nationally-broadcast PBS "California and the American Dream" Series), makes a significant contribution to help fill a gap in the public's knowledge about Indian gaming. Most importantly, Riffe privileges Indian voices and perspectives – so that California Indians themselves can tell the story of gaming's history and impact within their communities.

Throughout the film, the audience is taken on a journey – back to the roots of the social and historical forces that have shaped tribes' contemporary experiences. Riffe's film provides a primer on native issues in California history: the Spanish missionaries and enslavement of the native peoples, the discovery of gold and resulting "wholesale genocide" of indigenous peoples, the reservation era of isolation and poverty when California Indians were shut out of the economy (a trend that some argue continues to this day), and finally the legal battle resulting