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HONG & RAMONA

DISSERTATION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

AMY LAM

May 2019

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ABSTRACT

This is a novel set in frontier California.

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CHAPTER 1

HONG & RAMONA

It was the Wild Wild West times but the people who lived that frontier life called it yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Land was long, wild grass tangled with scrubby brush, sparse oak woodland squiggled from the dirt, all beneath a sky blue as ever, obviously. The air smelled fresh, not like air freshener but crisp like a clean shirt, as long as you stood downwind from the outhouse, stables, and hens pecking by their roost. In the autumn of 1855, almost a forever ago, two women and their son lived at the foothills of the Santa Clarita Valley, north of our nowadays Los Angeles right off Interstate 5 long before there were highways, home to the first and way less famous gold rush that drew the earliest trickle of men who came to California ready to risk it all for a yellow nugget.

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Hong Chen and Ramona Esperanza Ramírez had not been married under the eyes of God or state or whomever. But they lived as husband and wife as far as anyone could tell. They gave their six-month-old son their own names, Miguel Chen Ramírez, and it was official enough for the women of Villa de las Viudas, the home of the widows. At the northern tip of the Santa Clarita Valley, the town was a square of a dozen buildings and a stable that faced a flat yard of patchy grass, mostly dirt, a well-used well, and a garden plot the size of five bowling lanes which grew herbs and vegetables in the right seasons, and blooms of agave that stayed all year round. There was the boarding house, the biggest building with four rooms and four beds, and the occasional home to fleas depending on who had boarded most recently. The big room cottages, as Señor Van Nuys called them when he sold the women on the village, were Monopoly cabins the size of a bedroom. One cabin as drafty as the next. The rest of the outpost was made up of the kitchen house, the outhouse, the storage house for saddles, sundries, and supplies.

There were eight widows in all living in Villa de las Viudas, four who lived alone and four who lived in pairs, along with Hong, Ramona, and baby. But Hong, Ramona, and baby weren't on the books of the white man from Los Angeles who built the town before it was known as Villa de las Viudas and let the viudas live on their own in exchange for a little pay and to maintain the small boarding house for men who passed through still rushing after gold flakes. The white man from Los Angeles, Señor Van Nuys, made trips to Villa de las Viudas on the first of the month, on the dot, to thumb through the boarding house's guest book, collect his profits, and sell supplies and food to the widows.

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VITA

Amy Lam is a writer. Her fiction, essays, articles, and interviews have appeared in *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Tin House*, *Bitch Media*, and *The Poetry Foundation*. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from California State University - Northridge in 2002 and earned an Associates of Arts in General Studies from Rio Hondo College in 2000.