

# THIS IS ALL I CHOOSE TO TELL

History and Hybridity in  
Vietnamese American Literature

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## PREFACE

*Once upon a time there were three blind men strolling down a path. They came to an elephant standing in the middle of a road. "Watch out for the elephant!" someone nearby yelled. The first blind man approached the elephant, touched its trunk, and said: "I know what an elephant looks like. It looks like a tree!" The second blind man walked up to the elephant's ear, touched it, and said: "No, no, you are wrong. I know what an elephant looks like. It resembles a giant cabbage leaf!" Finally, the third blind man caught the elephant's tail and exclaimed: "What are you two talking about? An elephant is like a broomstick!"*

STORY HEARD AT A BUDDHIST TEMPLE, 1984

As with all researchers and literary critics, the questions I ask and my analysis are shaped by my academic training and personal background. My personal upbringing differs from that of many of my peers. I was born in France to a Vietnamese mother and a French father, and neither one has a college education. I attended a public high school near a small village in the south of France. In 1984, at the age of nineteen, I immigrated by myself to the United States, where I first lived in Gardena near Los Angeles with my Vietnamese American aunt, uncle, and their children. I did not speak English and knew nothing of the academic world. I worked in a nail salon near Orange County, home of the largest Vietnamese American community in California, and as a horse trainer, before moving to San Jose some years later. I then attended ESL classes, adult school, community college, and finally the University of California at Berkeley. There I studied cultural and visual anthropology, film, and francophone literature, and eventually focused on Asian American literature. I received the help of many along the way. Because of my unique background, whatever critiques I may have of American society

are mitigated by the experience of America as a land of rebirth. This book includes observations made on a long and uncharted path, and was born out of my personal commitment to work at the intersection of academia, activism, and art.<sup>1</sup> Behind *This Is All I Choose to Tell* lies the desire to inform, include, understand, and create.

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