

PART THREE

# Anxious Formations



---

## Love, Anxiety

### INTO THE WILD

Shortly after graduating from Emory University with bachelor's degrees in history and anthropology in 1990, Christopher Johnson McCandless sold most of his possessions and, under the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp, worked odd jobs across the United States. His two years on the road, a testament to self-reliance, self-discovery, and romanticized individualism, culminated in a Jack London-esque "Alaskan odyssey." Stranded, lost, and alone for four months in Denali National Park, McCandless died of starvation, and it remains open to interpretation whether his death was accidental or suicidal in nature. A shrine built where he died became a destination for many adventurers fascinated by his story, which was first popularized by the book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer (1996).

Eighteen-year-old Thịnh saw the film adaptation of *Into the Wild* (Penn 2007) and often talked about it with an American woman,<sup>1</sup> ten years his senior, who was a regular customer at his parents' small drinking establishment in the foothills of the Central Highlands. He developed a habit of sending her ponderous text messages, which she either only politely responded to or ignored. Late one night, he arrived unannounced at the house she was renting a room in to announce his devotion to her. When he asked her if she loved him, she firmly said "Không" (No) and told him to go home. Thịnh did but continued to send text messages nearly nonstop, eventually writing that her personal happiness was more important to him than her reciprocating his feelings. Because of this, he would stop all contact with her if she wished. She did not respond to any of these messages. Around 3:00 a.m. he texted to announce that this was to be his last communication with her because he was going to go "into the wild." He snuck one of his parents' motorbikes out of the house and drove eight hours to his sister's apartment in Ho Chi Minh City.



FIGURE 5. Motorbikes and urban anonymity have made romantic intimacy possible in the public sphere, especially in Ho Chi Minh City's downtown.

#### WINDS OF CHANGE

The first time she drove a motorbike, Trâm crashed into a vegetable stand. Now in her mid-thirties, she often told this story from her adolescence in Ho Chi Minh City to prove her occasional reckless streak. Young Vietnamese women are supposed to be gentle (*hiền*), but Trâm described herself as fierce (*dữ*). While she acknowledged that she had mellowed with age, I still found her to be unusually direct, and she clearly reveled in telling me when I made a mistake. For example, meeting her at a different café than our usual lunch spot, I misused the Vietnamese idiom “a change of wind” (*đổi gió*), which I assumed was equivalent to the expression “a change of scenery.” Trâm cracked a smile as she informed me that “a change of wind” is reserved for more dramatic changes than trying a new restaurant.

Sometimes, Trâm continued, she daydreamed about going by herself to Vũng Tàu, a coastal city two and a half hours away by motorbike from Ho Chi Minh City. This struck me as odd for two reasons. First, the idea of wanting to go on an excursion by oneself, or even wanting more than a few hours of alone time, was relatively uncommon in Vietnam at the time.<sup>2</sup> Second, the tone of our typical banter quietly turned serious. What was Trâm trying to escape? Why would someone as forthright and pragmatic as her take such drastic action to avoid confrontation? Would she ever act on it, or was just the thought enough for her?

I was unaware of it at the time, but the subtext of Trâm's fantasy was crisis: the recent discovery of her husband's extramarital affair. For months afterward,

she and her husband bickered constantly over trivial matters, and it seemed that the only times they were not arguing were when they were not speaking to each other at all. Trâm came home one afternoon only to have her husband harangue her over some unwashed dishes before she could put down her keys. She turned on her heels, walked downstairs to the apartment building's parking garage, and drove to Vũng Tàu.<sup>3</sup>

#### IN AND OUT OF LOVE

What do Ho Chi Minh City residents worry about as they fall in and out of love? To answer this question, we must situate the interpersonal experiences of romantic love and emotional intimacy in their sociopolitical context. Emerging forms of romance in Vietnam promote a reorientation of the self toward the love object in a manner that affirms modernist fantasies of intimate recognition. When middle-class Ho Chi Minh City residents discuss love, which they often do, they speak specifically about the objects of their affection, their intentions, and their plans. In doing so, they affirm a contemporary vision of their love lives that is conventionalized as entailing the mutual recognition of—and resulting intimacy between—two individuals (Berlant 2012). However, new romantic formations do not simply replace Confucian and socialist ideals of affection that prioritize collective obligations. Rather, they reconfigure them into a hybrid of conflicting models of modern selfhood in Vietnam. The ways that Vietnamese draw from and invest in romantic tropes of selfhood to fashion themselves as modern subjects vary from person to person, but two problems are consistent: determining the authenticity of romantic love and reconciling the gap between the objects of people's affections and what gets projected onto those objects (Berlant 2012).

While many of my respondents believe that following their hearts instead of obliging filial duty or Confucian gender roles makes them “modern,” I contend that their relation to modernity is not only defined by intimacy and the acknowledgment of their individuality. The anxieties of the self that romantic self-making projects inspire and are contingent upon are equally, if not more, critical to modernist identities and selfhood. According to Salecl (2020), love anxiety arises from the experiences of one's own self as undermined yet expanded and redefined through romantic entanglements. Not only does anxiety reveal the contours and effects of romance as a political self-making project, it is critical to the experience of romantic love itself. For Ho Chi Minh City's middle class, love and anxiety do not just coincide with but co-animate each other.

To demonstrate the intersection of romance, anxiety, and socioeconomic transformation, this chapter presents two case studies, that of Trâm and that of Hải, a twenty-year-old man who, like Thịnh, developed unrequited feelings for a Western woman. The betrayed wife and the unrequited lover were two of the most common figures in the stories about the agonies of romantic love recounted to me throughout my fieldwork. Together, they disclose several key factors that shape the

romantic trajectories of Ho Chi Minh City residents attempting to form romantic relationships based on “both the grammar of love and the grammar of the market” (Nguyen 2007, 287), including how Confucianism and socialism are marshalled in the process. However, Trâm’s and Hải’s experiences are not meant to be representative of romantic relationships in Vietnam, let alone in Ho Chi Minh City. They do not reflect the complexities of increasingly visible same-sex relationships or even more conventionally successful couples, and their versions of romance reflect their age, gender, and class differences. Hải grew up under *đổi mới* and embraced its effects. Attending English courses and frequenting expat bars, he used his family’s financial resources to self-consciously craft a hybrid Vietnamese-Western identity. Conversely, older and less economically secure than Hải, Trâm held more conservative attitudes about *đổi mới* and regularly framed her decisions to me in terms of traditional gender norms, even as she frequently flouted them. Although Trâm and Hải are invested in the same romantic discourses, how they interpret and enact them reflects the relation between their particular subject positions and modernity itself.

Ethnographic case studies of people rejecting, adapting, and internalizing conflicting discourses of love and late modernity indicate that if, indeed, romance is a modernizing self-making project, it is not a teleological undertaking (Zigon 2013; Davis 2014). Emphasizing individuals’ romantic experiences challenges overgeneralizing claims about gender or class ideologies by attending to the dynamic process of how global trends are incorporated (or not) into people’s sense of self. In Vietnam, romantic formations associated with neoliberalism are interpreted through and made possible by Confucian and socialist models of selfhood. Focusing on case studies not only reveals convergences and contradictions among the various models of romance and selfhood but also between individuals and their social milieu as they attempt to balance being in love with social obligation.<sup>4</sup>

While I conducted person-centered ethnographic interviews on many topics with Trâm and Hải and observed them in numerous settings, this chapter draws mainly from conversations about their romantic predicaments.<sup>5</sup> These exchanges occurred over a span of several months, usually at cafés and restaurants but sometimes at mutual friends’ homes, where I observed how their friends and relatives reacted to their troubles.<sup>6</sup> I do not attempt to determine the truth of Trâm’s and Hải’s feelings; I leave them to struggle with those questions themselves. While the stories and perspectives they offered during our conversations do not give direct access to their inner selves, they do reveal the general understandings of selfhood, gender, and emotion that Trâm and Hải draw upon to interpret their experiences. Thus, I focus on their attempts to articulate and rework these implicit models to achieve their own goals. The analysis of both case studies was guided by four basic questions. First, what are the primary and secondary attachments for the subjects? That is, who or what is the love object, and what possibilities do the objects suggest? Second, what are the institutional norms that produce such attachments?

Third, how can the subjects of the case studies attain their goals, or what can they do to close the gap between themselves and the object of their affections? Finally, how do the subjects reencounter themselves in this process?

Both Trâm and Hài shared their dilemmas with me not simply because we were, and remain, friends but because, as an anthropologist, I mostly listened. Echoing many psychotherapists' critiques of styles of emotional support, their other friends too often gave unsolicited advice and did not—perhaps could not—understand them the way they wanted to be recognized. Hài's ardor was dismissed as irrational, and Trâm in particular worried that others would criticize her and did not want to invite public judgment on the state of her marriage. This is not to imply that I understood them better than their loved ones. However, by allowing them to explore their feelings without opining on them, I attempted to do so differently than many of their friends and family, and perhaps this was enough.

Neither Trâm nor Hài expressed any interest in consulting a psychotherapist for their issues, but both sometimes asked me for advice as if I were one. To this, I told them it was not my place to do so. Moreover, they also wanted my perspective as a foreigner on romantic love, which they imagined to be a universal experience yet one increasingly shaped in Vietnam by Western expectations of gender, emotion, and choice. As events unfolded, I became not just a witness to their romantic problems but a conspirator in plans to resolve them. Indeed, Trâm's and Hài's interactions with me likely shaped the insights they gained about their own situations over time as my interview questions prompted them to reconsider their assumptions about love, themselves, and Vietnamese culture, among others. This chapter explores the possibilities—romantic and otherwise—that the objects of Trâm's and Hài's affections give rise to, and the social norms that create these attachments. Furthermore, following Berlant (2012), I examine what they do in order to close the gap between themselves and the objects of their affections, and how they reencounter themselves in the process.

#### THE THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE OF LOVE

Ethnographic scholarship on the politics of romantic love focuses on the different tactics that people use to navigate new forms of emotional and sexual intimacy and highlights the ways in which emotion and social action become fused as simultaneously tacit and culturally elaborated, embodied and rational, and spoken and unspoken (Rebhun 1999; Ahearn 2001; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Yan 2003; Padilla et al. 2008; Cole 2010; Zigon 2013; Nelson and Jankowiak 2021).<sup>7</sup> Love has been further theorized in relation to global capitalism, discourses of emotion, and political technologies of population control (Collier 1997; Freeman 2007; Friedman 2005; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Lipset 2004; Ryang 2006; Davis 2014). Romance has long been an arena for the struggles and experiments in freedom, choice, and self-making connected to the rise of a modernist identity

defined as an individuated self with unique traits.<sup>8</sup> While premodern contractual marriages were based more on financial considerations than on sexual attraction, modern romantic marriages feature an emotional intimacy that is predicated on individuals' characters fulfilling each others' mutually incomplete selves (Giddens 1993; Cherlin 2004). With the increased mobility, competition, and individualism associated with capitalism, people sought refuge from the new uncertainties of the marketplace in marriage. However, romance was not simply extricated from economic contingencies in the modern era. It has assumed many of modernity's hallmarks, including rationalization, disenchantment, and a therapeutic discourse of the self (Illouz 2012). Love has become more than duty; it is the outcome of individual desires and a romantic endeavor that supports psychological and existential security. Economic transformations produce new forms and understandings of desire, which in turn create different ways of relating to others (Stout 2014; Wilson 2004).

Economic transformations produce new forms of desire and different ways of relating to others (Povinelli 2006). The emotional intimacy that characterizes modern romance depends on the self-reflexive ability to articulate one's feelings to oneself and one's romantic partners. Under neoliberalism, marriages based on affective relationships instead of external institutions produce anxiety because individuals bear responsibility for their own happiness (Illouz 1997). Moreover, within the structure of contemporary forms of romantic love, there is, perhaps more often than not, a gap between the object of one's affection and the possibilities generated by one's desires projected onto the love object (Berlant 2012). Thus, romantic love connects emergent notions of individual freedom and self-realization by provoking self-interrogation: how do I feel about the love object, and how does the love object feel about me (Lindholm 1998)? The ethnographic material that this article draws from is permeated by the question of whether or not another's love is real. This question is simultaneously psychological and political: psychological because it concerns the veracity of emotional knowledge, and political because it entails how investments in fulfilling certain fantasies are produced by social institutions (Povinelli 2006; Berlant 2012).

Love is one of the most influential modernist projects of the self, but it is one that demands others to validate one's emotion work (Illouz 2012). Intersubjectivity is not merely the merger of isolated subjects, because encounters with others cannot be reduced to a mere emanation of the constitutive subject (Crossley 1996; Csordas 2008). Emotions do not merely happen to people but are instead social actions that shape the boundaries between the individual and the social that allow them to be made known to each other (Jenkins 1994). Thus, love strains the integrity of the self so that "self and society are faced with each other" (Ryang 2006, 1; Throop 2010a; Zigon 2013). The ethnographic material that this chapter draws from is permeated by the question of whether someone's love is real.

Though typically described in vaunted and heady terms, love can be just as anxiety-inducing. That anxiety and love are as conceptually differentiated as they

often are is a curious matter, since many of the same expressions used to describe their respective phenomenological experiences refer to a common set of physical states that include heightened arousal, internal feelings of flux, and sensations exceeding the limits of the body. Vulnerability, insecurity, and uncertainty often characterize romance, in effect acknowledging the importance of the love object to a person and that person's need and lack of control over the love object (Nussbaum 2001). While anxiety notably does not have an object (May 1950), romantic love is distinct because the object is often so vivid. When else do we have a more intimate sense of the object? A step toward a more rigorous examination of how love and anxiety are related to each other could be to demarcate their boundaries. However, doing so reifies static categories. Instead, I focus on the interpenetration of what gets labeled as anxiety and/or romantic love and how they are coproduced by political-economic transformations.

#### VIETNAM'S ROMANTIC HISTORY

French literature introduced Western notions of romance (*lãng mạn*) and love (*tình yêu*) into Vietnam during the colonial period (1887–1954). Popular with urban youth in the 1930s, the *Thơ Mới* (New Poetry) and *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* (Self-Reliance Literary Group) movements examined conflicts between romance and filial duty and the cultivation of emotionality, especially love, for the sake of modernizing (Phinney 2008a). The incorporation of new literary conventions into Vietnamese poetry and fiction incubated new concepts of the individual that would facilitate the spread of socialism in northern Vietnam (McHale 1995; Marr 2000). However, romance was delegitimized by socialist modernity as public affect was directed toward the state and loyalties outside of the individual and the state, including family obligations, were discouraged (Schwenkel 2013). The International Communist Party, in particular, exhorted youth to be nation builders as vanguards of the socialist revolution. Women were encouraged to join the Party as a way to liberate themselves from the patriarchal confines of the family (Tai 1992). Young wives upset that their husbands were sent to war were chastised for being selfish, bourgeois, and Western and encouraged to redefine love as a sacrifice to the nation (Pettus 2003).

Romance in Vietnam has long been an acceptable condition for courtship, but people have only more recently come to expect it in marriage. In Ho Chi Minh City, young people are often concerned with finding a romantic partner who will fulfill customary marital roles (e.g., male breadwinners and female caretakers), much like their parents and grandparents. However, they also increasingly prioritize receiving emotional satisfaction and self-fulfillment from their partners. One of the ways in which Ho Chi Minh City residents realize a “modern” identity is by drawing from romantic idioms of the self as individuals in search of romantic partners uniquely suited to them instead of having marriages arranged for them (Hirschman and Nguyen 2002; Earl 2014a).<sup>9</sup> State-envisioned subjectivity in the

reform era shifted from “revolutionary love” and “socialist love” in emphases on the individual’s allegiance to the state to one of a happy, healthy, and wealthy family. The shift from building the nation to focusing on one’s family is necessary for the creation of citizens responsible for themselves and the nation’s rise in the global economy (Phinney 2008a). In effect, the state yielded its position as an object of sentiment and love once the household was established as the primary economic unit (Nguyễn-Võ 2008); conjugal and family love replaced it. Instead of being a haven from the vagaries of the marketplace, “modern romantic love is a practice intimately complicit with the political economy of capitalism” (Illouz 1997, 22).

Today, popular discourses about romantic love (*tình yêu*) within and beyond Vietnam often assume its universality, with the result that it gets placed on a spiritual pedestal as proof of our shared humanity. In its purest distillations, love should be independent of financial and material vagaries, even overcoming them if need be. For example, Thuận (from chapter 2) told me that he had “cried like a baby” when his girlfriend Vy (from chapter 3) broke up with him. Because of her family’s limited economic means, her parents insisted that she marry an overseas Vietnamese man so that she could move to the West and secure their future through economic remittances (Small 2018). Thuận interpreted her acquiescence not just as her not loving him enough to defy her parents, but as their relationship having never been based on “true love”<sup>10</sup> at all. (Now working in the marketing department at a multinational corporation, Thuận owns a house and car. He and his new wife went on a lavish honeymoon in Paris.) The ways that Vietnamese draw from and invest in romantic tropes of the self to fashion themselves as modern subjects vary from person to person, but what is consistent are the problems of determining the authenticity of romantic love and the gap between the objects of people’s affections and all that is projected onto them. That is, within the structure of contemporary forms of romantic love, there is, perhaps more often than not, a gap between the object of one’s affection and the possibilities generated by one’s desires projected onto the love object (Berlant 2012). Romantic love connects emergent notions of individual freedom and self-realization by provoking self-interrogation: how do I feel about the love object, and how does the love object feel about me (Lindholm 1998)?

#### TRÂM

#### *If Love*

Trâm and Danh had been married for nearly ten years without much incident, which was part of the problem. Unable to conceive a child, the couple consulted biomedical fertility specialists and fortune tellers alike, spending vast sums of money on hormone therapy medication and votive goods to burn at auspicious temples. Meanwhile, Danh seemed to regress into bachelorhood, spending more

time and money with his friends than with Trâm. Like many of her female friends, Trâm fondly recalled Danh's chivalrous gestures during their courtship, but these memories now served to remind her of how much had since changed. Throughout Vietnam, wives desire intimacy and perform more emotional labor than their husbands (Vu 2020). Before they were married, Trâm's passing mention of a headache over the phone to Danh would occasion an unexpected delivery of aspirin to her office during his lunch break. Now, she went to the pharmacy by herself—for much bigger headaches, she insisted—even after asking him to go for her.

The state of Trâm's marriage was defined by three interrelated dissatisfactions that reflected her own fraught relationship with modernity. First was the problem of a stalled rise into the middle class. Although generally supportive of *đổi mới*, Trâm criticized many of its social consequences, including the sexual openness of urban youth and the increasing anonymity in her once tightly knit neighborhood. Moreover, as peers with more financial resources and personal connections attained what many Vietnamese consider to be modern lifestyles, she felt excluded from *đổi mới*'s economic effects and found herself on the fringes of Ho Chi Minh City's upwardly mobile. Trâm admitted to me that she was envious of her best friend, Vân-Anh, watching as she got married, gave birth, and bought a house and eventually a car. Meanwhile, Trâm and Danh had been living in her domineering mother's apartment since they got married. (The Vietnamese postmarital residence pattern is patrilocal, but Trâm refused to live with her spendthrift in-laws.) According to Trâm, her living situation reflected both the uneven distribution of *đổi mới*'s benefits and Danh's inability to provide her with a "good life."

The various markers of the Vietnamese middle class and modernity itself promise a greater degree of personal autonomy, especially for women. Criticizing patriarchal Confucianism as feudal, she and many others I knew in Ho Chi Minh City believe—despite my repeated protestations otherwise—that Western men and women are enlightened equals who choose for themselves how to be emotionally fulfilled. Regardless, what Trâm considered modern, anchored in an idealization of gender and freedom, shaped the horizon of her romantic aspirations. Given that she imagined middle-class modernity in terms of personal freedom, it is no surprise that romance was critical to her own happiness.

Second, the inability to conceive a child both created immense personal turmoil for Trâm and underscored the effects of Vietnam's political-economic transitions. Although marriage in Vietnam reflects Confucian, socialist, and neoliberal configurations, the dominant marital discourse emphasizes a set of customary roles delineated by Confucianism (Goodkind 1996; Soucy 2001). Since the principal function of Confucian and socialist models of marriage is, respectively, continuing the patrilineage and boosting population quality (Pashigian 2009; Gammeltoft 2014a), what justifications remained for Trâm and Danh's relationship? How else could they meet each other's needs—if they even needed each other anymore? While Vietnam has an established tradition of spousal obligations (*tình nghĩa*)

that may or may not be accompanied by feelings of love, it is based on a social order that has recently become less salient for urban youth. Trâm often said that in courtship, love is destined (*duyên*) to happen or not; in marriage, love is owed. She believed that raising a child together and focusing on a shared goal would bring her and Danh closer as a familial unit.

Third, the absence of a child to focus Trâm and Danh's attention allowed them to drift apart, highlighting the unfulfilling romance of their marriage. While Danh had no "knack for observation," Trâm was keenly aware of her husband's habits, preferences, and schedules but felt increasingly estranged from his thoughts. Perhaps the greatest attraction of romantic marriage for Trâm and her friends lay in the emphasis on intimacy as a matter of emotional communication and interpersonal equality. Intimacy and the democratization of men and women in the private sphere are based on recognition of the other's individual characteristics (Giddens 1993). While a desire for emotional intimacy between spouses is not solely rooted in modernist configurations of selfhood and marriage, it takes on the form of what Trâm imagined to be Western expectations of emotional expressiveness.

Shaped by neoliberal conventions of emotional intimacy and Confucian expectations of gendered obligation, Trâm's desires led to an impasse. She wanted a marriage based on romantic ideals but was unsure how to propagate one without a child to draw her and Danh closer. For example, asked to describe how their initial romance could be revived, Trâm explained that Danh needs to take better care of her by taking her out more often and buying their own home. That is, she answered in terms of fulfilling Confucian socioeconomic roles. Trâm's idealization of Western romance overlooked the emphasis on the recognition and communication of one's feelings that characterizes neoliberal formations of marriage (Illouz 2012). Indeed, she seemed to me unaware of even holding competing models of marriage. Rarely mentioning her own faults in her marriage's problems in our conversations, Trâm effectively refused to participate in the reflexive self-making project of modern romance. Whether this was due to inertia or resistance to neoliberal ideals of selfhood mattered little, as a crisis would compel her to take one up.

### *Outside of Love*

Ly had recently left her husband, not realizing that her in-laws would prevent any contact with her three-year-old son. She confided in Danh, whom she met through his work as a sales representative, and they eventually became friends. Trâm described feeling a sympathetic twinge in her stomach when Danh explained Ly's plight to her. However, Danh went on to confess that his initial feelings of compassion toward Ly had turned into attraction.<sup>11</sup> He insisted that he did not have any sexual contact with her and affirmed his loyalty to Trâm, promising to discontinue his friendship with Ly. Not wanting to stand between two people who loved each other, Trâm even went to Ly's house to yield (*nhường*) Danh to her. Ly asked Trâm if she was crazy.

It was a few weeks later, late at night, when Trâm was next in the neighborhood, this time to deliver a gift to a friend who coincidentally lived a few houses from Ly. The dim light and shadows made it difficult for Trâm to make out the two familiar silhouettes not too far from her. The man leaning against a motorbike, they stood next to one another—not so close as to warrant much attention from passersby, but close enough to disclose an intimacy. When Trâm called out her husband’s name, the couple turned toward her, faces still obscured in the shadows, but their attention was confirmation enough. She immediately went to her in-laws’ home to report Danh’s infidelity. She asked her father-in-law three times to take his son back, but he refused. That night, Danh returned home to her, which she took as a sign that he still loved her.

Trâm drew from various models of marriage, emotion, and selfhood to determine the authenticity of love, both hers and his. The most clearly articulated account of Danh’s betrayal related to domains such as spousal responsibilities and finances that resonate with dominant discourses of infidelity (*ngoại tình*, lit. outside love). Marital infidelity has become a flashpoint for conflicting opinions about *đổi mới* (Horton and Rydstrom 2011). High rates of adultery are regarded as extensions of a feudal tradition of polygyny.<sup>12</sup> Many blame the corrupting influence of the West for purveying sexual libertinism and immoral lifestyles that people succumb to. Rapid urbanization and an increase in disposable income provide anonymity and an availability of sexual partners and have intensified the commercial significance of the sex work industry (Hoang 2015; Nguyễn-Võ 2008).<sup>13</sup> Unfaithful husbands are faulted for their weakness and irresponsibility in jeopardizing stable families. The women involved are positioned against one another vis-à-vis husbands: wives as morally pure, passive victims expected to forgive their husbands and extramarital partners as greedy and manipulative temptresses. Such is the power of these competing discourses that Trâm claimed Ly did not truly love Danh and only wanted his money, despite Trâm’s repeated complaints that he had none.

However, the more pressing accounts of Trâm’s betrayal—the ones that seemed to bother her more because she had not yet come to terms with them—focused on Danh’s emotional dishonesty.<sup>14</sup> She could produce a list of things that Danh could do to take better care of her but did not know what he could do to restore trust and intimacy to their relationship. That is, she had greater difficulty articulating the violation and resolution of a model of marriage as an emotional institution. Indeed, she was not sure if she could trust Danh again or even if he had stopped seeing Ly. Over the following months, Trâm made several attempts to identify the affective roots of her marital problems. The process of doing so not only revealed how she deployed and reconfigured assumptions about modernity, marriage, and love but also constituted her own attempted self-making project.

This endeavor to remake the self was marked by a liminality stemming from uncertainties over love’s authenticity: did Trâm still love Danh, and vice versa? Modernist articulations of romantic love encourage private reflection and emotional communication to answer such questions (Illouz 2012). Trâm, however,

sought to determine the authenticity of love through a series of concrete plans. According to her, whether or not these plans succeeded (i.e., whether or not she had the resolve to pull them off) would reflect her true feelings about Danh. Their purpose seemed to be less about the viability of realizing her goals than about helping her determine what those goals were. In doing so, she explored possibilities in remaking her self according to the demands of each plan.

Trâm's first plan—to divorce Danh—was perhaps her most straightforward. The drawbacks to divorce (e.g., neighborhood gossip) would be temporary, and she would be free of her in-laws. Yet she hesitated to initiate legal proceedings because staying married was the path of least resistance. Her indecisiveness also stemmed from uncertainties about what to do in her everyday interactions with Danh, which she said was the most difficult thing to bear. Trâm knew how to behave with friends or colleagues but could not accept any of the cultural scripts for dealing with her husband (i.e., either forgiving or leaving him). Her subsequent plans called for more drastic self-transformations. For example, she wanted to marry an American partly because she believed that American men routinely made romantic gestures (e.g., bringing their wives flowers), despite my repeated protestations. In her experience, Vietnamese men change after marriage and are not committed to the romantic foundations of marriage that she idealized. She enviously compared the relative sexual freedom and gender equity that she assumed American women enjoyed to the patriarchal confines that their Vietnamese counterparts endured.

Trâm knew she had only a vague understanding of what her new life in America might be like—only that it would be better than her current one in Vietnam. She worried about not being able to become someone who was attractive to or compatible with an American or, if all went well, not being able to become an American herself. That is, she worried that she did not know how to remake herself. Regardless, the possibility of the transformative properties of love—her own utopia of gender, sex, and affective life—outweighed the risks of marrying a foreigner and moving away from her family. Such fantasies of the West allowed Trâm to imagine the possibilities of her own selfhood (Parish 2008) yet also created anxieties about the gap between what she already possessed and did not yet possess. Forays into international online dating, with some assistance from Vân-Anh's better English skills, quickly dimmed Trâm's hopes. Over the next few months, she developed more schemes that she could not settle on, including one that entailed her getting pregnant but divorcing Danh soon afterward.

The back-and-forth nature of Trâm's plans suggests that she was trying to determine what to do on the basis of whether she still loved Danh, whether he still loved her, and whether they both actually loved each other—questions she had no answer to, despite how often she returned to them. I suspect that she tried to answer the question “Do I still love him?” by resolving the question of “What should I do?” That is, romantic love would follow suit from the new horizons of

possibilities that she would engineer with her plans. The actualization of these possibilities was always mediated by an attachment to an Other: her current husband, her next one, or an unborn child.

Uninterested in the neoliberal imperative toward self-sufficiency, Trâm viewed romance as a vehicle toward care according to Confucian-inflected gender roles. Yet she also wanted to attain the affective intimacy and modernist ideals of emotional fulfillment that characterize romantic marriage. Throughout this period, Trâm also tried to salvage her marriage by opening a dialogue about the relationship with Danh, who refused to engage in these conversations. The suggestions she received from Vân-Anh (e.g., keeping silent when angry to avoid arguments) did little to improve the situation. I contend, however, that what hindered these conversations even more was Trâm and Danh's unfamiliarity with the self-reflexive communication about their feelings that characterizes both modern romance and identities. For many members of Ho Chi Minh City's middle class, the construction and performance of an emotive self has become critical to naturalizing neoliberal reforms (Tran 2015). Within the therapeutic discourses of the self that have become popular throughout the region, intrapersonal issues are framed as an underlying cause of interpersonal conflicts (Yang 2014), and interior contemplation should precede the more concrete courses of action that Trâm preferred. However, during our conversations, she struggled with articulating her feelings. Her romantic goals were used to guide her toward her aspirations for a middle-class life with more economic security and emotional satisfaction. However, she did not internalize a regime of the self marked by self-sufficiency or self-reflexivity, perhaps because that regime was out of her reach.

### *Fight and Flight*

The highway to Vũng Tàu is not especially perilous, and Trâm knew it well. She was not even that angry when she left without telling anyone. Yet anxiety dominated her recall of the events. Worries about skidding off the road with no one to help her occupied her thoughts during the entire trip. She wanted to turn around, but she finally had a plan that she could actually implement by herself. Testing Danh's commitment to her, Trâm wanted to see if he would meet her in Vũng Tàu, where they could spend of the rest of the weekend to rekindle their marriage. According to her, a husband who truly loves his wife would save her from a dangerous situation, even if she had put herself in that situation. Instead, they only ended up fighting over the phone, and she spent the night in a hotel room watching TV, kept awake by unfamiliar noises she thought might be ghosts. Still, she had no regrets.

When Trâm first told me of escaping to the beach by herself, I assumed it was a way to avoid confrontation. However, it was designed to provoke one. What started out as a romantic project to transform her and Danh's intersubjective entanglements became, in the end, a solitary self-making endeavor. Trâm enjoyed challenging herself in manageable increments. By stepping out of her everyday for

a mission that was different from what she (or we) expected, she discovered that she was—or made herself—bold enough to embark on new courses of action. This was a journey that she needed to make for reasons I am still unclear about, but she found out that her husband was someone who could not make it with her.

For a few months, I had minimal contact with Trâm, only seeing her with our mutual friends. When we finally had lunch again, I asked her if there was anything new in her life. Staring into her coffee, she told me about a new lover, a colleague who seemed diametrically opposed to Danh in many ways, except that they were both married. Some nights, they would sit side-by-side in the darkest corners of the café where we were then meeting. Days were romantic too. If he knew Trâm skipped lunch, he would treat the entire office to steamed pork buns for an afternoon snack. She asked me if I was surprised that she was having an affair. I said yes, but mainly insofar as she had told me multiple times she was through with men. She surprised herself as well, having become a figure that she despised. Although she believed she had every right to conduct an affair of her own, she soon ended the relationship out of guilt toward her colleague's wife and young daughter.

Many have made note of the mysticism often tied up with romance. People frequently joked to me of the love charms, tonics, and amulets used on unwitting souls, or of soothsayers consulted to divine answers to romantic uncertainties. The implication of these stories is that individual destinies are bound to broader circumstances. Certainly, Trâm had moments when she believed that her circumstances were ordained by powers far outside of her control: her husband's actions, Confucian patriarchy, or her own karma. At other times—more often than not, I would gather—she looked to a more open-ended future. Trying to balance being in love with duty and obligation, she lacked the social and economic capital (e.g., English skills, self-reflexive emotionality) necessary to successfully navigate conflicting models of romance and selfhood. For many in contemporary Vietnam, romance is no longer the stuff of fairy tales and far-flung destinies. It has turned into a realm in which individuals can seal their own fates. For Trâm, however, this did not make romance seem any less fictional.

## HẢI

### *In Love*

Whereas Trâm's romantic struggles were focused on uncertainties about the authenticity of love, in the next case study, love itself is seldom in doubt. The numerous narratives about unrequited love (*tình đơn phương*, or love in a lonely direction) I heard during fieldwork typically involved young men making grand gestures to the objects of their affection, despite repeated rejections. Enamored of the modern West as portrayed in global pop culture, Hải set out to reinvent himself when he left his hometown of Phan Thiết for college.<sup>15</sup> While his classmates at the University of Economics aimed for well-paying jobs upon graduation

and generally snubbed him for being an unserious student, his primary goal for “studying” in Ho Chi Minh City entailed becoming modern. His version of a modern individual, however, had less to do with the consumerist lifestyles that his peers desired than with self-determination and understanding. Hải sought an alternate education found in Ho Chi Minh City’s cosmopolitanism and the encounters with people and practices from the West to discover global modernity. He admitted to me, however, that his busy social calendar had the additional function of masking an underlying loneliness. Sometimes, spending time with friends, especially if they were coupled with one another, exacerbated his sense of isolation.

Hải spent three years unsuccessfully wooing Ngọc, a high school classmate who went to a different university in Ho Chi Minh City. He made up excuses to go to the apartment she shared with friends in the hopes of running into her because, according to him, he missed her and cared for her well-being. “To miss” and “to remember” are synonyms in Vietnamese (*nhớ*), and Hải was constantly reminded of Ngọc by tangential resemblances (e.g., the length of someone’s hair) and would talk about his lovesickness (*thất tình*) to anybody who would listen. Quick-witted and handsome, Hải had little difficulty attracting women but usually ended those fledgling relationships after a few weeks out of loyalty to Ngọc or, it often seemed, a devotion to his own misery. Hải’s friends told him to forget her, though the only advice they ever offered was to busy himself with schoolwork to appease his parents. Nobody, not even Ngọc herself, could deter him when she posted this on his social media account: “*Tôi mãi mãi sẽ không thích anh*” (I will not like you forever).

### *The Loneliest Direction*

Hải’s English teacher invited several friends for a pub crawl to covertly introduce Hải to an Australian colleague’s daughter, named Abby.<sup>16</sup> Several drinks later, Hải and Abby were making out on an otherwise empty dance floor of a gay bar for thirty minutes in full view of everyone, including Abby’s mother. Despite his aimless life, for that night, he said, “*cuộc sống là màu hồng*” (life is pink). Despite the evident elation when I met him for coffee the next morning, he was worried. Did Abby love him back? Was she only interested in sex? Would they even have sex? If they fell in love too fast, would they break up too soon? Most urgently, what happens next? Hải’s subsequent interactions with Abby and their mutual friends at various venues popular with Ho Chi Minh City’s English teachers were stilted, and it became clear to everyone but Hải that she did not reciprocate his feelings.

Like Trâm, Hải set out to become the type of person he hoped Westerners would find attractive. Because he barely knew Abby (something that seemed lost on him), he mostly relied on stereotypes of the West. Hải’s belief that Westerners are more direct and emotional than the Vietnamese resulted in a series of increasingly desperate overtures to win Abby over. His ideas about the art of seduction were reinforced by Western pop culture but missed cultural conventions about maintaining distance that are violated for entertainment purposes. For example,

he once surprised Abby at her office with enough pizza for her and her colleagues. After she angrily sent him away for disrupting her workplace, he brought the pizzas, an extravagant expense for him, to my apartment to breathlessly recount what had happened, eating almost all the slices himself. Later, Hài tried to enlist me in helping him recreate a scene involving cue cards from the film *Love Actually*.

In repeated conversations with me at cafés and restaurants over a period of several months, Hài attributed his behavior to the universal power of love. He gave me the same answers when I asked him, “Why do you love her?” and “How do you know you love her?”: “I don’t know. I just do.” Yet he followed cultural scripts of chivalry, care, and gender that were mapped onto his fantasies of the West and the transformative properties of romance. Hài’s refusal to accept Abby’s rejections reflects masculine ideals of perseverance and assertiveness that in other contexts would be valued. (His conduct was not far removed from how Trâm wished Danh would act.) He went to any event that Abby might also attend and would try to talk with her all night in the hopes of recreating their initial spark. When I translated the concept of “stalking” as *săn* (hunting) to describe how Abby might interpret his actions as threatening, Hài mistook it as a compliment. He exaggerated Vietnamese gender roles that highlight masculine determination and feminine passivity to command Abby’s attention because he assumed that Westerners are more romantically assertive.

Most critical to Hài’s romantic self-making project, however, was his numerous expatriate friends’ courtship advice: “Act natural” and “Be yourself.” These suggestions focus on finding a soulmate to complement one’s individuality instead of someone to fulfill social obligations that contributed to collective functioning. Hài hoped to reveal his adoration for Abby as an essential component of his self, assuming that what Abby wanted most was to be loved. (“Everyone wants to be loved,” he reasoned.) However, it seemed more likely that Hài projected his own need for recognition onto her. He felt passive in his inability to control his emotions, but this passivity can also be understood as a strategy to establish his longings’ intensity. This devotion was supposed to demonstrate his willingness to care for her, so he was puzzled when Abby (and Ngọc) did not reciprocate his feelings despite their authenticity and purity.

A paradox in the experience of unrequited love is that the love object exists so vividly in the person’s experience of him or her but may not even know that the person exists. Abby occasionally texted Hài after their awkward encounters to apologize for not speaking more. They often chatted online late into the night, and Hài wondered why he was unable to reproduce in person the rapport he had with her online. The mixed signals and ambiguous rejections of his advances extended Hài’s hopes for a relationship as well as anxieties about his worthiness as a suitor and, since he defined his self by his love for her, his entire being. Perhaps most troubling was that he sought out a particular form of recognition from Abby, but at times it seemed that she did not recognize his existence at all. Love had become

an individual self-making project that was hindered by the lack of an object to validate his emotion work.

Increasingly the principal means of accessing romance's utopian promises, anxiety has become a defining feature of romance under late capitalism. Lovers transcend relationship problems and racial, gender, and class hierarchies through an intense fusion of selves that creates a state of liminality. Liminality is the means through which capitalist formations become ingrained in the phenomenology of (Western) romance because lovers depart from the mundane (e.g., romantic get-aways) to affirm each other's selves (Illouz 1997). Indeed, Hài (and Trâm) crafted new versions of themselves by imagining or provoking ruptures in quotidian rules and responsibilities. However, their liminality stems from a more profound source of anxiety than everyday deviations: the reworking of the boundaries of the self. As Hài's obsession grew, the divide between his emotions' intensity and how much he actually knew about Abby became evident even to him. While he attributed this disparity to love's cosmic powers, I argue that it created a more fertile plane for the projection of his desires and produced a perceived immediacy in his experiences of her in his consciousness. His monadic intersubjectivity simultaneously conflated and co-constructed the love and the love object, echoing Berlant's observation that desire "visits you as an impact from the outside and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you" (2012, 6).

### *Falling in Like*

As Hài told others the story of him and Abby, he revised his feelings so that he no longer fell head over heels in love. Instead, he realized he had only "fallen in like," which established a gradient of romantic attachment spread across varying degrees of emotional intensity and rational thought.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, if "true love" was a stable foundation for the type of relationship that Hài wanted but seemed further out of reach with every stilted interaction he had with Abby, then his feelings for her could not be "love." However, reframing his emotions as "falling in like" proved unsuccessful as an attempt to reason himself out of his own suffering. He spent hours in the pool to distract himself, but the disparity between his growing physical strength and his continued emotional vulnerability exacerbated his feelings of being held in Abby's sway.

While Hài considered his feelings for Abby a fundamental component of his psyche, love and the way he privileged his emotions as a matter of self-definition also express an emerging class identity. Romantic love became an extension of his self-making project. Although his inability to rationalize the self could be construed as a limit of *đôi môi's* affective impact, the very impetus to do so reflects a middle-class subject formation wherein selfhood is defined in emotive terms (Tran 2015). That is, the drive toward self-mastery frames emotions as threats to rationality, and self-control becomes increasingly valued as private feelings are

taken as primary sources of self-knowledge and understanding. In our conversations about Abby, Hải often asked me what his emotions meant, eager to discuss their significance and decipher his own psyche. His friends, increasingly impatient with his sulking, advised him to ignore his feelings, which he interpreted as their not acknowledging him, his problems, and his goals in life. If the emotions stand in for the core of one's being, then to dismiss his feelings as irrational is to reject Hải himself. The discourse of romantic love articulates an ideal of individuated selves that should be accepted by others, a powerful draw for someone who often felt misunderstood and attacked by friends and family. However, by listening to him as a friend and an anthropologist, thus validating him as a person, was I also enabling toxic behavior? Despite my intention to not tell people what to do, I tried convincing him to stop pursuing Abby, to no avail.

Hải's cruelly optimistic<sup>18</sup> attachment to Abby and what she represented became a referendum on the self. That is, he needed not only her recognition as a romantic partner but also a validation of what he was doing (or not) in Ho Chi Minh City. His academic performance suffered, and any resolutions to refocus his studies usually fizzled out, since coursework reminded him that a career in finance was not what he wanted for himself. A relationship with Abby would give Hải a sense of purpose to focus his energies and replace the anomie of the seemingly random events and interactions that constituted his everyday life in Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>19</sup> Endowing Abby with a transformative power anchored broader anxieties about the self, but she, or rather his savior fantasy of her, formed an unstable foundation for a self-making project. Anthropological theories of emotion typically highlight the multiple ways that people draw on their emotions as a way to understand how people make sense of the world and of themselves (Levy 1984). One's own emotions can also be used to understand others, insofar as self-understanding entails thoughts, feelings, and behaviors made meaningful in relation to others. However, in Hải's experience, love operated independently of him. A defining feature of his self, it had somehow become alien to him. While the objectification of Hải's feelings as love gave him a social identity as an unpragmatic romantic, it also impeded other forms of self-knowledge, including the rational, reflexive understanding that eluded him.

Back in his hometown for summer break, Hải reached the nadir of his (lack of) experiences with Abby. Trying to push her out of his consciousness without the myriad distractions of Ho Chi Minh City, he did not feel anything, only numbness and emptiness, something he found difficult to put into words. When I asked him if he thought the English phrase *to feel dead inside* was an apt descriptor, he agreed and went on to quote a line from the poem "Yêu" (Love) by Xuân Diệu, a leading figure of the *Thơ Mới* movement: "*Yêu là chết ở trong lòng một ít.*" To love is to die inside a little. The next line, which Hải did not quote, is "*Vì mấy khi yêu mà chắc được yêu?*" For when you love, can you be sure you're loved? That modernist poetry published in 1938 resonates with Hải's very contemporary

predicament attests to modernity's long precedent in Vietnam. However, that his feelings became his primary site of self-understanding, regardless of their usefulness, reflects the emotional self-reflexivity increasingly demanded by *đổi mới* selfhood. As Hải predicted, his broken heart only diminished with time. By the time he learned that Abby and an American she had been dating for a few months were expecting a child, he took the news in stride. Several months later, he developed long-standing flirtations with a few expatriates before becoming involved in a casual sexual relationship with a French woman. Despite being self-consciously careful to avoid developing a strong emotional attachment to her, he was unwilling to continue seeing her when she refused to be monogamous with him. When I asked him if he had started seeing anyone else, he said, "You know me. I still have feelings for her."

### CONCLUSION

Hải once told me to interview people about who their perfect partner is, what makes them happy, and what they want in life because, according to him, Vietnamese people always think about love. That *thinking* is used synonymously with *worrying* in Vietnam suggests the prevalence of love anxiety. Trâm and Hải did not understand their own feelings. Often calling herself "crazy" during this period, Trâm was surprised by her emotional volatility, even though her reactions to her circumstances were far more measured than Hải's. While Trâm used romance to adapt to new circumstances, Hải sought outright transformation. If Trâm's case speaks to the convergence of anxiety and love, his suggests their co-emergence from the same underlying structures—social, political, and psychological. For him, love and anxiety were not just coexistent but also coterminous. In reevaluating the self according to the demands of emerging romantic discourses, Ho Chi Minh City's middle class can draw from a growing array of discourses of emotion, gender, and marriage. Doing so confronts them with alternative models of selfhood in the hybrid forms that romantic love takes in Vietnam. For many, holding up their current situations to such ideals is not only anxiety-inducing; their experience of romantic love is anxious itself.

For Ho Chi Minh City's emerging middle class, love is paradigmatic of the new-found freedoms and joys to be explored in the reform era (Nguyen 2007; Shoheit 2017). However, reducing romantic love to a neoliberal self-making project ignores the role of other regimes of selfhood in the construction of modernist identities. Romance in Vietnam is a hybrid of various discourses of emotion, gender, and class, and the contradictions within this assemblage subsequently create anxieties about the self. Not simply the byproducts of romance, such anxieties are critical to the development, structure, and experience of romance itself. Indeed, they may compel people to adopt the hallmarks of neoliberal selfhood as much as, if not more than, the emotional intimacy that more typically characterizes romance.

However, love does not only belong to a subject. It is directed toward someone else with a particular set of properties. Love is in many respects “a giving over of a part of our being to another, or the self-estrangement of our being in its intimate entanglement with another” (Throop 2010a, 774). Unsurprisingly, neither Trâm nor Hài believed they could enact alternative selves on their own. This required another person, a love object, to become who they wanted to be. Given the foreign notions of romantic love they used to accommodate ideal versions of themselves, it is perhaps no coincidence that Westerners, real and imagined, figured in the goals of both. Neoliberal models of the emotions frame them as the ultimate source of self-knowledge. However, love anxiety does not just stem from people’s changed relations to others or even their changed positions in contemporary Vietnamese society. Rather, it stems from a changed perception of their own selves that has been rendered unrecognizable to them by romantic love, a project of both self-making and self-alienation. Anxiety is both the author and remainder of romantic self-making projects.

When my initial fieldwork ended, Trâm was still married. Given her tendency to interpret emotions through a behavioral frame, I suspected that she justified her decision to stay married as one motivated by love: her apparent inability to initiate divorce proceedings must be evidence of love. This could be read as either the triumph of marital love over infidelity or, more cynically, anxiety over starting a new life. However, the next time I saw her, three years later, she and Danh were markedly different, “in love” even. She reported that they understood each other better because they now communicated their anger instead of keeping it to themselves. When I asked her if they were happy together, Trâm laughed. “I don’t know.”