



2001

Book review of 'Invitations to Love' by Laura Ahearn

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Recommended Citation

Fisher, James F.. 2001. Book review of 'Invitations to Love' by Laura Ahearn. *HIMALAYA* 21(2).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol21/iss2/15>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Ahearn, Laura. *Invitations to Love*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

In these times without limits on what qualifies as grist for the anthropologist's mill, Laura Ahearn has turned over a new stone and unearthed a hitherto undiscovered species of anthropological data - love letters! Love letters are an extraordinary lens through which to view not only the hearts (and minds, when those prevail) of those who write and read them, but also a variety of other things, such as gender, literacy, love, social change, and agency, to take the five focal concepts around which Ahearn organizes her discussion. That's only the beginning. The letters also shed light on topics as diverse as nationalism, personhood, emotion, politics, family, fate, and development.

One of the many strengths of the book is the depth of time it covers. Ahearn went to Junigau, in west Nepal, originally as a Peace Corps teacher in 1982 and has been in constant touch with her friends there ever since. Ahearn's account, therefore, includes her own participation in village life in several capacities: teacher, daughter, development worker, and anthropologist. She is appropriately self-reflexive, without being self-centered.

Some of the love letters she collected were written by men and women who had been boys and girls in her classes. Since she has returned to Junigau many times over the years, the social change she describes is not so much a "before and after" restudy, as a portrait of microprocesses of social transformation as they are actually occurring over a 19 year period. The changes are indeed dramatic: soaring literacy rates, increasing numbers of "love marriage" elopements (aided by the love letters literacy makes possible), monetization of the economy, penetration of mass media, and change in ideas and rituals concerning purity and pollution, to name a few.

The bulk of the book consists of penetrating analyses of fully contextualized excerpts from the letters themselves. Though Ahearn's experience as a woman was mostly with other women, of the 200 letter corpus at her disposal, 170 were written by males. Therefore what she has to work with is, for the most part, not letters written by newly literate women, but letters written to women who now can read them. These letters reveal not what women are thinking or feeling, except at one remove: what men imagine will be effective ways of engaging their thoughts or feelings. The men seem to be successful much of the time.

Ahearn's general conclusion echoes Levi-Strauss' contention that writing favors the exploitation rather than the enlightenment of mankind. She finds that literacy empowers women, but also sometimes weakens their position - for example, women who choose love letter-enabled elopement forfeit traditional support from their natal homes if their marriages turn sour.

Ahearn concludes with a nuanced discussion of how literacy is implicated in the ongoing shift in gender relations, which in turn affect the expression, and even the conception, of love. The result is a compelling analysis of social change, including rapidly evolving forms of marriage. Undergirding the entire book is a complicated and evolving sense of agency, which Ahearn lucidly discusses in indigenous village terms. The result is a delightful breakthrough in our understanding of how people live and love in rural Nepal.

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