

Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal. Laura M. Ahearn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. 295 pp.

ANITA WILSON

Lancaster University, England

anita@wilsonhmp.freemove.co.uk

Invitations to Love is not a book to be rushed. Like the activities and practices it describes, and the extended nature of anthropological inquiry, it evolves at a gentle pace. Relevant details and nuances of information creep in almost imperceptibly and always appropriately--although the reader may be charting unfamiliar territory of Nepali geography, culture, or correspondence there is never a sense that insufficient detail has been provided.

The book is divided into three broad sections: "Arrivals, Introductions and Theoretical Frameworks," "Transformations in Gender and Marriage," and "Love, Literacy and Development." The first describes the broad theoretical frameworks on which the book is based. The second follows more intimate and culturally situated details of love, marriage, and correspondence; the third concludes with wider issues of contemporary influences on love, literacy, and agency in a rapidly changing world. The author provides helpful references within the text to signal future topics to the reader as well as to tie back to those that have already been discussed.

I confess to experiencing moments of impatience, asking, "When do we get to the literacy bit?" My reaction was based more on contemporary practices of research and information gathering than on weakness in the narrative. We rarely have the luxury of seeing a project unfold naturally, as we usually skip to a relevant page, anxious to find the one salient point, rather than accepting and enjoying an unfolding narrative. This leisurely pace of this book is a welcome tonic.

A subject as personal as love letters requires sensitivity in the collection of data, and respectful treatment of the material itself, the correspondents who produce and share it, and the way it is reworked to fit the academic frame. Working as I do with correspondents in prisons, I found that my well-exercised sense of ethical integrity and fair representation was satisfied. Ahearn's attention to questions of (non)anonymity and the (re)presentation of authors and respondents is fully developed, fair, and representative. In particular, the conaming of events and emotions in English and Nepali languages contributes strongly to a sense of balance and equanimity. Occasionally, I felt uncomfortable intruding into the intimacies of people's lives (the narrative of Sarita and Bir Bahadur, e.g.) but from personal experience, I know the difficulties establishing dividing lines between involved relevant and irrelevant when attempting to fully represent peoples' lives. Ahearn makes an appropriate choice by detailing the personal and affective relationships between researcher and researchee.

The visual images bring to life the people, places, and artifacts described in the text. My only quibble was that I wanted to see more detailed visual reproduction of the correspondence. Although Ahearn connects her analysis to the influences of visual and cultural literacy, through film and magazines, I hoped more would be made of the decorative quality of the letters, the traces of Westernization within these texts, and the intriguing but overlooked headers such as "around 11:00 at night" and "in a deserted room" (p. 216). The letters are accessible in their entirety on the web, but here they are reduced to transcript only--no images or color--and little mention is made of illustrations or enclosures, such as photographs, contained within correspondence. The author may wish to limit the accessibility to such documents in the public domain.

Ahearn uses the concept of development in a broad variety of ways, applying it to the developing literacy practices of correspondence as well as to broader issues such as the historical and contemporary development of the Junigau community, a shift of focus in employment and economy, gendered access to education, the encroachment of Western influences such as film and magazines, and tensions between personal agency and traditional values. Ahearn's notion of a "practice theory of meaning constraint" (pp. 56-58)--where both text and context are taken into consideration--is a useful addition to the contentious debate over multiple interpretations, and offers an imaginative way to revisit meaning over time and space. Ahearn focuses on the development of women in Junigau, but the book maintains a well-balanced account of the gendered activities and practices of the whole community, linking them historically, economically, and socially. Ahearn's comments on gender imbalance, patriarchy, and chauvinism are effectively made by using humor, without recourse to direct feminist rhetoric.

Invitations is a very human book. Ahearn talks about love without sentimentality, talks about literacy without recourse to evaluation, and talks about social, cultural, and economic development without proselytizing. She is an engaged researcher who (re)presents others in an honest and informative way. Given the pace of the world, it was a pleasure to have the indulgence of reading so measured a text. There are few books that I would read twice--this is one of them.

^a2002 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the December 2002 issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (33:4). It is also indexed in the December 2002 issue (33:4).