

Janning, Michelle. *Love Letters: Saving Romance in the Digital Age*. Routledge, 2018. Pp. 122. US \$55.99 (paperback). ISBN 9781315166001.

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Michelle Janning's *Love Letters: Saving Romance in the Digital Age* is part of the *Routledge Series for Creative Teaching and Learning in Anthropology*. According to the series foreword, this series is intended to help undergraduate students learn more about culture and society through everyday objects, such as money, coffee culture, and baseball gloves (xii). Janning approaches the love letter as one of these everyday objects.

Janning's book explores two subjects: first, the "curatorial" aspects of how love letters are stored; and second, "the impact of digital and love letter format" with the aim of "add[ing] to our understanding of the impact of technology on contemporary human relationships and on the cultural definition of romantic love" (xiii). The book's first chapter "The Stuff of Love" sets the foundation for her argument. She defines a love letter as being a written expression which is "exchanged with someone else" to express "romantic love, intimacy, affection, or sexual interest" (6). Janning also argues that a study of love letters necessitates an understanding of culture, which she characterizes as "dynamic, produced by people in their everyday lives both individually and collectively" (14). While defining terms is the expected beginning of any argument, Janning does so in an accessible, almost conversational way. Given the intended audience of undergraduate students, this way of writing makes the first chapter an excellent model for students who are writing a case study and who might be unaware of how to get started.

Janning's second chapter "The Digitization of Love" examines how "digital or paper format matters in people's love letter curatorial practices" and "how group inequalities and *privilege* (access to valuable resources that come about because of group membership) may shape these practices" (17). Janning shares some insightful findings about material and digital cultures from her survey of 373 respondents (24). For example, she observes that "people are more likely to save and revisit paper love letters than digital ones" but also that people do not frequently revisit old love letters (25). The results of her study and its significance are clearly laid out in a readable way and is something which—like her defining terms—could serve as model for students who are doing their own case studies. Another aspect of the chapter which

students and professors may find useful is that Janning uses the concept of privilege in a practical context and as applied to a specific situation, which demonstrates how privilege might be used differently by sociologists and anthropologists as opposed to a layperson or media outlet.

The third chapter “Space Matters” addresses the practical aspects of where people store their love letters. While this chapter seems at first glance to be deceptively simple, Janning successfully convinces readers that the matter of space is not entirely simple. Something which students and scholars will likely appreciate about this chapter is that Janning addresses gender differences in how love letters are stored and how often they are visited, and some of her findings may surprise. For example, Janning notes that while women are more likely to save love letters and mementos for previous relationships, men are actually more likely to revisit their saved love letters (44). Janning’s look at gender in this chapter has the potential to be very useful to sociology and anthropology professors, in particular, because she discusses gender differences as applied to a rather nonpolarizing topic. Her fourth chapter “Time Matters” looks at another demographical factor, namely age. Janning examines whether the age of the individual matters when it comes to saving love letters and draws the conclusion that it does not (54). However, there is some difference in how age demographics revisit certain materials, with younger people being more likely to revisit digital materials, while older individuals favor revisiting paper letters (55). Something which instructors who are assigning this book may find useful about chapters three and four is the ways in which they clearly share findings of Janning’s survey among demographics. The chapters model best practices in doing case studies and are something which undergraduate students would find helpful as models.

The final chapter “Love Letters as Both Individual and Collective” is the real gem of this book. Janning examines how the individual and society influence love letters and their curation. She proposes a new framework, which “defines the fears surrounding the digitization of love letters, with the central fear defined as losing cultural values associated with contemporary Western conceptions of romantic love” (72). Janning’s proposed framework contains five components: personalization, pace, preservation, privacy, and place (74). She asks that readers think about these five components as “indicators of life in general” and ultimately connects these fears to our culture (84). The book concludes with a kind of reiteration of its overall premise and that of the Routledge series as whole; here is an everyday object, readily dismissed, but an artifact worthy of serious study and one through which we might better understand ourselves, others, and the world around us.

This book has many potential uses inside the classroom for inspiring conversations about material and digital cultures. Something which Janning emphasizes are the “curatorial practices” of love letters, which encompasses “how and where people save, store, re-read, organize, display, and perhaps choose to throw away” the letters (13). Most undergraduate students are active on social media, where they daily curate their feeds to show the content that most resonates with them. Janning’s book would be a good avenue for having conversations with students about how artifacts are “curated” and how the nature of this curation changes with technology. The prevalence of generative AI, which was not as readily accessible when *Love Letters* was written, might also provide additional considerations for students to think critically about. Students might be asked to consider, for example, if the usage of generative AI might impact the value that individuals assign to the love letter.

For someone who is not an undergraduate student, Janning's book reads a bit repetitively at times. I suspect that some of the repetition might have been intended for the benefit of the presumed undergraduate audience, who often approach scholarly texts with a significant degree of trepidation and might require more signposting to follow her study. Because the book is written for an undergraduate audience, however, *Love Letters* would make a fantastic example to assign anthropology or sociology students who are working on senior theses; the book is structured well and includes all the components of a case study nicely and clearly laid out. Janning also describes the limitations of her study and is generous in her suggestions for further research (90-91), so another assignment for students could be to choose one of those suggested directions and further the existing research done by Janning. Implementing *Love Letters* into the classroom in this way would provide students with the experience of building an argument based on credible support.

Even as someone who was not part of the intended audience, Janning's book was interesting and inspired a lot of thought about how cultural expectations shape our understanding of love, and many of her findings were interesting and sometimes unexpected. Janning also has a rather compelling—sometimes even self-deprecating—voice as a writer, which makes the book a really enjoyable read. When I ask my literature students at the end of each semester what they wish we had read more in class, they often say *romance novels*, and as I read Janning's book, I did have a lot of thoughts about how her research could find a place in my classroom. Based on my own experiences as an English professor, I think students would really enjoy reading Janning's work and be inspired by it. For scholars who are interested in expressions of love in the digital age or professors who are looking for an accessible and relatable study for course adoption, Michelle Janning's *Love Letters* is an excellent choice.