



A Tribute to Nancy Abelmann

Society for Urban/National/Transnational/Global Anthropology
Ellen Moodie (U of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Nancy Abelmann (April 24, 1959-January 6, 2016)

How to write of our beloved friend Nancy? She probably would have been delighted with a haiku, nothing more. Though she was a world-renowned scholar of Korea and Korea America, with a named chair at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), she eschewed fancy titles and accolade-heavy introductions. In her emails, and postcards and letters handwritten with a deep scratchy slant, she often signed her name "nancy," lower-case n, or just "me."

Ken Wissoker of [Duke U Press](#), which published *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problem of Segregation* (2004), offers us the consummate image of Nancy, unpretentious and intense: "I can't count the times I saw her sitting on the floor in a hotel or airport with a younger scholar giving them advice on their writing or their CV."

As president of SUNTA from 2012 to 2014, Nancy skipped tradition and invited board members to break bread together, holding the annual meeting over dinner to talk about the business of budgets, panels, and prizes. Nancy's link to SUNTA formally began in 2004, when *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk, and Class in Contemporary South Korea* (U of Hawai'i Press, 2003) won the Anthony Leeds Prize in Urban Anthropology. Her first book *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (with John Lie) (Harvard U Press, 1995), in its attention to transnationalism in a local, urban racial frame, epitomizes SUNTA's engagement with cultural formations of urban areas, nation-states, and transnational and global processes.

Nancy arrived in Urbana in 1990, after completing her Ph.D. at the U of California, Berkeley. There she studied with Nelson Graburn, who [writes lovingly](#) of Nancy as a brilliant scholar, and, "more than any other graduate student, a teacher."* Her dissertation was an ethnographic study of the Koch'ang Tenant Farmers' Movement in South Korea, published as *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (U of California Press, 1996). Members of her graduate-school cohort echo Graburn's view. Linda-Anne Rebhun of the University of California-Merced posted in a moving tribute, "Nancy and I were in the same entering class She was so friendly and so frighteningly brilliant, but seemed unaware of that, so she came across as humble. She loved her tiny apartment in Berkeley, but had no idea how to keep house, she was quirky that way."

At UIUC Nancy eventually became the Harry E. Preble Professor of Anthropology and East Asian Languages and Cultures, with appointments in Asian American Studies, the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, and Gender and Women's Studies. In 2003 she co-founded the Ethnography of the U Initiative (EUI), in which the university as an institution became a sustained research focus for students. The project has been adapted across the country. In 2009, she took on the position of Associate Vice Chancellor for Research – Humanities, Arts, and Related Fields, through which she worked intensively with faculty members to write winning grant and book proposals. As she once wrote of herself, "I love to edit (myself and everyone else). I sort of feel like 'hidden in every sentence is a better sentence' and the challenge is to unearth that better sentence. I can do it for hours...."

Stories of Nancy's generosity overflowed after her death. Radhika Govindrajan, a recent post-doctoral scholar at UIUC now at the U of Washington-Seattle, writes, "I'll never forget the night she called me at 10 pm, bursting with excitement because she had just seen *Aningaag*, a short Gravity spin-off that reminded her of my work on sacrifice. She asked me to call her back after I had seen the film so we could talk about it. I know she touched so many people's lives in this intense and personal way."

One former student, Charse Yun, describes that intensity vividly: "What brilliant, well-respected scholar would continue to keep in contact with a former grad student who dropped out of the program? I left UIUC in 2002 with a terminal master's degree and thought that was the end of my academic career, but nancy not only continued to correspond via emails (and even offered me a job!), but later, after I moved to Seoul, would look me up when she visited. What brilliant woman would gossip in conspiratorial whispers, her voice rising to a high-pitched giggle, straighten up, try to purse her lips in a stifled smile, continue to relate some funny story and then burst out laughing, bending forward, shoulders shaking? ... "

Jiyeon Kang worked as Nancy's research assistant in Seoul and is now a communications professor at the U of Iowa. She remembers "research meetings" in 2008 as "often strolling in the neighborhood or sitting on porch steps, taking about important and frivolous things, future plans, or (in my case) lack thereof. She was so unpretentious and caring. ... Maybe what made her so extraordinary and fully human is that she was always curious, compassionate, and a bit worried how she's doing as a scholar, teacher, family member, and person. Nancy taught me that academia is not a lonely place where I need to hide my weakness. She showed me that I can be truly human yet belong to a community of wisdom and support."

Near the end of her life, Nancy, survived by her husband, Andrew Gewirth, twin daughters, Carmen and Simone, and son, Isaac, exchanged innumerable haikus with her global circle of friends. As she explained in a public journal entry, "I invite you to dabble ... they won't take much time and will save you from having to touch on the sad or sentimental." She then embraced them all with a few simple syllables: "You are my people/You are near and far/You keep me happy."

*This quote, and all that follow, was posted on Nancy Abelmann's [Facebook](#) page after January 6, 2016. Used with permission.

Andrew Newman is Contributing Editor for SUNTA's AN column.

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