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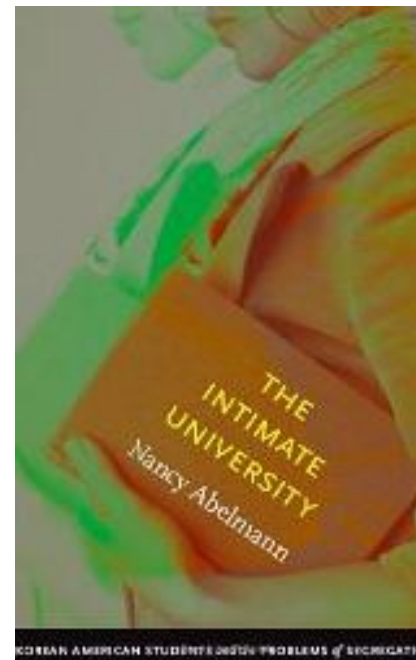
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Abelmann, Nancy (2009). *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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Reviewed by Boh Young Lee  
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*The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* is a book that offers powerful stories shared by over fifty Korean American undergraduates in public higher education in Illinois from 1994 to 2000, a handful of students since 2000, and even family members of some of the students. From the beginning, as indicated by the rationales, purposes, and methodology of her research, the author authenticates that her book shares reality- and experienced-based stories by sharing second-generation students' liberal college dreams and the challenges (the class and racial limits) to those dreams that they experienced at the U of I.



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Chapter One describes the social/ethnic geography of Korean America in order to explain the immigration and settlement patterns of Korean American in Chicagoland based on what four Korean American students shared. Interestingly, the four students counted themselves as i) an inhabitant of the U of I Korean American mainstream (being there); ii) a person moving from the city to the suburb, not in the mainstream (moving in); iii) a city Korean American who could look in at the suburbs (looking in); and iv) a FOB for having arrived in the U.S. as a high school student, which shows that even in the Korean society grouping exists, based on the length of their immigration history, neighborhood of residence, language ability (Korean and English), or even religion (Christian vs. non-Christian).



Nancy Abelmann (Ph.D. Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1990) is a professor of Asian American Studies, Anthropology, East Asian languages and Cultures, and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. As an anthropologist, her areas of expertise include the Koreas and Asian America. Her research interests are transnationalism, class, education, mental health, families, and gender.

In Chapter Two, the author shows why she took the religion seriously in order to explore Korean Americans' own ethnic intimacy as well as their racialized images by focusing on how the religion, Christianity, especially AAC, challenges families and University, between Korean Americans and their parents and between students' liberal college dreams and its reality respectively.

Chapter Three introduces Mary's stories, sharing her liberal dreams and stressing her struggles with and divergence from the Korean American mainstream because of their segregation of themselves from others.

In Chapter Four, the author introduces Owen's disappointment with the U of I as well as his struggles with understanding the contingencies of his birth: his family's Catholicism and his Korean ethnicity. In contrast to Chapter Three, Mary's stories, the author points out the difference between Mary's and Owen's stories, stressing that Owen is a largely successful example of liberal human development in college.

Chapter Five focuses on sharing the stories of John, Owen's older brother, and Tony, Owen's paternal cousin, which are quite different from Owen's. These two students challenge the liberal college ideal by positioning their ethnic family differently against the university as the immigration-generation men. The author shows how their identities are changed and shaped, what they thought of their family as immigrants, how they categorized Korean immigrants differently, and what they thought of the gap between the university's claims and its reality such as anti-Asian American racism at the U of I.

In Chapter Six, the author explains why she pulled Uncle Mark and Mr. Han into the project even though they are not students at the U of I but the family members of some of students that the author interviewed. She shows their immigrant male adulthood influenced the different college paths of the second generation. In addition, she brings personal education, employment, and immigrant history, including brief Korean history, into the discussion of the phenomena that appeared in the immigrant family so that the stories become alive, down to earth, by showing how the personal histories were affronts to Mr. Han's very person. Interestingly, some parts of the stories that Mr. Han shared might be based on not just the personal experiences but also on the social contexts of Korea at that time. However, by not adding resources to explain Korean culture, such as the importance of birth-order (different responsibilities or opportunities) and the expectations of gender in family, readers may lose an opportunity to understand Mr. Han's stories better by exploring social contexts in which Mr. Han got involved.

In Chapter Seven, at first the author summarized several stories that male participants shared in the preceding chapters in order to support her justification for suddenly focusing on immigrant women whose lives are different from the women that the author introduced in the first half of the book: how the meaning of "family" worked differently for immigrants and second-generation men and women. The women in this chapter were pretty successful in their careers. However, these women described their isolation in the family as well as in the society in the U.S., as women, wives, immigrants, and Asians, struggling to find their voices, facing difficulties in pursuing their dream and ignoring dominant discourses, and regretting their choices by following social norms in both Korean and the U.S.: "I am between South Korea and America" (p. 150). Interestingly, the author provided two different in-depth interpretations based on the interview data, which helps readers to look at the data using different approaches and to gain better an understanding of what the author is trying to say.

Throughout this book, readers may see its strengths. First, readers can often find notes that support the author's interpretations or opinions, which helps readers to

understand the given information better, especially since those notes are placed at the end of the book arranged as numbered lists, divided by chapters, so that readers can easily find where the detailed information is. Second, readers can often find the author's own voice, stating her perspectives from her position as an interviewer for self-critiques or self-assessment, taking interviewee's comments to support her views of realities at Universities, and sharing her hesitance to bring up sensitive matters that might make Owen's family vulnerable to ethnic stereotypes. Third, by quoting Korean words in English, as pronounced by the interviewee, not only does the author increase the credibility of the contents of the book, she also shows her culturally sensitive interpretations. Fourth, the author covers various voices, from the Korean history that the first generation experienced to the current situation that the second generation faces, which shows this book tells even hidden stories that illustrate what Korean Americans have to overcome.

On the other hand, there are some things missing from this book. First, even though it is a virtue of this book that the author quotes Korean words in English directly, I found some Korean words interpreted incorrectly (e.g., ambitious [*hohwang*] life, p. 76) or stated without any further explanation about the contexts of the words (e.g., the Park Chung Hee regime, p. 152). Second, the author sometimes did not provide detailed information or explain things clearly. For example, when she was not sure what a student's point was in bringing up an issue, she did not ask the student to elaborate what he was trying to tell her. Rather, she guessed it by stating, "I am not sure if..., but..." I wish the author could have asked those students or members of the family more questions to let them have opportunities to tell stories explicitly so that the readers could have clear ideas about their stories. In addition, in Chapter Three, Mary referred her younger brother as "more white" by explaining how his gender had allowed him to be like that. However, the author did not ask Mary to be explicit about why she thought of his selfishness and other unflattering traits as "white." Additionally, the author states that she did not choose the students in the chapters to represent general Korean American college students. Rather, she explains she interviewed people who feel they are excluded and wanted to show why they felt that way. However, she did not let people inside of the

Korean American mainstream cultural circle have an opportunity to explain why their social circle is not racially diverse, as Mary stated, or what they think of people who feel they are left out. Given that, Mary's stories may give readers more biased ideas or strengthen their racial stereotypes. Third, the title of this book is *The intimate University: Korean American students and the problems of segregation*. From Chapter One to Chapter Three, yes, the author talked about race and college based on personal college students' stories. In the conclusion, she returns to the questions to think about segregation in the American university today. However, she argues in the rest of the book about the pivotal role that family plays in shaping family members' lives, devoting more than half of the book to that topic. Thus, readers may feel that this title might represent only partially the whole contents of the book, and it may need to include "family and gender" as well.

Overall, this book presents interesting, cohesive, but somewhat personalized stories for people interested in different voices to increase their cultural awareness and willing to build on their pre-owned cultural knowledge. By focusing on exploring the reality that immigrants (first- and second-generation) face and their personal histories, the author shows the particularities of race, family, and community can have an enormous impact on the lives of immigrants.

### About the Reviewer

Boh Young Lee is a Ph.D. student at the University of Georgia in Child and Family Development. Her research interests include early literacy development, early childhood education, diversity issues in education, and teacher education.

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