

7-1-2013

"I'm afraid [of] my future.": Secrecy, Biopower, and Korean High School Girls

Noelle Easterday

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“I’M AFRAID [OF] MY FUTURE.”: SECRECY, BIOPOWER, AND KOREAN HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Anthropology

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July, 2013

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wonderful Korean students and homestay family. 삼촌, 언니, 민영, 혜민, 현우, and “my kids”: your openness and generosity remain a testament to your courage and patience with the American English teacher in your midst. 감사합니다. I hope this piece serves to remind us all of the profound importance of cross-cultural exchange, safe spaces for conversation, and the dislodging of the teacher-student binary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Fulbright Commission in Korea and the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) Fellowship program for providing me the opportunity to explore Korea and teaching simultaneously. Executive Director Shim deserves special thanks for her commitment to ensuring quality ETA training and consummate support of the program's many English teachers placed across the peninsula. The Korea Fulbright office staff members also merit special thanks for all their hard work behind the scenes. For his foundational role in creating and directing Camp Fulbright and thereby facilitating seven wonderful chances for me to experiment in new teaching methods and content for English learners in Korea, I must acknowledge Vincent Flores. My fellow Korea ETAs comprised a network of young adults engaging in constructive reflection on our many roles and interventions as English teachers and cultural ambassadors. Margaret Mahoney and Lindsay Herron were especially instrumental in my development as an instructor and their dedication to caring for the well-being of their students still inspires me to "do better" by my former and current students across both continents.

Of course, my placement high schools' administrations, faculties, and staffs must be recognized for their generous accommodations during my three years of teaching in Korean secondary institutions. I thank my homestay family for taking me into their home and teaching me more about Korea than I could ever measure. I must also thank them for allowing me to sleep in on the weekends. I am indebted to the thousands of Korean teenagers I had the privilege of sharing even the briefest time with. Their courage and tenacity (in and outside the classroom) were only matched by their willingness to have honest conversations about what it means to be a Korean adolescent. Though most of my former students will never read this piece, I hope that it may serve to inform future ETAs and other English teachers in Korea of the challenges and pressures facing "their kids."

I am forever grateful to the University of New Mexico Department of Anthropology ethnology faculty for the rigorous graduate training I received after having been away from school for four years. Dr. Field and Dr. Brulotte guided me through my rediscovery of the discipline, while Dr. Debenport, Dr. Valencia, and Dr. Smith encouraged my experimentation as an academic and nascent theorist. I am also lucky to have worked with a great many talented colleagues in UNM's anthropology department, especially Maria del Pilar File-Muriel, Meghan O'Leary, and Geneva Smith. My graduate career in anthropology would not have been possible were it not for the abundance of mentorship and care given to undergraduates by the University of Notre Dame's Department of Anthropology faculty. In particular, I must thank Dr. Fuentes, Dr. Nordstrom, Dr. Mahmood, Dr. Gaffney, Dr. McKenna, and Dr. Mack for their investment in me as a budding anthropologist. I hope to one day emulate their service to the discipline in inspiring a new generation of wide-eyed young adults to stay curious about what it means to be human. My remarkable volunteer editors, Chris Chhim, Tyler Davis, Maria Mazzillo Mays, and Cassie Edlefsen Lasch, deserve accolades for the time they invested in helping me through the many stages of my project. Finally, I must acknowledge the unconditional support from my siblings and father, who did nothing but encourage me in my stint abroad and endured the inevitable and undoubtedly bottomless "thick description" of my time in Korea upon returning to the States.

**“I’m afraid [of] my future.”:
Secrecy, Biopower, and Korean High School Girls**

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the secrets revealed by Korean high school girls. Despite their struggles being known to the Korean public-at-large, the majority of these secrets express the students’ dismay at not meeting the high standards expected of teenage girls in successfully preparing for the future. In this case study, the public airing of the otherwise silenced acknowledgement of the authors’ perceived deficiencies and failures illuminates processes of biopower (the subject-based regulation and disciplining of bodies) embedded within the Korean nation-state building project. I explore how the Neo-Confucian principles of reverence, obedience, and self-cultivation work together with the neoliberal, post-industrial consumerist nation-state in rendering adolescent girls “docile and useful” (Foucault 1990[1976]). I aim to explicate the regulatory mechanisms and disciplinary pressures experienced daily by Korean teenage girls and argue that adolescent subjects in particular embody both the underpinnings and cost of the nation-state building project.

[Keywords: Korea, adolescence, secrecy, biopower, education, body image]

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Section 1: Teaching English in Korea *“I don’t speak English.”¹*

From 2006-2009, I taught English to Korean high school students under the Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) fellowship. The Fulbright teaching program in Korea² prides itself in country-specific teaching preparation and support for the year-long placements of its instructors in primary and secondary, public and private, co-ed and single-sex, urban and rural schools. The Fulbright Foundation’s cross-cultural mission statement - to promote peace through international scholarship and education - is incorporated as a major component in Fulbright ETA training; this involves designing lessons that not only provide useful practice to improve conversational English, but also touch upon topics of Korean and/or American society and experience. Having an anthropology background, I was especially attuned to this aspect of my curriculum planning and endeavored to incorporate the introduction of new information about the US and/or comparative discussion of the Korean or American experience in most of my lessons.

However, the development and implementation of lessons that covered both practical English usage and cross-cultural dialogue and comparison proved quite challenging given the logistical constraints of my job, as is the case with every Fulbright ETA position in Korea. The major limitation was simply the amount of time I had face-to-face with my students. My placement girls’ high school had six hundred sophomores divided into fifteen classes of forty, and I was assigned to teach each class once a week. These sessions were slotted for a mere fifty minutes, but after roll call and settling in, I was often left with only forty-five minutes to conduct

¹ See Appendix for images of select postcards.

² In line with the common usage by my Korean colleagues, I use “Korea” to denote contemporary South Korea and the nation-state that comprised the peninsula before the South’s split from the North. I use “North Korea” and “South Korea” when differentiating the politically distinct nation-states and historically-situated ideologically-constructed nationalisms. I argue for the term “nation-state” rather than “nation” or “state” below.

a lesson impressionable enough that they might remember some content a full seven days later. Sometimes school events and testing coincided with my class time with no way to make that time up. With the semester only sixteen weeks long, I had at most a little over thirteen hours with each class. One semester, conflicts in the schedule restricted my teaching in one particular classroom only eleven times.

The classroom itself too proved a challenging environment since forty students with their desks, books, and many other belongings crowded the space and limited the opportunities for more active learning. Most every Korean high school rotates teachers to each classroom every hour rather than students moving to new rooms during breaks. This results in the same forty students sitting in the same desks in the same homerooms throughout the academic year. High school sophomores, the age group I taught, often spend ten to twelve hours a day at school - the majority of that time is spent in their homerooms, including lunch and dinner. Consequently, one finds a great abundance of personal items stored throughout the classroom space, and in my experience these items included but were not limited to: books, school supplies, personal media players, musical instruments, easels, slippers, blankets, pillows, mirrors, lotions, brushes, makeup, nail clippers, toothbrushes and toothpaste, chopsticks and spoons, needles and thread, bandages, towels, gym clothes, jump ropes, badminton rackets and birdies, flashlights, brooms, mops, and even toilet paper.

Though frustratingly cramped for my preferences as an instructor, the item-littered room's contents frequently could be conveniently inserted into the lesson. Once, to the whole class' amusement, a student pulled out a bottle of Febreze after making a fart joke at the expense of her neighbor. Another time, I introduced the idiom, "You hit the nail on the head," when I walked into the classroom and found a student quite vigorously "fixing" her desk with a

hammer. When asked what she was doing, she replied that her desk leg had been bent during a particularly competitive round of badminton. Knowing full well by then that badminton, just like studying, sleeping, and eating, was a perfectly normal activity performed in the homeroom, I asked why *she* was fixing it. She stared at me confusedly for a moment, then said that it was *her* desk. I asked where she had gotten the hammer, expecting her to name the groundskeeper or technology assistant so that I knew to whom she had to return it. But, she wrinkled her forehead and replied it was her father's, but it "lives at school" because he never used it at home. That she treated her homeroom desk with similar possessive authority and stewardship that her parents would their home did not seem odd in the least to anyone in the room save me. Every time I taught a class, I entered their "home"/room. Partner and group work as well as games and competitions within this space, then, had to be carefully planned and executed to prevent anyone from getting hurt or upset that their personal items needed to be moved seemingly out of its "place."

As a *woneomin* (원어민, "native speaker"), I was expected to provide a fun and casual atmosphere for my classes in order to elicit increased participation and confidence in communicating in a foreign language. My job description contrasted sharply with the school's regular English courses taught by Korean teachers significantly since those were designed to impart the content found on yearly standardized exams leading up to the College Scholastic Ability Test also known as *suneung* (수능) or KSAT, in the students' senior year. Indeed, an entire forty-five question section of the exam is dedicated to English, equaling the length of the other two largest sections: Korean and math. Instead of focusing on the pragmatic application of communicating in a foreign language, regular English classes were usually taught mostly (sometimes solely) in Korean and consisted of diagramming sentences, dissected paragraphs, and

completing mathematical-like equations in textbooks. Students rarely spoke aloud during these courses except to answer when called upon, and, as was the case in my school, the more advanced students among the forty were more likely to be asked to contribute. Of course, I cannot speak for the whole of the Korean secondary education system, but it is noteworthy that those of my colleagues who I asked told me, without exception, they observed the same dynamics in regular English classes at their own placements.

Thus, I was given the task of taking the drudgery out of practicing a subject that was the cause of much anxiety as the *suneung* drew nearer. Part of this, my school assumed, was immediately achieved from the sheer novelty of my Americanness and the fact that I spoke little Korean so I *had* to conduct my lessons in English. My school wanted me to “have fun,” “teach students how Americans really talk,” “help them interact with a foreigner,” and “talk about America.” I was given free reign regarding my curriculum (no textbooks or unit guides were advised) and my students received no official grades from my course. Each group of forty students comprised the full range of English language abilities from near native fluency to basic English vocabulary laminated onto Korean grammatical structures - this after at least three years of state-mandated English courses through middle school.

Though I appreciated my school’s strong support and confidence in my curriculum design, I certainly felt as though I were being pulled in opposite directions in terms of what I could offer “my kids,” as I often referred to the hundreds of young ladies who granted me the sincerest support, and honest teaching evaluations, of all. I struggled to resolve my plans for meaningful cross-cultural content embedded in useful and enjoyable activities within the logistical constraints of the high school environment. Navigating between entertainer-teacher and official American representative-teacher was challenging. While I understood the need for games

and other light-hearted activities, and indeed I often incorporated these opportunities to practice and refine conversational English into each lesson, I also immediately recognized my students' interest in engaging in a two-way dialogue that would supersede or perhaps bypass the traditional Korean teacher-student relationship.

I was, of course, a very “different” kind of teacher. The school administration treated me as a temporary guest to Korea and offered my presence up to the community as proof of their to commitment to providing their students with a more comprehensive education in English. An example of the former was the seemingly faculty-wide concern about whether the school-provided lunch was too spicy for my American palate, even after a full season of enjoying my meals in their company. That I was asked to simply stand onstage alongside the vice-principal and heads of the departments during an hour-long presentation to parents regarding the quality of their children's education while never being addressed directly nor given a translation of what the vice-principal said about me demonstrated the latter. I was twenty-three, American, and clearly a source of educational and social capital for my native-speaking Englishness, but not necessarily because of my individual contributions to “my kids.” For the school administration and faculty, any “native speaker” teacher of the same demographic could be slotted to entertain students and create enjoyment of English while also providing them interactions with a foreigner and hopefully an occasional American perspective to boot. And while I certainly wanted and worked diligently to prove a good investment to the school that so generously and patiently facilitated my Fulbright ETA fellowship, what mattered to me most was “my kids” formative educational experiences given the unique circumstances of our short time together.

I took my role extremely seriously and intuited that my students took the “difference” in our teacher-student relationship seriously as well in that it afforded them a chance at frank

conversation (as I will discuss further below). This was especially evident in the liminal moments before and after official class time when students were less likely to care if their English was grammatically correct and more likely to ask and discuss what America was really like and throw in deeply personal questions that they probably would never have asked a Korean teacher. “Teacher, Gossip Girl school, is it real? So many beautiful girls and fashions.” “In USA, do students play games everyday?” “I want to go to America because in Korea I never sleep.” “Noelle Teacher, isn’t Korean job difficult for you?” “Noelle Teacher, you go to the world, so you never marry?” “Teacher! You are free! When you go back to your home take me with you!”

Sensing their desire to engage in a larger, or perhaps deeper, conversation, I resolved to somehow incorporate platforms for honest and open dialogue (to the extent that the students were willing to share and participate) into my lesson designs. The five minutes before and after class were not enough to give all my students the chance to approach me, the “different” teacher, with their questions and comments, so I endeavored to somehow facilitate these conversations within the class period’s cross-cultural content and English-improving activities. This type of comprehensively layered lesson design proved quite elusive at first, and I felt the typical guilt and defeat of a well-intentioned yet inexperienced educator. Then I was introduced to the secret postcards project.³

³ Teaching in Korea as part of the Fulbright ETA network demonstrated time and time again that the best ideas are inspired by colleagues’ own experimental pedagogy. I owe a major debt of gratitude to the many women and men who so fearlessly shared their failures and successes in the classroom with me. I especially must thank Stephanie Dodson whose presentation at the Fulbright ETA conference in Jeju, Korea in the spring of 2007 inspired me to adapt her project for my own placement classes. Stephanie’s presentation introduced and detailed the secret postcard project idea that had enjoyed much popularity in her school; it combined cross-cultural content, open and honest student conversation, and English improvement in effective and meaningful ways. Never had her students been so excited to participate in an English-based project before, she said. Shortly thereafter, I designed a similar lesson for my classes over the course of two years.

Section 2: The Secret Postcard Project

“I hate talking my secrets.”

The project was based on the *PostSecret.com* website concept created by Frank Warren that posts anonymously submitted secrets written on artistic postcards in its weekly blog. The website has a huge international following (as of February 11, 2013 it has logged nearly 590 million site visits) and attributes its success to its overarching mission: to learn about oneself through the confessions of others and to feel community through the mutual sharing of seemingly shameful admissions. The blog’s mission is rooted in the assumption that reading into other people’s secret lives via freely-shared confessions by *PostSecret* participants is more than the sanctioned indulgence of voyeuristic curiosity. Indeed, while the site has published five bestselling books (compendiums of secrets organized according to themes), the project’s reach extends beyond the consumption of text - as evidenced by the sold out tour events in which audience members are invited to publicly share their secrets at the open microphone. The website itself has a dedicated “*PostSecret Chat*” forum where users can discuss secrets as well as track follow up stories to popular and provocative posts (such as admissions of love or suicidal thoughts). Perhaps most indicative of the community building and supportive spirit of the project is the letter posted at the bottom of the webpage, which details a young woman’s struggle with deep depression, how she found the number for a crisis hotline printed in a *PostSecret* book, and how calling that number saved her life. She wrote, “Thank you for the book, thank Hopeline for being there, and thank the people that send in their postcards so that others know they are not alone with their secrets.” (PostSecret.com 2013) Though the postcards change weekly and there is no digital archive to access past posts, the website permanently lists contact information for this crisis hotline.

My English as a Foreign Language (EFL) adaptation of this website concept focused on the group analysis and individual creation of secret postcards both within and outside of the classroom. The lesson plan introduced the concept, showed multiple examples of secrets that had been posted, and asked the students to analyze the content of each postcard they were assigned to. I selected a wide spectrum of postcards that I felt could be easily understood by my students given their visual cues as well as the simple English structure of the written secrets. Wanting to demonstrate the breadth of types of secrets that were revealed as well as diversity in styles in the composition, I included the following in the guided practice portion of the lesson:

“My parents don’t know that I know that they wanted a son.”
“I’m in love with my best friend”
“I feel like I’m always hiding behind a mask.”
“I lost everything and it set me free.”
“Sometimes I have dreams that toilets are eating my bum. I’m terribly afraid of them.”
“I think life is easier for men.”
“One of these men is the father. He pays me a lot to keep it a secret.”
“I adore my son, but sometimes...”

After modeling and discussing these secrets and their possible meanings as a class, I split the students into groups and gave each a different postcard to do the same on their own. They were instructed to imagine who the author was, why he/she had needed to keep the secret, what the secret might illuminate about the author’s life more broadly (such as specific or general demographics), and what might happen were the secret to be revealed without the anonymity afforded by the website. Groups each received one or more of the following:

“I would much rather be fat than be dead.”
“I have no idea where my life is going to lead me.”
“I am not a religious person. But I envy people that are.”
“My mental image of God looks like this woman.”
“I’m in love with the girl holding this.”
“I wasted my wishes on you.”
“I was going to tell you, but then you left.”
“I want it to rain the day I get married.”
“I’m really a loner.”
“I don’t care about recycling, but I pretend I do.”
“I ~~hate~~ forgive you.”
“People who live in the United States and don’t bother to learn English make me sick.”
“Everyone who knew me before 9/11 believes I’m dead.”

“I hate loving families...because I don’t have one.”
“I stole change from my roommate to buy a slice of pizza.”
“I’m afraid of the future.”
“College is killing me.”
“My mom killed my dad long before he killed himself.”
“I sit in public and pretend to read, but I’m actually eavesdropping on your conversation.”
“I hate working as a janitor for arrogant rich people, so I clean their keyboards with the toilet brush.”
“All I want is for you to be honest with me. And happy. I could never be disappointed in you. So don’t be afraid.”⁴

The lesson benefited from the concise and grammatically straightforward style of the secrets’ wording. Yet, the engaging way in which the prose hinted at the mysterious context of the authors’ realities focused their attentions away from the sole use of English that I demanded during all my lessons. Students who had previously remained largely silent, seemingly from fear of revealing their low level of English speaking abilities, animatedly, albeit haltingly, called upon their register corpus of known vocabulary to explain the story they believed to be true. The classroom clamored with thoughtful suppositions. I was thrilled.

Their homework was to create a postcard of their own and the five rules they had to follow were: (1) every secret must be true, (2) it must be a secret the student had told no one, (3) it must include a visual component, (4) it must be in English, and (5) it must be anonymous. Introducing, creating, and engaging in a form of our own secret exchange provided a creative mechanism through which I could elicit participation from every one of my students. Students with lower levels of English were given time outside of class to complete the assignment and everyone could carefully select what words they would to convey it along with its visual component. Each of the two semesters I conducted this lesson, I collected hundreds of postcards, unsure what they might tell me.

⁴ I include the entirety of my lesson prompts here so that the reader may see how the students might or might not have emulated the examples in the postcards they submitted. It is my estimation that some of the prompts’ content resonated more with my students, which resulted in some of my students’ submissions looking quite similar to the examples provided. This, however, does not negate the significance of their choices in what secrets to submit since some students created postcards with completely different content than the examples from the lesson.

Collecting 307 secret postcards over the course of two academic years from a pool of twelve hundred students may seem a quite low turnout. However, given that this was an optional homework assignment to be anonymously submitted a full week after the lesson itself in a class with no official grading system, an approximate twenty-five percent participation rate was enough for me, the teacher, to consider the project a relative success. While I was happy with the quantity of participation, the quality of the postcards in both use of English and visual components demonstrated the participating students' commitment to investing in their anonymous contributions.

Reading through them the first time, I debated what I would do with the secret postcards. The original plan was to put them up on a tack board in a major hallway and rotate the secrets on display weekly.⁵ Yet, this became impossible due to the school administration's decision to use that space to post sophomore-specific testing tips and study guides. I had also planned to setup a drop box where students could anonymously submit secrets on a continuing basis, but the elimination of equal student access to reading the postcards meant the ongoing project was cropped down to the lesson-homework pairing. It also meant that I was the sole keeper of my students' secrets in both their semiotic and material articulations. Students vocalized their disappointment that they could not see the other postcards, but did not demand a viewing. Instead, many asked if I had read all of them, and when I responded that I had, some students commented during class that they wanted to identify their postcards to me. Wanting to maintain anonymity as a whole, I reminded the students that I did not want to know who created specific postcards, but if anyone wanted to talk to me privately, they could certainly do so if they could

⁵ Indeed, I told my students that voluntarily participating in the project meant that they were giving me permission to show their secrets to other students, teachers, administrators, and my American family, friends, and colleagues. I defined "voluntary" in both English and Korean and in order to demonstrate their consent, I had them repeat back to me who might see their secret postcards.

find some time in their busy schedules. I also offered a letter writing option for those who were too booked to visit me from nine to five - which every student was outside of lunchtime or extracurricular activity time. No one made an individual appointment with me, and I did not receive any letters regarding the secrets project in particular.

Thus, I never had formal conversations with “my kids” about their specific secrets. I did, however, have many informal conversations with them throughout my time in Korea and even after I returned to the U.S. Indeed, in order to better situate the postcards within the salient and predominant memories of female adolescence in Korea, I contacted many of my former students⁶ and asked them to reflect on their high school years. Specifically, I asked:

- 1) What pressures did you face as a high school student?
- 2) What do you feel your responsibilities were as a high school student?
- 3) What were you most worried about as a high school student?
- 4) Who did you talk to about your feelings/thoughts? Your family? Friends? Teachers?
- 5) What options of support did you have to help you through these pressures?

I then went on to ask more detailed follow-up questions to their replies, and I have included many of their responses to complement the data analysis below. Reexamining the postcards now, six years later, I have no way of attributing specific secrets to particular teenagers like I might have been able to while teaching them. This, then, precludes the individualized ethnographic contextualization of each postcard writer to her secret. However, these contemporary reflections on their high school years combined with the breakdown in numbers of postcards by category can serve to illuminate more generalized trends in the secrets they chose to share. The postcards vary in content, but can be loosely grouped into categories according to themes - which I have taken the liberty of subjectively determining based on my own sense of “going together-ness” [see Figure 1].

⁶ I am lucky to remain connected to my former students through Facebook and contacted them individually through private message in order to ask these questions.

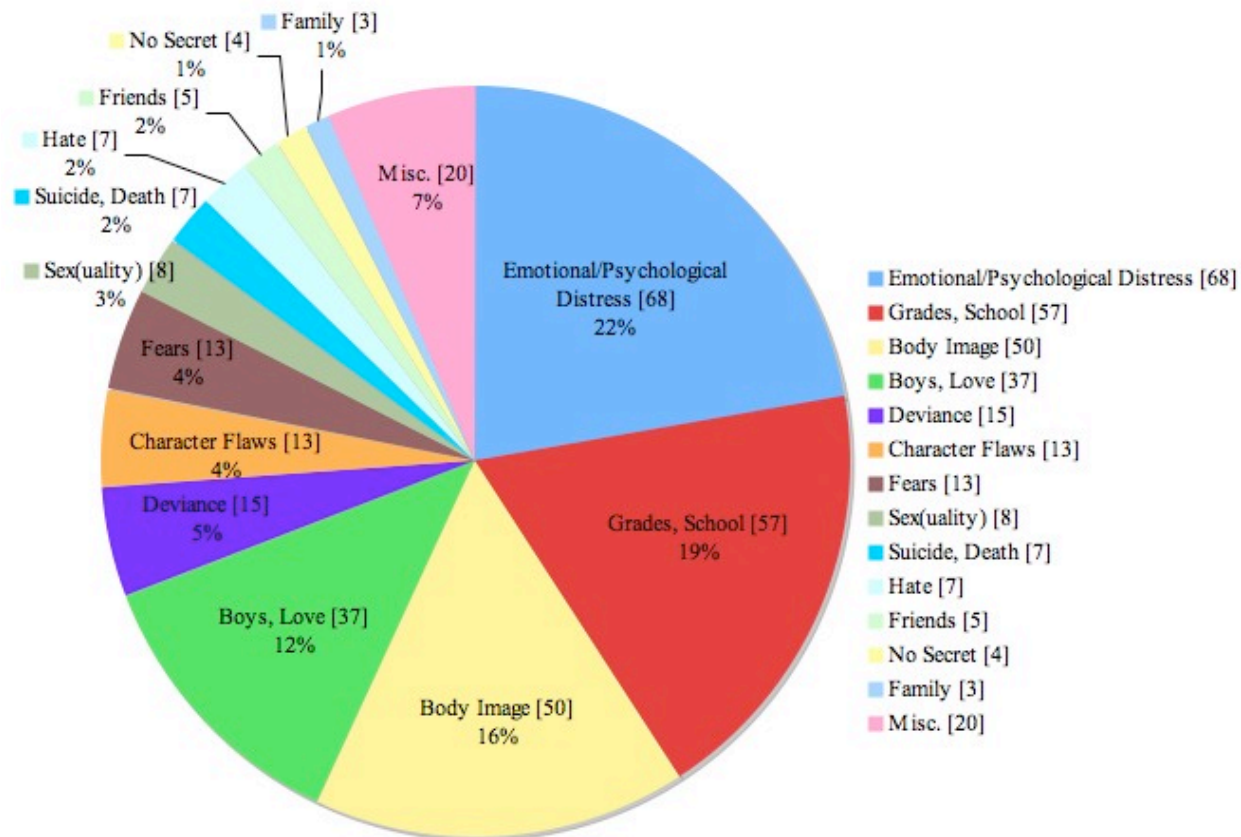


Figure 1 - Secret Postcard Data: “Theme [# submitted]”

Examples within each category include:

Emotional/Psychological Distress [68]:

- “I want to know how can I write next page of my life!”*
- “I’m soo sad, but I’m don’t cry.”*
- “It’s difficult for me to catch up with the time!!”*
- “I want to leave...wherever...”*

Grades, School [57]:

- “I want to get more improve grade in my exam.”*
- “I know that I study hard because I’m a high school student. However, my mind doesn’t make me studying. How to make my mind to study.”*

Body Image [50]:

- “I want more and more beautiful, but....”*
- “I have black skin...so sad.”*
- “I hate my face!!”*

Boys, Love [37]:

- “He might be my ‘boy-friend’ but he is not my boyfriend.”*
- “As usual...I run into impossibility love.”*

Deviance [15]:

- “I have several watches, and some were bought without my mom’s permission.”*
- “I went out, but my mother doesn’t know.”*

Character Flaws [13]:

"I am not generous."

Fears [13]:

"I see everything is ghost at night."

Sex(uality) [8]:

"I am bisexuality."

Suicide, Death [7]:

"I want to die."

"Sometimes, I think death is the most comfortable thing in the world."

Hate [7]:

"I hate my father. Sometimes, I want to kill him..."

Friends [5]:

"I think I don't have a best friend who I talk my secrets."

No Secret [4]:

"Hahaha! I have no secret!!"

Family [3]:

"They don't love me (mom, dad, my sister)."

Misc. [20]:

"Sometimes I feel I am losing the mind of a child."

This paper focuses its analysis particularly on the three categories with the highest numbers of postcards: "Emotional/Psychological Distress," "Grades, school," and "Body Image". Together, they represent over half of the secrets revealed by my students. I am particularly interested in why these themes constitute the majority of secrets submitted for the class project when my students were free to choose to reveal whatever they wanted. How does the overrepresentation of these specific categories of concealed information offer insight into processes of subject-making as experienced by the Korean female adolescent population? What are my students revealing alongside their individual secrets? What follows is the unpacking of my students' collective narrative of what teenage girls in contemporary Korea feel compelled to hide and why.

Section 3: The Power of Secrecy and the Logic of the Public/Private Distinction

"I think I don't have a best friend who I talk my secrets."

In order to analyze the contents of the postcards submitted by my students, the term "secret" must be defined and contextualized in accordance to this dataset. In his 1906 article, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," Georg Simmel claims secrecy and

concealment are integral to social relationships to the degree that “every human relationship has, as one of its traits, [a] degree of secrecy within or around it” (466). Yet, he also warns against the “logically fallacious, but typical, error, that everything secret is something essential and significant” (ibid.:465). In making both of these claims, Simmel draws a distinction between the information itself and the *act* of withholding information, which, he privileges as inherent to human sociality. “Secrecy,” he writes, does no less than “[confer] power to modify fortunes” (ibid.:466). Of course, many secrets contain knowledge that is quite significant to individuals, communities, and imagined communities⁷, but the most crucial feature of secrecy is the act of withholding because social work is done according to why and how the actor chooses to keep or divulge that secret. The secret holder is ultimately in control of revealing it (or part of it) to others or continuing its concealment, and this is the source location of secrecy’s power as practice (ibid.:466). T.M. Luhmann (1989) expands upon the social act of concealment, claiming it creates property because it can be possessed and, therefore, by its very existence creates a category of nonpossessor. Thus, secrecy, to Luhmann “is about control” (161). This dichotomous relationship to secret-as-property, she argues, dialectically informs each side’s “attitude” toward the concealed information. Not only does secrecy as a dialectical process alter the secret’s social value and meaning, but Joseph Masco (2002) claims it “is also wildly productive: it creates not only hierarchies of power and repression, but also unpredictable social effects” (451). In reading these three theorists together, secrecy can be viewed as a social act embedded within and (re)producing unequal power relations.

The delineation of secrecy’s true power - that it rests in conditions of concealment rather than just content - is rendered visible by the vast majority of postcards submitted for my class

⁷ Some examples: the restricted circulation of information pertaining to nuclear technology (Masco 2002), indigenous language (Debenport 2010), and entertainment magic performance know-how (Jones 2011).

project. The greater part of the dataset contains messages about the author's life that constitute information accessible to anyone. It is this trend in expressing known content versus the expected conferred possession of unknown that demonstrates secrecy's function as a social act. What I mean to say is, instead of the postcard's content itself being property, I posit the *expression* of that information, even though the information is not calculatedly withheld from anyone, is what defines the nature of its secrecy in this case. What makes this expression of known information meaningful as a social act is that it makes public the otherwise strictly private acknowledgement of the author's perceived deficiencies and discontent in the regulatory processes exerted on Korean female teenage subjects.

A secret, according to the postcard authors, is information one feels *compelled* not to communicate, even if that information is common knowledge - such as the emotionally and psychologically distressed adolescence these high school girls experience due to the hyper-competitive, regulatory educational machine⁸ or the negative body image and fixated desire to edit their bodies⁹. In submitting postcards that reveal expressions of dismay at not meeting the high standards expected of teenage girls in order to successfully prepare for the future¹⁰ (thereby protecting them from a perceived arduous and painful adulthood), the students make clear that these expressions are typically silenced, or perhaps more accurately are rendered inutterable, in the public. The public in this case is not the static bourgeois sphere created opposite the institutionalization of privateness as put forth by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Instead, I draw upon Susan Gal's work, "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction" (2002) whereby the public is dichotomized from the private through semiotic processes, yet both "coexist in complex combinations in the ordinary routines of everyday life" (78). Gal asserts that public and private

⁸ See Sections 6 and 7.

⁹ See Section 8.

¹⁰ ¹⁰ See Section 5.

are “tools for arguments” (ibid.:79) about social worlds and should not be used to directly describe them. The public/private distinction, then, is not structural as Habermas claims, but instead “is best understood as a discursive phenomenon that, once established, can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, interactions, relations” (ibid.:80-1).

In this case, the public/private distinction regulates the social fact of the Korean female teenage subject wishing to articulate her emotional and psychological distress. Thus, the postcard project illuminates how, outside of the project itself, these girls felt *compelled to conceal* what they wrote and submitted to me. This social act of secrecy can be analyzed as a “communicative phenomenon,” which Gal says, “shows a complex and systematic logic” (ibid.:77). The logic at work, I argue is the disciplining of the bodily individual in accordance to population-wide regulatory pressures that uphold the Korean nation-state’s post-colonial, Neo-Confucian, modern project of development. The public airing of the otherwise silenced acknowledgement of the authors’ perceived deficiencies and failures in being “good” members of society explicates the deployment of hegemonic discursivity in controlling female teenage bodies on both individual and group-wide scales. This hegemonic discursivity acts as a regulatory mechanism in promoting docility, or perhaps complicity, within population-wide norms of conduct. In other words, these teenage girls are coerced into silence by fearing the negative repercussions that deviating from societal norms would incur in singling themselves out among the multitude.¹¹ In refraining from uttering the recognition and dismay in their perceived deficiencies and failures in public, the high school students contribute to upholding the hegemonic process of regulatory concealment. This

¹¹ As I explain further in Sections 5-8 , these repercussions include the material consequences of being considered a non-ideal subject, who, according to Neo-Confucianism is characterized as obedient, reverent, and self-cultivating (Kim, T. 2003).

regulatory concealment, I argue, is an articulation of biopower exerted by the nation-state in its ongoing project of forming and controlling subjects.

Section 4: Biopower, Norms, and Bio-Inequality
“My body is...not mine. (I don’t know what I want to do.)”

Michel Foucault defines biopower as the “organization of power over life” which includes disciplining of the bodily individual and regulation of the population through the regulation of norms per the nation-state’s prerogative of “making live” and “letting die” (Foucault 1990[1976]; 1997; 2003). Biopower, then, comprises two interconnected trajectories of bodily control: anatomopolitics, which centers on “the body as a machine” and its optimization into an economic system, and biopolitics, which is the optimization of the ideal subject into a governmental system (Foucault 1990[1976]:139). In anatomopolitics, bodily discipline is honed through societal institutions that ultimately mold active bodies into properly productive subjects of the nation-state. Anatomopolitics harnesses technologies and mechanisms that discipline the body “to be rendered useful and docile” (ibid.:249) such as the architecture and routines in the military, prisons, hospitals, and, yes, schools. These “disciplines” (in the plural meaning the institutional systems and processes that enact and (re)create the bodily discipline of anatomopolitics) Foucault argues, “are techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities” (Foucault 1979: 218) and adhere to tactics that fulfill three criteria: 1) the exercising of power at its lowest cost (economically, politically, and socially), 2) the exercising of power at its most effective and for its longest duration, and 3) the increased correlation of power’s “economic growth” with the pervasiveness of its institutional apparatuses (ibid.). Foucault argues that discipline is neither an institution in of itself nor an apparatus, but rather is a technology of biopower.

In biopolitics, the population is regulated through state mechanisms of governmentality, defined as “the art of government” (Foucault 1991), which are conducted on and within the population as a whole. Biopolitics centers on the methods and strategies of regulating life processes within the nation-state’s population, however that population membership may be hegemonically defined according to fluid power relations among subjects. Examples of biopolitical projects include “acceptable” forms of sexuality, racism, and judicial systems that diagnose criminality. In theorizing biopolitics, Foucault recognizes that fleshly and political life are dialectically constructed in biopower’s mission of “making live” and “letting die.”

Connecting the two arms of biopower are “norms.” Determined by hegemonic processes of power relations among the population, norms exact and maintain control of the aggregate of “multiplicities” that are the individual agents comprising the imagined community. Foucault (1990[1976]) writes, “The normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation” (253). Thus, the “aim to establish homeostasis” within the population as opposed to protecting it from external dangers is biopower’s major project (ibid.). This regulation toward homeostasis (with all its entailed power relations) demonstrates how “hegemony works precisely by being *articulated* between the realm of coercion and punishment” (Smith 2004:219) because adherence to norms is, in practice, socially and materially rewarded in its avoidance of psychological and corporeal castigation. In short, the hegemonic (re)production of norms within the population and experienced by the individual is the most fundamental instrument biopower deploys, and, as I will demonstrate below, biopower’s project of homeostasis can be seen in the contextualized analysis of the types of secrets my students chose to reveal in our postcard project.

In “Another Politics of Life is Possible” (2009), Didier Fassin revisits Foucault’s theorization of biopower, biopolitics, and governmentality and makes several crucial clarifications of what he believes Foucault means by these terms. In Fassin’s reading of Foucault, biopower is the “power over human conduct,” biopolitics is the “politics of population understood as a community of living beings,” and governmentality is the “rationalization of the ‘art of governing’ rather than the real practice of government” (Fassin 2009:45-6). These definitions are particularly significant when applied to this case study since they make legible behavioral and ideological systems of discipline and regulation that Korean adolescent girls are embedded within. The disciplining of conduct, politics of community, and the rationalization of governmental praxis intersect to form a matrix of regulation and control exerted on members of Korean society according to their specific subjectivities. The matrix is built upon economic rationale being extended to the population level in the biopolitical workings of the modern nation-state (ibid.).

Fassin also notes that Foucault fails to address the very real inequalities established and upheld by population-wide norms and subsequently introduces the term “bio-inequalities” to better qualify biopolitics as “about not only normalizing people’s lives, but also deciding the sort of life people may or may not live” (ibid.:48). In the case of contemporary Korea, homeostasis is actually the continuation of competitive processes whereby subjects compete with each other to become socially mobile within a society that has finite resources at its disposal for the promotion of persistent socio-economic development. Here, Fassin’s reinsertion of “meaning and value” into Foucault’s framework of life, defined as the “course of events which occurs from birth to death” (ibid.:48), is especially helpful in explaining how inequalities can be maintained within a population guided by regulating homeostasis. For example, Neo-Confucianism, which has fed

Korea's neoliberal push for economic and state growth while reinforcing the sense of duty to the nation-as-family¹², continues to (re)establish norms of proper individual and population-wide comportment.¹³ The Neo-Confucian doctrine is one rooted in the meaning and value of self-cultivation, which, as Oh & Arditì (2010) write, "is part of a microphysics of power whose specific mechanisms take expression in the operation of practices aimed at constantly 'aligning' a person to an order of things" (21). Reading bio-inequality through Neo-Confucian norms is particularly useful in seeing discipline's "procedures of partitioning and verticality" that "define compact hierarchical networks" and "oppose to the intrinsic, adverse force of multiplicity the technique of the continuous, individualizing pyramid" (Foucault 1979:220). Norms such as Korea-specific¹⁴ systems of hierarchical deference, acceptance of age- and gender-based self-sacrifice for the homeostatic benefit of the population as a whole, and valuing "self-cultivation" as the ideal act of subject alignment (Oh & Arditì 2010) generate both discipline and control while optimizing the subject's conduct and production as part of the Korean nation-state. Establishing norms through biopower is thus a nation-state project that renders legible subjectivities and the appropriateness of power relations in material ways.

When applied to Neo-Confucian Korean society, Fassin's theoretical contributions are valuable in thinking through how and why female high school students are coerced - internalizing discipline through practices of surveillance - into molding themselves into proper and productive Korean subjects through age- and gender-specific disciplines and control.

¹² See the discussion on *minjok* in Section 4.

¹³ Neo-Confucianism is not the only hegemonic process at play; indeed, neoliberalism itself is a "hegemonic mode of discourse" (Harvey 2005), but as I explain in the Section 4, Korean Neo-Confucianism has laminated onto the recent neoliberal restructuring that currently defines the nation-state's post-colonial endeavor. So, it remains a practical and valuable source of biopower analysis.

¹⁴ Oh & Arditì (2010) argue that Neo-Confucian mechanisms of "discipline" and "surveillance" - "microphysics of power" - must be analyzed as "a different order" than that of Foucault's West, writing, "One cannot speak of microphysics in a singular form; the complex of mechanisms, tactics, maneuvers, et cetera that compose a microphysics differ greatly from place to place and from time to time" (22).

Included in conduct affected and shaped by biopower is the concealment of information that constitutes my students' enactments of secrecy. But what are the majority of my high school students concealing? Expressions of perceived self-deficiencies and failures in embodying the ideal Korean female teenage subject. The self-disciplinary conduct of concealing these expressions of known discontent and disappointment reconstitutes biopower and recreates systems of individual discipline and population-wide control. Not only is biopower regulating these expressions by compelling students to remain silent, but the causes of these female teenagers' dismay are *due to* bio-inequalities stemming from their specific intersectional subjectivity: mainly, as detailed below, in the form of hyper-competitive secondary education and the marking of appearance-based diagnostics of social mobility.

Secrecy, then, *functions as a tool* of disciplinary power in that it discursively renders self-blame for failure to individually out-compete within the multitude. In being possessed by the individual, this known information is, in effect, restricted to being applied as a self-critique rather than a critique of the Korean nation-state's systems of meanings and values. Yet, secrecy in this case also *explicates the internalization* of norms and subsequent bio-inequalities. What the postcards reveal in terms of thematic content builds a picture of the Korean nation-state's ongoing subject-making projects as internalized by high school girls in particular. In looking at the dataset as a whole, the categories of concealed admissions, thoughts, and feelings themselves reveal the nation-state's successes in disciplining and regulating obedient, reverent, and self-cultivating subjects.

Section 5: The Korean Nation-State: Arbiter of Biopower *"I live in Coreā."*¹⁵

¹⁵ The different spellings of "Coreā" and "Korea" reflect the popular English-language usage before and after the 1910 annexation by Japan. My students commonly attributed this differentiation to Japan's wish to be alphabetically listed before its colony. This secret postcard, then, expresses discontent in the colonial and post-colonial politics of

One can dissect contemporary Korea's systems of meanings and values by historically contextualizing them, and here I do so in line with the assertions of Pai (1998; 2000), Shin (1998), and Shin & Robinson (1999) that the modern Korean nation-state was born in the years after Japanese occupation. Plaguing Korea from 1910-1945, those thirty five years continue to profoundly influence Korean society at every level - especially in terms of forming and defining nationalist ideologies (ibid.) - many of which stress the importance of working together to ensure Korea's current and future economic independence. As colonial subjects, Koreans were forced to contribute disproportionately to the Japanese homeland in extraction of labor and resources (Savada 1990; Lee 1999). While Korean land was being reaped and sowed to feed the "mother country," Korean labor was being tapped to bolster Japan's industrial growth and expansion. In the 1920s, Japanese industrialization of the peninsula centered in northern Korea demanded so many Korean workers that the labor market suffered an extreme domestic shortage. The enactment of a compulsory labor law in 1937 required men twenty to forty-five years of age to contribute to colonial infrastructure in Korea as well as the pre-World War II build up in Japan. As World War II intensified, the age was reduced to eighteen years old, amounting to approximately one million Koreans compulsorily mobilized between 1939 and 1945, some of whom were forcibly shipped off to Japan to complete their service (Park 1999). Skilled and unskilled workers alike were harnessed to prop up the Japanese war machine and this included many girls and women who were forced into sexual slavery. As the contemporary discourse on these "comfort women" exemplifies, Korea's postcolonial nationalist narratives of tragedy and exploitation often elide the complexity and multivalence of systems of violence particularly suffered by women throughout colonized Confucian, and now within democratic Neo-Confucian

naming by reclaiming the "C" spelling regardless of the veracity of the common explanation of why the spelling change occurred.

Korea (Soh 2008).

At the end of World War II, Allied forces drove Japan out of its colonies, and Korea found itself in the political chaos of competing ideological systems of governance: communism and liberal democracy. Not long after its emancipation from Japanese colonialism, the peninsula broke out into civil war spanning from 1950 to 1953 and splitting the North and South along the forty-eighth parallel. In the sixty years since the Armistice was signed, the North and the South have switched polarity in terms of economic growth and prosperity (Eckert 1990). Up to the late 1960s, North Korea led the South in income per capita and GDP, but Park Chung Hee's military dictatorship from 1961-1979 (including the years of his "elected" presidency) strong-armed the South's economic system into a jumpstart through the massive shift to export-oriented industrialization. According to Haein Cho (1989), it also marked the decade in which Neo-Confucian secularization began permeating the nation-state construct. The 1980s post-industrial era yielded even more government-driven economic reforms including instituting protectionist trade policies and saw more conspicuous consumption among the elites while the wealth gap vastly increased.

Today, while North Korea continues its closed-door policy with its isolationist government, the South finds itself the envy of Asia in terms of economic growth over the past few decades. Considered one of the poorest nations on earth when they began cleaning up the ashes of the civil war, 2011 saw Korea's GDP at over \$1.5 trillion (OECD 2012). In the span of one generation, Korea has gone from a developing nation to the thirteenth largest economy in the world – all this with a population topping approximately fifty million. The rate of transformation has astounded economists, historians, and development scholars alike who often refer to "the Korean miracle" (Kim, K. 1991) as the sum result of post-Cold War neoliberal restructuring and

global investment. Whereas today it functions as a common greeting, the phrase “Have you eaten rice today?” is a holdover from immediate post-war reconstruction when malnourishment was a serious issue; grandparents remember the “starving time” fifty years ago. Meanwhile their grandchildren invest in five-hundred dollar cell phones and are immersed in the ever-present and ever-improving technology that has made Korea the most highly connected (in terms of internet availability and speed) country in the world (IDC 2012).

Intense long-term American investment coupled with conglomerate-friendly regulation reforms have propelled Korea into the proverbial Who’s Who of economic powers, both within East Asia and throughout the broader global community. Tech industry leaders, particularly Samsung, carry enormous respect in Korea, influencing economic and political policy both publicly and privately.¹⁶ Even so, the last four decades have not always been smooth sailing. Most notably, the nation pulled itself up from the International Monetary Fund crisis in the mid-90s in which non-performing loans and excess debt in the midst of the Asian financial downturn caused the currency to drop in value by half resulting in the dissolution of billions of dollars in venture capital. Government subsidies, authoritarian business-friendly legislation, and conglomerate incentives reestablished Korea as a key investor in the region and an important economic (as well as political) ally of the United States. Cho (1989) argues “as the post-liberation generations replace the pre-liberation one in the government and business, they try to do with the American model what their predecessors did with the Japanese model” (316). This special politico-economic relationship has yielded the expansive KORUS Free Trade Agreement - brought to force in March 2012. The KORUS FTA vastly streamlines importing and exporting of consumer goods and is projected to add over \$10 billion to Korea GDP annually (Oustr

¹⁶ My English teaching colleagues at my placement high school referred to the Republic of Korea as “the Republic of Samsung” on a number of occasions during our discussions on political and corporate corruption scandals.

2012). The Korean economy is, in short, booming, and exemplary of how neoliberalism is a “transnational political project” (Wacquant 2009).

But Korea’s economic reality is intrinsically embedded within the nation-state, which here I define as the ideological and material system of defining, (re)creating, and deploying power in hegemonic processes of subject-making including primarily the identification of membership to the Korean nation and recognition and reification of sovereignty of the Korean state. Given subjectivity is the “ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects” (Ortner 2005:107) and hegemony is the intersection of praxis and the “weight of the past” and thus dialectic at every scale (Smith 2004), then subject-making is the fluid and continual hegemonic (re)production of this ensemble in part by individual and interpersonal thoughts and actions (there is also interpolation) as entrenched in and informed by historically-contextualized relationships of power. As Alonso (1994) argues, “Hegemonic strategies, at once material and symbolic, produce the idea of the state while concretizing the imagined community of the nation by articulating spatial, bodily and temporal matrixes through the everyday routines, rituals, and policies of the state system” (382). Both the “state”¹⁷ and the “nation”¹⁸ can be understood as projects and processes of hegemonic social formations, which employ subject-making, but should not be considered more political or more civil respectively in their relationships to power. That is to say, there is not a structural or material delineation between the political and civil realms of society, nor is the state a disembodied apparatus of power acting within the imagined community (Anderson 1991) of the nation (Abrams 1988; Smith 2004; Trouillot 2001). Rather, both the “nation” and “state” as effective hegemonic

¹⁷ Aretxaga 2003, Nagengast 1994, and Trouillot 2001 include debates on how the “state” has been theorized in academic literature over time. These works describe the departure by some anthropologists from using the term to denote an entity comprising the institution of power as seen in, for example, Goldberg 2002, Scott 1998, and Weber (who’s lecture translations can be found in Gerth & Mills 1946).

¹⁸ See Korea-specific explanation of this term below.

projects “rely on collusion in terms of a trade-off in which ‘participation’ in the social project promises to empower those recognized as its legitimate members through intensified productivity of the overall corporate body politic” (Smith 2004:226).

The Korean word *minjok* (민족) translates to “nation,” but its two roots are the Chinese characters 民 (*min*, “populace”) and 族 (*jok*, “lineage”). The common usage today assumes a nation comprising a particular people - those who descended from the same ancestral bloodline. Discursively legitimizing the occupation of Korea, *minjok* was introduced by the Japanese in the early stages of imperialism as a means of asserting racial superiority pointedly in comparison to its future colonial subjects (Em 1999). Yet, it was quickly co-opted by the resistance movement that argued that if Koreans were of their own bloodline, and Japan’s national interests were based on racial exceptionality, then Koreans should embrace their own national sovereignty based on common blood membership. The ideology that all Koreans shared a race, culture, and history provided invaluable impetus to batten down until independence from Japan was achieved in 1945. Strong and Van Winkle (1996:565) describe the ideology of common blood as “a tragically necessary condition for the continued survival and vitality of many individuals and communities,” and this was no less true in the Korean context. Indeed, Korea’s pledge of allegiance requires a person ‘devote her body and soul to the eternal glory of her country and people.’ In this case, “country” is translated from *choguk* (조국), which more literally means “fatherland,” and “people” is translated from *minjok* (민족) meaning more literally “race of people.” As Eckert (1999) writes, *minjok* as ideology “functioned as a kind of state religion in the postcolonial nation-building process,” (269) and it continues to permeate all aspects of Korean nationalism (Pai 1998; 2000) manifesting itself in international relations, public policy and governance, and daily interpersonal interactions.

Neo-Confucianism, defined as the philosophy that “transcendentally grounds the mundane” and argues “human interpersonal relationships and concern for society and government are inseparably united with deepened ascetical practice as the path to ultimate personal fulfillment” (Yi 1988), intrinsically binds together post-colonial Korean nationalism, the Korean nation-state’s push for industrialized growth and economic independence (Kim & Park 2003), and *minjok*’s material manifestations of lineage-based membership’s expectations and duties. Its major tenets are reverence, obedience, and self-cultivation (Kim, T. 2001). Just as sons and daughters are expected to comport themselves dutifully for the benefit and honor of their immediate and extended families under Neo-Confucianism, Korean subjects, as defined by *minjok*, do so to support and strengthen the nation: economically, politically, and socially - with these realms of experience always dialectically interconnected. This involves not only adhering to discursive ideologies of personal sacrifice for the greater good of the family, but also reaffirming the hegemonically-produced “responsibilities” of the Korean subject. Taeyon Kim (2003) explores the multilevel affects of Neo-Confucianism on the body, writing, “The Neo-Confucian body did not refer just to the corporeal, nor did it act as a reference to an individual self. The emphasis on non-distinction between self and others produced a sense of self that was non-individuated and fluid, with no boundaries to determine a distinction between one’s family and one’s self” (99). Thus, the proper post-colonial Korean subject embodies part of the whole at both the micro- and macrocosmic scales, and this so-called “institutionalized familism” has been argued to directly reflect “the sociocultural and political components of compressed modernity” (Chang & Song 2010:545).

Aside from internal subject identification and embodiment, Kim and Park (2003) argue that “pro-growth Confucian ethics” can be directly linked to “the Korean miracle” in that the

Neo-Confucian discourse on suitable work ethic was laminated onto the nation-state's project of economic restructuring and expanded industrialization. Similar to Weber's "Protestant work ethic" (Weber 1968), though not in an entrepreneurial spirit but rather a work ideology based on "diligence," "sacrifice," "loyalty," and "harmony," the authors posit that the intersection of Neo-Confucianism and post-colonial nationalism in Korea is remarkable in that the "the workers' commitment to the process of industrialization was intimately linked to...cultural ideals and nationalist aspirations" (Kim & Park 2003:46). Thus, if nationalism can be thought of as a "structure of feeling" whereby "effects of power are simultaneously effects of pleasure," (Alonso 1994:387) then Neo-Confucianism, as a hegemonic process defined as "a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination" (Roseberry 1994:361), is the lynchpin from which that pleasure was and continues to be derived.

Rather than an autonomous power-wielding entity, the "state" is a "set of processes" that are "linked to a number of apparatuses not all of which may be governmental" (Trouillot 2001:47) and functions to "create new spaces for the deployment of power" (ibid.:127). That industrialization skyrocketed in the South during Park Chung Hee's dictatorship is no coincidence since his leadership and administration vastly reoriented and redirected deployments of power - favoring authoritarian intervention in the economic system as opposed to a liberal democratic- or market-based approach to development. It was through this kind of "strong" authoritarian state, Kim & Park (2003) argue, that Neo-Confucian values were "channeled into developmental means" (Kim & Park 2003:47). The symbiosis of Neo-Confucianism and state-based development paired the ideological underpinnings of the non-distinction of self from family to the economic articulations of the obedient, reverent, and self-cultivating subject. Shifts

in the meanings and values produced and upheld by this symbiosis occurred alongside state economic projects: from industrialization (1970s) to post-industrial consumerism (1980s), then Asian financial crisis austerity (1990s), and finally globalized neoliberalism (2000s). That meanings and values are intrinsic to these new deployments of power can be seen in how, as Cho (1989) puts it, “the economy is not so well differentiated from the polity in modern Korea” (311). These meanings and values inform and construct more than just economic spaces of power carved out by governmentality, but encompass the full range of what Fassin calls “life as such,” or “life which is lived through a body...and as a society (not only as species)” (Fassin 2009:48). Through meanings and values, then, state processes work in conjunction with the nation’s imagined community to comprise the “nation-state”.

Thus, biopower is enacted through the hegemonic projects (Roseberry 1994) that define and uphold the Korean nation-state. Nation-state projects are predicated on meanings and values parsed as “good” for “life as such,” but primarily maintain power relation homeostasis. By constructing “a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination” (ibid.:361), hegemonic projects regulate subjects at both the individual and population-wide scales. A major component of nation-state building and maintenance is controlling, regulating, and disciplining female bodies (Anagnost 2011; Cheng 2011; Kanaaneh 2002; Mackie et al. 2006; Moore 1988; Pinto 2012; Rubin 2006), and the postcards submitted by my students illuminate their internalizations of this hegemonic project in their high school years. Adherence to norms is socially and materially rewarded by the nation-state through the avoidance of “unnecessary” hardship, despite the bio-inequalities that are intrinsic to contemporary Korean norms, which, in this case, I argue cause adolescent girls profound emotional and psychological distress. That their distress is public

knowledge yet they self-discipline to conceal it demonstrates the robusticity of bio-inequalities entrenched in hegemonic projects predicated on meanings and values.

Section 6: Teenage Emotional/Psychological Distress and Dismay
“I act hard in front of my parents but...”

Following the Asian financial crisis in the mid-1990s “social demand and global pressures” hastened neoliberal reforms (Abelmann et al. 2009:232) favoring projects like “productive welfarism” - a set of social policies supported by the Kim Dae Jung¹⁹ administration intended to “[buttress] national economic prosperity rather than [drain] the state coffers” (Song 2007:334). Yet the Korean nation-state orchestrated these reforms as well and had incentive to do so because by locating responsibility of self-cultivation within individual agents they also became the object of blame for failure or non-compliance (ibid.). This blame left individual subjects (and by extension their families) with the liability of suffering the material consequences, like poverty and unemployment, of the bio-inequalities intrinsic to reforms that value the neoliberalization of “life as such”.

Included under Korea’s neoliberalism umbrella is “the new model student,” who, as Abelmann et al. (2009) argue, “is an autonomous student-consumer who is responsible for managing his or her own lifelong creative capital development” (232). High school students are expected to be the makers of their own successful, stable, and prosperous futures. Only, they are expected to do so in a hyper-competitive society whereby they must compete with their peers to gain upward mobility in the education, employment, and marriage markets. One can imagine how this shouldering of responsibility for their entire futures at such an early age might cause high school students to feel extreme pressure, stress, and anxiety. Unsurprisingly, these feelings

¹⁹ President of Korea from 1998-2003, Kim marked the first civilian president whose party was not intimately connected to previous military dictatorships. While his presidency was considered a momentous victory for the Korean democracy movement (Haggard et al. 1999), unemployment skyrocketed under his neoliberal policies (Song 2007).

of emotional and psychological distress are evident in the postcards submitted by my students. A major theme in the data is the author expressing dismay in how she has not created a sufficient and effective blueprint for the rest of her life. For example:

“Where am I?? What I want? I’m not here. Find me!!”
“I don’t know what I want, what I like... I don’t know who I am.”
“I don’t know what I want to do. I have many things which I want to do.”
“I don’t know what I should do, and where I should go now. Here?”
“I don’t know what I will do! (PD Journalist Writer Businessman Politician)”
“I don’t know what I will do. (cook, teacher)”
“I changed my dreams many time. Until now, I want to do many things. What is my real dream...?? Complex.”
“I don’t know what is my real dream...”
“I don’t have a dream.”
“I don’t know about my dream!!! [Help me please]”
“I don’t have aim! (fear terror anxiety solitude reverence trouble dread care veneration)”
“I don’t know what to do in the future.”
“I want to know How can I write next page of my life!”
“Can I solve it? (puzzle)”
“I really want it?”
“I lost my way.”

In the neoliberal, Neo-Confucian Korean nation-state, high school students are expected to self-cultivate by preparing for the rest of their futures ostensibly by calibrating their choices and actions today according to how these will cumulatively affect their tomorrows. The postcard authors’ teenage years, then, comprise a career preparing for a career and other lifelong cumulative benefits from good life management.²⁰

Referring back to Fassin’s reading of Foucault that honing conduct is biopower’s major project, one can see how current articulations of adolescent discipline are hegemonically upheld as a “good” management of one’s life - but only if the future bears positive results in terms of prosperity and upward social mobility. Abelmann et al. (2009) explore the psychology of bio-inequality, claiming, “Under these new forms of regulation, neo-liberal subjects are elected to understand their positions in personal terms, even as they are located in a complex web of structural positions, as articulated for example by class and gender” (243). My students

²⁰ Adolescent girls are, as Section 7 details, preparing themselves to make a suitable spousal match in the future as well.

demonstrate this shouldering of personal responsibility for the kismet of their lives in their secrets describing their loneliness. For example,

“Sometimes I am ALONE.”
“I feel lonely many times...”
“I don’t wanna be alone.”
“What can I do for me?? I want to have this problem solution. (feel lonely sad alone solitude one person)”
“Sometimes, I feel alone.”
“I am lonely...”
“My secret is...I’m very lonely.”

They express their emotional distress that they may not be measuring up to these high standards and subsequently foresee facing the profound negative consequences of their failures and deficiencies as good subjects. It is unsurprising, then, that they also share secrets of sadness.

“I sank into DEEP melancholia.”
“I’m always HAPPY. BUT... [crying face]”
“I always smile BUT, actually I’m sad.”
“Do I seem happy?”
“I’m scared x-mas eve if they see that? [sad face ornaments on the tree]”
“I am crying.”
“I have many tears!!!”
“I’m soo sad but, I’m don’t cry.”

Secrets in which the author shares how she puts on a brave or happy face, such as *“I act hard in front of my parents but...,”* exemplify the discursivity of personal shame and self-discipline (re)produced through meanings and values channeled through Korean nation-state projects. This concealment of emotion happens on the bodily level. Furthering the point that this management of conduct fundamentally affects the body, some postcards reference exhaustion.

“People expect too many things to me. I’m SO tired.”
“I’m very sad because I’m very sleepy.”
“I’m very tired, but I don’t have enough time to sleep.”

But perhaps the most striking expressions of distress my students reveal involve the recognition of their regulation as individuals within a population-wide system of control. Take the following:

“I am bird in a cage. I can’t fly. FOREVER.”
“I want to get out as soon as possible.”
“Help me. Please take my hand. [Helicopter throwing down rope for to take student away.]”
“I want to leave...wherever...”
“I want to hide out.”

Students feel as if they are trapped and express dismay that they cannot escape the pressures exerted on and responsibilities placed upon them at this time in their lives. And time itself, it seems, is yet another source of alarm.

“It’s difficult for me to catch up with the time!! (wait!!)”
“I know that time waits for no one. But I want to catch the time.”
“Time is running out.”

Students shouldered the accountability for their personal distress and dismay. While some girls reveal their self-perceived deficiencies and failures, others suggest they are embedded so deeply within biopower’s matrix of regulation that they feel no control whatsoever.

“I’m scarecrow. My mind. My idea. My mentality. Anything is not mine.”
“I’m just going through the motion...(Monday~Sunday...)”
“I don’t have volition.”
“The volition is not to me!”
“My body is...not mine. (I don’t know what I want to do.)”

It is a sad irony that the authors of these secrets feel they have no “volition” yet also feel responsible for this lack of control. Because ownership of their life management is highly concentrated in my students’ adolescence, they are also particularly subject to self-recrimination. These postcards demonstrate how Korean teenage girls are acutely aware of the negative consequences of their management failures when “life as such” is rendered in accordance with the meanings and values of the neoliberal, Neo-Confucian nation-state.

Section 7: Grades, School, and Adolescent Discipline *“I feel like I’m slave of exam.”*

The future of the nation, according to Children’s Day founder Pang Jeong Hwan, rests in the nation’s children (Arirang 2011). Yet, part and parcel of Korea’s recent explosion of growth in wealth has been a significantly reduced birth rate; this is partly attributed to the sheer expense of educating children (Channel News Asia 2011). Recent surveys have calculated it costs an estimated \$231,000 to raise a child through the end of her university education (ibid.). Unlike in the U.S. where university tuition and fees routinely force young adults into decades-long debt,

college in Korea costs just a fraction of what it would in America.²¹ While expenses stem from the cost of regular education like school fees and supplies²², they also include private tutoring, which is almost universally utilized to supplement the official national curriculum. But why is it so expensive to educate a child in Korea? The answer lies in the nation-state's post-Korean War push to promote "equal access" to development through education (Abelmann et al. 2009). This social demand for educational investment, however, has since become part of the neoliberal project of deregulation, privatization, diversification, and globalization" (ibid.:232) and exemplifies the neoliberal-Neo-Confucian symbiosis of meaning and value in the nation-state's education machine. There is no greater source of self-cultivation in Korea than being better educated (Abelmann 2002), and this had made a university education a baseline necessity for the good management of a prosperous future. It also has become the locus of intense competition among peer groups of students. The demand for better and more effective access to education is driven by the need to out-compete for society's finite prestige and wealth; the massive monetary investment by parents provides the means.

But students heavily invest as well through their time and effort. The ultimate object of the enormous amount of energy put into their educational careers is performing well on the university entrance exam (*suneung* or KSAT). Taken in their senior year of high school, this is a test considered so important by Koreans that businesses are government-mandated to open after

²¹ A semester as a humanities or sciences undergraduate at a national university costs approximately \$2000-2800 and at a private university ranges from \$3000 to \$5000 (StudyinKorea.go.kr 2013).

²² Noteworthy is the plethora of "stationary stores" located in urban and suburban areas. These shops sell a vast array of school supplies ranging from pencil cases to post-its to desk-sized pillows. I have yet to encounter a wider selection of pens (colors, grips, gauge), highlighters (colors, inks, diameters), or erasers (specified/general usages, colors, shapes, animated character decorations) outside of what is offered at stationary stores in Korea. The merchandise provides students with choices on what they will use while studying, even if they do not have the choice of what, when, or where to study. Students of all ages often stop by the stationary store on the way home or on the weekends with their friends. It is clear it serves as a "hangout" location as it stocks items like hair clips and cheap watches that when tried on are the sources of great debate among the same-uniformed group of students crammed together in front of the store-provided mirrors.

school begins the morning of the nation-wide test to prevent traffic jams that might cause students to arrive late. Students who are late are offered free police escorts, lights flashing and all, to get to school on-time. Every single high school in the country begins the test at the same time and all high school seniors take the same nine-hour long test. Therefore, during the English listening portion of the exam, every test taker nation-wide is listening to the same recording at nearly the exact moment. The country even instigates a no-fly zone during testing hours on that day so as not to disturb the test-takers' concentration.

When the test day arrives in the second week of November, underclassmen, parents, teachers, and community members alike line the sidewalks leading to campus, loudly cheering, clapping, playing music, holding up well-wishing signs, and gifting good luck packages and flowers. Scenes of the revelry are plastered all over television that night and offer not only a view of the community support but also the haunting images of terrified teenagers numb, overwhelmed, or irritated by the commotion as they weave their ways toward what their faces seem to say is impending doom.²³ And it is quite understandable these teenagers appear terrified. Taking the KSAT is considered one of the most momentous events in a person's life. Buddhist parents are often found in the nearest holiest temple praying for their child's success²⁴ - some visit everyday for the hundred days²⁵ leading up to the test. Christian parents too ask for their community of worshipers to intercede on their child's behalf.

The KSAT is offered once a year and because university admissions is based on a quota system (even a one-point difference could mean attending a lower-ranking school). Other

²³ Parents, teachers, and clergy members, as I have witnessed, sometimes cannot hide this facial expression either.

²⁴ My homestay mother also made a monetary offering a year in advance so that the monks would pray for her daughter leading up to the exam. When I asked my homestay father if he had made an offering as well, he quipped, "I already paid for her education. It was quite a big offering." He chuckled, then added, "My offering will give her good luck for a lifetime."

²⁵ One hundred is an especially significant number in Korea. Babies celebrate their one hundred day birthdays to mark their first year alive (including gestation time). My homestay grandmother suggested this is a holdover from a time in which the family could not assume the child would survive within that first hundred-day period.

admission factors, such as essays, letters of recommendation, and history of community service and activities, though included in the application process, are far outweighed by the KSAT score so much so that it is immediately apparent which university a student can attend upon accessing her score online. Notably, no one I have ever asked has been happy with his or her KSAT performance. This includes the Seoul National University dental graduate who was a single point away from a perfect score. He recognized it was a great score, but even six years later was irritated that five people scored higher than him that year. Even though my dentist friend was admitted to Seoul National University (the number one ranked university in the country), that he was still disappointed by leaving room to improve bears testament to the salience of the competitive nature among peers. It also highlights how competition functions as a normative behavior and is a mechanism of biopower in that it motivates one to self-discipline while maintaining population-side homeostasis. My former student Dayoon deftly encapsulates this point in the following comment:

I tried to study hard when I was a high school student. It was so stressful for me to study every day. And often it seemed to me that my classmates were not my friends but just rivals...Of course, I was so happy when I got a good grade in [sic] exam. In contrast, when my grades went down, it was so hard to bear the sense of shame...Most students in Korea think that if they go to university, they'll enjoy the freedom, so they can endure their stress.

Unlike the U.S. university system which attributes varying levels of prestige to universities, departments, and programs between and within tiers, the Korean university system is set up on a spectrum of hierarchy²⁶ so universally recognized that it matters very little how students perform once they are admitted since it is the name of the school that is listed on the diploma that truly

²⁶ When I have asked new Korean acquaintances which university s/he attends or attended, some are reluctant to disclose this information. In a particular occurrence, my acquaintance apologized for being “careful” but that he is “sad” for not being admitted to a prestigious school. He said he regretted and was embarrassed by his failures as high school student, particularly his KSAT score, which prevented them from being able to attend. This is yet another example of how salient the individualized management of self-cultivation is in the Korean context.

matters to a potential employer. Lee & Brinton (1996) explore this economics of prestige and conclude, “the probability of being matched with a top employer is higher through direct application and is enhanced at prestigious universities through the schools' provision of introductions to employers” (182). Thus, Korean high school students are being held accountable for ensuring their future success upon entering the job market by how well they perform as students (and relative to each other) in their high school years. A student laments, “*My grade is floor. I don't know what I can do. If I didn't go University...I want to go University. I'm very sad.*”

And competition is getting fierce. In 2011, 82% of high school graduates entered university - the highest college attendance rate in the OECD.²⁷ However, that same year unemployed college graduates reached an all-time high (Jung 2011). Among the unemployed, over a third went to college and among the six million non-regular workers, nearly a third are college graduates as well (Oliver & Kang 2011). Lee & Brinton (1996) argue that “The increased competition among university graduates in the labor market appears to have led to an even greater emphasis on university prestige in firms' recruitment strategies” (181). That job competition is reinforcing university prestige power relations lays bare the bio-inequality inherent in the educational machine's norms. Korean high school students recognize the inevitability of competing with their peers in the future and this translates to needed to compete with them before they even graduate. One postcard author even goes so far to reveal, “*I'm afraid of my friend because my friend is too smart.*”

Part of the preparation for scoring well on the KSAT includes an entire sector of the educational machine consisting of *hagwons* (학원, “private educational academy”), sometimes referred to as “academies” and often described as “cram schools.” These are private businesses

²⁷ This is even more remarkable given that in 1945, Korea's literacy rate peaked at 22% (The Economist 2011).

that offer extra educational assistance through group and individual lessons. Their use has become so popular that the number of hagwons increased from 381 in 1980 to 31,000 in 2007 (Dawson 2010). Academies have become integral to the process of being educated as a Korean youth. On a typical weekday, students travel directly from high school to a hagwon, sometimes two in order to receive supplemental instruction on particular subjects. Usually, parents choose to enroll their children in hagwons according to the subject the student is struggling with, but hagwons also offer instruction in subjects as varied as piano, art, singing, and dancing. Many elementary and middle schoolers (as well as adults) enjoy learning and practicing these skills, but these subjects are almost unilaterally abandoned during high school years in lieu of addressing weaknesses in academic performance that might affect a KSAT score. Students commonly attend multiple hagwons each weekday and longer sessions on the weekends. Winter and summer breaks from school are not really breaks for students, but rather opportunities to attend intensive study sessions at hagwons. These businesses are so much in demand and therefore so ubiquitous that a math, science, Korean, or English hagwon could literally be seen on every street corner in my neighborhood on the west side of Seoul. It is extremely rare to meet a parent who does not send his or her child to hagwon and even rarer to meet a student who does not believe attending multiple hagwons will increase her chances of scoring higher on the KSAT.

Sera, another former student, explains how students understand their teenage responsibilities, saying, “Korean high school life begins with 'study' and ends with 'study.' [sic] High school students in Korea spend a lot of time on their studying to enter a high-level university. They try to enter there to have a good job (for instance, well-paid).” The management of personal performance to ameliorate lifelong prosperity manifests in the repressive regulation of students’ time, which amounts to, in many cases, forcing themselves to study during the

majority of their waking hours. One student writes as her secret, *“I have a problem...I want to studying well...How can I solve this problem? Since high school days are important, I want to study hard. I want to get better grades in final exam.”* It is common knowledge that every student wants to study harder, longer, and “better.” To *hate* studying is also recognized as a common trait among students. However students, such as this one, feel pressure to conceal their perceived failures to embody the ideal subject while desperately seeking to find some way to “fix” themselves. Some more examples include:

“I really want to study more than now. God. Please help me, ok? (All 100!)”
“However, my mind doesn’t make me studying. How to make my mind to study?”

“I wish good study.”

“I have to study hard, but...”

“I have some secrets. One of them is not to be good at studying. At this midterm exam, I didn’t achieve my goal.”

“I must study hard, but...”

“Study..I feel headache.”

“I don’t like study.”

“I hate to study. (study study study study study study)”

In a similar vein, another student reveals, *“I have a problem. I decide to wake up early before I go to bed, but I can’t wake up early. My mind wants studying but my body doesn’t!!! [angry face] Please help me..[crying eyes]”* That this student feels she is a failure because she metaphorically lost the battle with her body’s exhaustion indicates once again how salient the paradigm of the self-responsibility is to self-cultivation. Perpetual exhaustion from studying long hours aside, the results of this self-disciplining are, according to the author, visible on her flesh in the form of an angry face and tears rolling from her eyes. This snapshot provides a crucial reminder of the personal embodied experiences that are produced by the nation-state’s enactment of biopower.

The pressure to devote oneself to studying extends is exerted upon students well before their senior year of high school. While the KSAT is viewed as most important exam any Korean will ever take, other standardized tests are administered at all levels of schooling. Yet, these

exam grades are taken as indications of future performance on the KSAT and, as one would imagine, cause a great deal of emotional and psychological distress on their own. This is amply reflected in the following postcards:

“My secret is examination grade.”
“My secret is...bad grade to exam.”
“I want to get more improve grade in my exam.”
“I have problem that’s my grade.”
“I have bad grade.”
“My grade is not good!”
“I get poor grades...”
“I got a bad grade in math!”
“My grades are not improve.”
“I want good grade!”
“I need to improve my grade.”
“These days, I study hard, but I’m disappointed at my exam grade.”
“I hard study but I get poor grades. I’m sad. [crying face]”
“I couldn’t do well all the test. I’m very sad. It’s my secret.”
“I hate this grade graph because my parent are worried and sad. So, I am not happy.”

Wanting good grades is, of course, the norm, but improving their scores is thought to be entirely up to the student and their seeming willingness to sacrifice their time and energy towards it.

Once again, one can see how biopower, articulated through discursive subject-making, is the coercion of certain conduct as directed by the nation-state’s program of meanings and values.

High school for Koreans, then, is not a time to enjoy but rather a militaristically regimented schedule of studying with little time for any other activity like sports, clubs, or hobbies. Extracurriculars too are programmed into the schedule. Dayoon explains:

Once a week, there was a mandatory extracurricular activity time. There were clubs such as band, martial arts, newspaper and basketball. During that time, I was supposed to have fun. But I was in newspaper club and I usually studied. I didn’t have any winter/summer break. I still had to go to school and had classes. Most of Korean students don’t have any breaks. If they have a break, they probably go to private institution to get additional help intensively.

Military-like aptly describes how my students’ time was divided throughout the day. On average, they slept four to five hours a night. Indeed, the only discipline problem I ever had was students sleeping during class. A typical weekday consisted of being at school by 7 a.m. for morning

study hour, class until noon when they had a forty-minute lunch, afternoon class until 5:30 p.m., dinner at school, evening hagwon sessions until midnight, and late-night homework until 2 a.m. They were absolutely exhausted all of the time. In fact, it was incredibly rare to find a teenager who slept a full eight hours at night.²⁸

The art of studying²⁹ in Korea, then, includes regulating the student's body to certain spaces at specific times: these include the home, classroom, school library, private tutor's home office, and hagwon. As I described it in Section 1, the "home"/room space is particularly telling of the bodily regulation my students encountered on a daily basis. They are expected to spend so many hours of their lives in that space that it is treated as a literal home away from home. Pureum, a former student, reflects on how she was spatially and temporally regulated during high school, saying, "Our daily schedule was not only tough, but also restricted by teachers, so we couldn't break the schedule or get out of the school. All students had hard time to fit in the schedule and if failed, they moved to another school." Pureum had attended a private boarding school in which students were required (attendance was taken by a "study monitor") to be at their library carrels from 8 p.m. to midnight. Students attending public high schools out-compete each other by occupying hagwons until early morning hours. If they did not succeed in gaining the score they feel is necessary to ensure a more stable and prosperous future, students often forego attending a less prestigious university and instead study for the year leading up to the next exam date. When I contacted Jiyeon, a former student who "elected" (she did not feel she had a choice) to take a study year, she informed me that she studied sixteen hours a day on weekdays

²⁸ This kind of daily schedule is not confined to high schoolers. In line with the ever-increasing competition among peer groups, the pressures of not failing by out-competing in high school are being progressively felt by middle and elementary school students as well. Preparing students to enter the gauntlet that is high school includes sending them to hagwons at increasingly earlier ages. I recall my homestay mother fretting whether she was failing at performing the dutiful role of a Korean mother by bringing her eleven-year-old home at from hagwon at 9 p.m. rather than sending her to another one until 11 p.m. like all the other students in her class. Even though she was home earlier, her daughter studied until midnight most nights and often went to sleep after and woke up before I did.

²⁹ "studymentality"?

and six hours on weekends.³⁰ I asked if she felt she studied too much, and she laughed and replied that actually she thought herself quite lazy to take weekend afternoons off.

Jiyeon may have been able to laugh at that question, but the exertion of biopower on Korean high school students makes for a particularly volatile emotional state when faced with impending exam failure with lifelong ramifications. As the previous section explored, students used the postcard project as an opportunity to air their emotional and psychological distress and dismay about their perceived deficiencies and failures as “good” (meaning docile and useful from the nation-state’s standpoint) subjects. However, one must ask at what cost this is to the individual. Pureum describes her high school life as “hell,” but adds, “I rarely think about studying very hard. The reason why I try not to remember is probably that it was very tough. I think it’s human instinct to remember happy things rather than difficult things.” Perhaps biopower’s most productive norm is in silencing discontent by deeming it unproductive. Yet, the postcard project presented an opportunity to engage in the social act of revealing what my students were compelled to keep concealed. And reveal they did.

The following postcards directly address the author’s profound unhappiness with her subject-based expectations of long-term, consistent peak performance.

“I hate [being] in school.”
“I’m so tired!! I’m sleeping.”
“My brain is full! I have headache. [my head -> grade study diet hungry tired homework English school stress]”
“PANIC I can’t [think] in PANIC.”
“I feel like I’m slave of exam.”

It is important to note that only a single postcard expresses condemnation of Korean society or institutions: *“I’m exhausted. Korean education system ‘kill’ me. Why I have to study in stress.”*

While this sole student challenges Korea’s discursive homeostasis, the preponderance of self-blame for under-performance demonstrates just how deeply norms of perpetual self-cultivation

³⁰ This includes private tutoring, hagwon lessons, and personal study. Indeed, in her weekly calendar she blocks off chunks of time in which she forces herself to study alone in her room.

are internalized. Once again, I ask at what cost this is to the millions of teenage girls who carry the burden of full responsibility for the self-care of their futures based on discursive correlations of netting success potential by calibrating choices they make today. Certainly there are consequences to such extensive internalization of authoring one's lifelong success at such young ages.

While Korea has the highest rate of university attendance in the OECD, it also has the highest rate of suicides. The numbers are quite alarming. In fact, suicide is the leading cause of death for Koreans aged ten to nineteen years old (Yoo 2013). In 2010, that amounted to 5.2 out of every 100,000 (Yonhap 2011). For Koreans in their twenties, that rate rose to 24.4 suicides per hundred thousand. While suicide is certainly a complex issue that should be analyzed with contextual specificity, it would do well to read this secret, *"I do not know what to do... (Math - 0, Korean - 0) Sorry, mom. I'm so sorry..."* through the lens of a desperate and hopeless teenager. Read from that angle, the postcard takes on a quite unsettling tone. I did, in fact, receive multiple postcards regarding suicidal thoughts.

"Actually...I am angel. I want go home..."
"Sometimes I think death is the most comfortable thing in the world. Life is so harsh. [Death is] quiet...Dark and calm. Just relaxing."
"Sometimes, I think that I want to die."
"Sometimes I want to die!!"
"I want to die."

Here, I believe it sound to suggest that Korea's high rates of youth suicides are implicated with the overwhelming belief that one may easily ruin one's future by failing to embody the ideal teenage subject. That a perfect future cannot be manufactured in youth and that individual self-cultivation is not the only element shaping social mobility and socioeconomic stability are both muted by the Korean nation-state's technologies and mechanisms of biopower. This regime of subject-making affirms definite causality between "good" performance in adolescence and a "good" future at the individual and collective levels. However, this causality is most strongly

drawn between failure of consistent peak performance and the future's lost potential. Negative repercussions are stressed over positive ramifications. Thus, the guilt, shame, and hopelessness that most, if not all, Korean teenagers bear to some degree are intrinsic to the subject-making project, which pervades all levels of society. It is no wonder that so many Korean teenagers consider suicide as one of the only options to escape its psychologically and emotionally violent effects. The cost is very high indeed.

Section 8: Body Image: Unmarked Beauty and Marked Imperfections
“My eye is not big. It secret.”

While the “Grades, School” category of postcards illuminates methods, technologies, and mechanisms of subject- and population-regulating biopower deployed within the Korean nation-state via the institution of education, the “Body Image” category reflects how Korea’s hyper-competitive post-university job and marriage market is encouraging the literal editing of teenage female flesh. Not unlike their American counterparts (Fingerson 2006; Graham et al. 2001; Parker et al. 1995; Olafson 2006; Woolhouse et al. 2012), my former Korean high school students displayed hyper awareness of how their adolescent bodies work socially and inform their relationships to various modes of power. For example, during a break between classes when I came upon some students teasing another in Korean. The focus of the attention looked obviously irritated at the seemingly friendly banter, and when I asked what was going on, the group of students replied something to the effect of, “Teacher! Teacher! She is Filipina!” I, having not encountered this before, assumed this meant the girl had Filipino parents or had immigrated at a young age. “Oh really? Are your parents from the Philippines?” The girls burst out into laughter. “No, teacher!” The harassed student pulled at her cheeks and added, “See, black skin.” Her peers added, “You [the teased girl], go back home. [laugh].” Here they demonstrated their recognition of racialization’s social power at work. Similar occurrences

where students taunted their darker skinned peers as “black” alongside calling them “foreigner,” or more specifically assigning derogatory epithets such as “Filipina,” imply these students were placed on a lower rung of power relations due to their perceived bodily appearance.

In line with the fact that the vast majority of Korean high schoolers today identify as members of the Korean race, though this is shifting (see Kim, C. 2011), and therefore racial differences are less likely to be the primary mode of appearance-based power relations among their peer group, it is unsurprising that the most common secret about body image represented in the data set of postcards is that of falling short of ideal standards of beauty. Of the fifty postcards that I grouped into this category, sixteen addressed being overweight, ten lamented their height, five expressed dissatisfaction with their face and eyes, four exposed their hairy legs, three were dishearten by their dark skin, and the remaining twelve covered various other concerns. As indicated by the expressions of discontent about particular bodily characteristics, beauty in Korea has salient “objective” diagnostics: tall height, thin body, big eyes, “tall” nose, hairless legs, and white skin. The secrets, as I have argued above, are concealed expressions of emotional and psychological distress made public, and from them one can deduce that these beauty standards inform and lay bare the normalization of teenage girls’ bodies. What, then, are these norms accomplishing among the population and within the individual?

Some historical context is appropriate here. In “Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women’s Bodies in Korea’s Consumer Society” (2003), Taeyon Kim elucidates the shift in discursive ideology regarding the female body that has occurred with the development of the post-colonial nation-state. In pre-colonized, Neo-Confucian Korean society the “subjectless bodies” of females were hidden and protected from the public. While males were valued for their

mind and *ki* (life force passed through familial generations),³¹ women were thought of as vessels through which *ki* was perpetuated. The most important role in a woman's life, then, was to pass along *ki* to a new generation and her body was to be protected and secured at great lengths. Subjectless female bodies were kept out of sight from the public; indeed, government officials mandated women cover up in entirety including many layers to obscure the female form and in some cases a veil so that their faces were invisible as well. Pregnant women were also expected to devote all their time and efforts into assuring the best new addition to their husband's family line. "Korean women," Kim explains, "were deeply embedded in the body, both the family body (through their reproductive role in continuing it), the individual bodies within the family (by clothing, feeding, curing and cleansing them), and their own bodies (as the main object of value)" (Kim, T. 2003:101).

However, the domestic, invisible realm in which women's bodies were regulated shifted dramatically in the post-colonial era when the rise of the modern Korean nation-state coupled with its push for massive export-oriented industrialization demanded female labor outside of the domestic sphere - though, of course, women were still laboring within the domestic sphere as well. This female labor was further promoted in post-industrial consumerist era (Cho 2002), and in the post-IMF crisis moment of neoliberal globalization that contemporary Korea now finds itself, the Korean female body is hyper-visible in its consumer form (Kim, T. 2003). While this may suggest Neo-Confucianism's ebbing ideological foothold, Kim disagrees, writing "it is not, as some might speculate, the eradication of Korean Neo-Confucian cultural notions, but an expression of them through the new medium of global consumerism" (ibid.:110). These current

³¹ Indeed, the family *ki* was the essence of the family body, which, under Neo-Confucian thought, comprised selfhood more than a person's flesh. Furthermore, and significant to the discussion of *minjok* above, Kim makes the point that the Neo-Confucian body was not simply relegated to the individual's corporeality, but rather, "The emphasis on non-distinction between self and others produced a sense of self that was non-individuated and fluid, with no boundaries to determine a distinction between one's family and one's self" (Kim, T. 2003:99).

Neo-Confucian female body “norms” embedded within Korea’s consumer society are three fold: 1) subjectlessness, 2) imperfection, and 3) reliance on fashion to “re-order” that imperfection. Objective standards of beauty and the proprietary pressure for physical improvement, Kim argues, continue to gloss the multitude rather than the individual and manifests in fashion trends rooted in conformity as opposed to individuality. In adhering to the norms, beauty is the litmus of “decorum” not “vanity” (ibid.).

Beauty is the discursive mechanism by which an axis of the matrix of discipline and regulation is produced, and it especially affects teenage girls as they prepare to transition to adulthood. The Korean nation-state has embraced the “beautiful-is-good effect” (Eagly et al. 1991) to a startling degree whereby non-beautiful traits are marked as not good and the material consequences of this assessment regularly have very high stakes. As Herry, my former student, puts it, “In interviews, we need a better appearance because everyone like [sic] more beautiful. And I can feel that other people's attention is different.” Similarly, HyeIn, another former student, succinctly reflects, “Society is so beautiful and handsome! Society hates ugly people and ignores them.” Herry and HyeIn are referring to “lookism,” which denotes the condition of appearance-based discrimination in society that leads the individual to strive for an ideal bodily appearance to avoid the negative material consequences of personally falling short of public standards of beauty. And, in Korea, lookism is rampant. The negative consequences of not being considered beautiful when one enters the job and marriage market are enough to cause drastic self-disciplinary regulation of body image including extreme dieting and cosmetic enhancement (Cho 2002) ranging from eyelid surgery to skin whitening to jaw bone shaving and more.

I discussed above how as high school students prepare for their futures they aspire to ameliorate their tenuous life plans and perceived underperformance in education by, for example,

studying until literal exhaustion. But because lookism in Korea is currently the most salient diagnostic of worthy investment in human capital, teenage girls are also actively editing their bodily appearances per normative physical ideals and comportment to assure more promising class mobility and stability within the hyper-competitive post-industrial, globalized consumer era. Rather than the promise that these regulatory behaviors and choices result in upward mobility, the seemingly urgent necessity of pre-emptive protection from appearance-based discrimination in adulthood pervades teenagers' minds as well as their parents - many of whom go to great lengths to help their child discipline her body for the sake of a more secure future (Choe 2009; Lah 2011).

Since class in Korea, as Abelmann argues, “often is collapsed into or articulated through narratives on individual attributes and gender” (Abelmann 2002:25), then it stands to reason that the secrets my students revealed constitute narratives on how they fear the inevitable long-ranging political-socio-economic penalties of their bodily imperfections. Take for example this secret: *“Be carefull! My problem is weight because I think I get weight higher. higher. higher. So I think I have to diet. How about your think?”* This student’s expression of discontent about her body weight neatly demonstrates the intrinsic regulatory pressures she feels. On the one hand, the secret illuminates both the teenager’s recognition of her bodily imperfection with its “problematic” transformation and the internalized self-discipline of wanting to unmark herself - evident in the suggestion that she should put herself on a diet. On the other hand, it lays bare population-wide coercion in her asking whether I agree with her assessment of her own body and the wisest course of action. Is she asking me, the foreign teacher, for my opinion because she would like me to agree that dieting would be wise in her case: thereby encouraging her to decide upon a course of action? Or is she asking her foreign teacher hoping that I will tell her dieting it

is unnecessary because her body weight is acceptable to me? Perhaps she is directing the question toward the Korean public at-large, her imagined audience. If this is the case, then her secret more clearly underscores the effective hegemonic discursivity of lookism as a technology of biopower for society-wide homeostasis. Whatever the case may be, that this high school girl must emphatically remind herself to “Be careful!!” in disallowing her body to not be beautiful reveals the profound internalization of Korean “norms” of beauty and fear of the material consequences for bodies that fall outside of the spectrum of acceptable unmarked forms. Other examples of weight-related postcards include:

“I want to slim body. I’m very fat!”
“I have a secret fat.”
“I was thin but now I’m fat!!”
“51, 52, 53...put on weight.”

Of course, being fat is not something one can easily hide. This bodily characteristic, along with others that cannot be completely hidden by clothing such as height, is neither unknown to the student and her social circle nor to any stranger who looks at her body. This further supports the argument that the secrecy of the postcards’ content lies in their public expressions of information relegated to the private sphere.

In the study, “Body Weight, Self-Esteem, and Depression in Korean Female Adolescents” (2001), Kim & Kim extrapolate that what matters in lowered self-esteem among Korean teenage girls is not their actual Body Mass Index (BMI) but their *perceived* BMI. They write, “Only 2.6% of the female adolescents were overweight according to BMI criteria, while 78.5% wanted to be underweight” (321). The perception that they were overweight when, in fact, the majority of the study subjects had normal BMIs suggests a significant preoccupation with body size in adolescence and mirrors statements made by my former students as they reflected upon that time in their lives. Take my former student JiYoung’s comment: “I really wanted to be

smaller. Small and thin - which is a quite popular and common silhouette in Korea - was my ideal. I think the social atmosphere about women's body [sic], especially in Korea, made me or my friends care too much about our own body [sic] and complain over them.” JiYoung locates herself and her friends within the discursive matrix of biopower and, in reflecting upon her adolescence so critically, provides a succinct example of how teenage girls are especially targeted by the social atmosphere. HyeIn recalls how her adolescent body consciousness was based on comparison to others, stating, “I felt stressed! I thought I was a pig because I felt so fat and ugly. Other girls looked so skinny and pretty! I was always thinking about how I wanted to be prettier!” This echoes DongWon’s response in which she too notes her intense preoccupation with her imperfect body image. She explains, “Even though I know I needed to concentrate on my studies, I was stressed because I wanted to lose weight and I found myself thinking [sic] if only I were more slender and pretty...especially when I was looking at pretty, slim girls.”

To further iterate the point that a teenage girl’s desire to prevent marking herself via unsatisfactory body image is the internalization of norms exerted on the multitude, I recall the doctor’s scale parked near the restroom in my placement high school’s second floor hallway. When I asked my co-teacher why there was a scale in an educational environment, he responded it was made available so that any student could conveniently check her weight whenever she wanted to. My face must have given away my bewilderment, so he added that the girls really cared about their weight and didn’t American teenagers care about their weight too? I replied that, yes, American high school students generally care about their weight, but that scales were not located in school hallways. He asked where they were located then. “In the nurse’s office or the sports room,” I answered. Laughing, he asked, “Then how can students regularly check their

weight?” It seemed it never had occurred to him that a school would not provide easy access to something the students so obviously, in his estimation, wanted available.

This example demonstrates how societal structures in their material forms perpetuate systems of stigma and discrimination. It proves a valuable reminder that internal surveillance and self-discipline result from the honing of conduct in the material world. High school (its physical structure, routines, and social fabric) deeply influences Korean teenagers in their subject formations. Given that school is a place that functions as a home away from home, the conversation above reminds one that it is the major Korean institution, in addition to the family, that deploys biopower in honing adolescents to be docile and useful adults in the future. It (re)creates and upholds bio-inequality in the hyper-competitive, regulatory educational environment whereby students feel great anxiety, sadness, panic, and the need for escape (see previous sections). This technology of regulation includes preparing the teenage body for adulthood among its objectives. Thus, while biopower exerted on teenage girls promotes docility to maintain homeostasis it focuses not on the usefulness of their bodies in adolescence, but rather on their bodily potential once they reach adulthood. This potential is defined by the ability to embody and perform the Neo-Confucian responsibilities of self-cultivation, obedience, and reverence to the family and the family body, which extends to the nation-state. Since lookism is rampant in Korea, the contributions a woman can make to ensure a secure and prosperous future is fundamentally tied to her bodily appearance.

Some context for how lookism affects employment is in order. It is commonplace for Korean employers to require a photo accompany job applications - many even require the applicant reveal her height and weight on the initial form. It is also common knowledge that if applicants are on equal footing on paper, the more attractive applicant will be hired. Haejoang

Cho (2002) witnessed such discrimination, saying, “Representatives of the personnel departments...felt that this policy was reasonable insofar as attractive young women were good for the company’s image and improved the atmosphere of the workplace” (ibid.:185). The Korean newspaper Hankyoreh conducted a survey investigating this topic and found, “Nine out of 10 adults said ‘pretty women’ have a better chance at landing a job” (Hankyoreh 2006). In another survey administered by the jobs website *Career.co.kr*, 78.9% of the total respondents believed appearance had “significant or “very significant” influence over job prospects while only 1% responded it was of “low significance” and none believed it was “very insignificant” (Schwartzman 2012). These beliefs, however, are not based on pure conjecture since the Hankyoreh survey went on to reveal, “[F]our out of five human resources staff said they prefer good looks,” and, “Nearly half of public organizations, or 46.7 percent, and 38.8 percent of private enterprises said they count appearance in interview assessments” (Hankyoreh 2006). In asking whether she too believed appearance has a significant impact on whether one gets hired, and JiYoung explains the stark reality of lookism in Korea, saying:

I think before all these matters about beauty, their skill and talents are more important. But in Korea the appearance comes first. When you go to an interview, the interviewees think you are not talented or good enough to be in because you are wearing jeans and sneakers instead of fancy skirts. Or they think the other applicant is more suitable not because he or she is more skilled and talented but just looks nicer than you. [It is l]ike this to live in Korean society [sic] to look nice is quite an important matter, and that's why people feel stressed and get unsatisfied about their bodies - [the] same happened to me as well!

JiYoung’s comment points to both attributes of flesh and fashion as measures of beauty. In the contemporary post-industrialist, globalized, consumerist Korean nation-state, bodies are considered useful in their capacity to work and also in their capacity to consume. This applies to the consumption of beautifying fashion and leads to the creation of what Kim (T., 2003) deems a “capitalist body.” She writes, “These body techniques and concept of the self...tell women that

their bodies are fluid and plastic objects that can be transformed and recreated to adhere with the appearances and shapes that are culturally recognized as desirable” (ibid.:109). The capitalist body, then, is constructed at the mapping of Neo-Confucian ideology onto the nation-state embedded female body.

One industry that continues to overtly present the female capitalist body as its ideal employee by incorporating it in the company model is the Korean airline industry. Flight attendants on Korea’s two largest carriers (Korean Air and Asiana) are unilaterally young and beautiful - and nearly all female.³² Wanting to maintain an air of luxury and dignity, these top carriers select flight attendants based on their bodily potential to provide quality service; “quality” is measured largely by the overall airline aesthetic and reverential customer treatment that makes travel a more pleasant experience.³³ Korean Air even enlisted famed Italian designer Gianfranco Ferré to create the newest line of its uniforms. Indeed, many of my students considered the flight attendant profession to be both glamorous and prestigious and often listed it as their “dream job” during class assignments.

These companies subscribe to the thought that the multitude of employees is composed of individuals who comprise the corporate image, and, thus, discriminatory appearance-based regulations are valid and necessary during the selection and employment process. It is, of course, unsurprising that the flight attendant image is so attractive to customers and my students alike since Korean Air and Asiana have standards of beauty that applicants must meet in order to move ahead to flight training. In fact, most women who apply for a job with these carriers are not

³² In 2012, 95% (3,305/3,493) of Asiana crew members were female flight attendants (Sung 2013).

³³ Arlie Hochschild (1983) argues these kinds of job expectations call on flight attendants to perform “emotional labor” in that they are asked to regulate customers’ feelings in addition to their other tasks.

selected to be flight attendants.³⁴ In order to pass the first round of cuts, Asiana applicants must be younger than twenty-seven, be at least 5'4" tall, and have nice teeth, clear skin, and healthy hair. The women are often asked to forego makeup for initial interviews so that their natural beauty can be seen (Sung 2013). Once women are selected as Asiana flight attendants, their bodies continue to be regulated not least by the ten-page long dress code policy³⁵ that determines whether they can keep their jobs. Among the items listed in the policy are earring size (six tenths of an inch maximum), length of bangs (two-thirds of forehead covered maximum), number of bobby pins allowed in hair, position of hair bun, blemish-masking foundation, nail length, and apron length in relation to the uniform so that approximately two inches of the skirt is visible at the bottom (ibid.). Asiana is the last major Korean airline to allow its flight attendant to wear pants and this occurred only after the National Human Rights Commission of Korea recommended it in February 2013. Yet, it is not the only airline company that functions as a technology of biopower in honing capitalist bodies. Indeed, private institutes that prepare women for the job are positioned within a network of cosmetic surgery clinics and doctors, which provide convenient discounts on procedures that “fix” common imperfections (such as liposuction).

While adolescent girls are worried about their future job prospects in relation to appearance-based discrimination, they face a future marriage market embroiled in lookism as well. In fact, Laurel Kendall (1996) compares the two directly, stating, “At the arranged [blind date], as in a job interview, a woman is under tremendous pressure to convey a positive

³⁴ The selection process is so rigorous that a flight attendant once told me she felt lucky to be selected and expressed gratitude to have the job that she did even though she worked incredibly long hours and had to deal with difficult customers. She also confided that since her time as a crew member was limited (referring to the age restrictions of flight attendants whereby employees are switched to a desk job once they are deemed too old to maintain the company’s aesthetic standards) she could overlook her current work load.

³⁵ The men’s dress code is two pages long.

impression of her looks and personality in a brief period of time under awkward circumstances” (Kendall 1996:112). Being marked as not beautiful is even more perilous now when potential husbands can choose from so many women who have edited their bodies to move closer to beauty’s ideal. It is not uncommon to hear young men joke about how ““a woman with a past can be forgiven but an ugly woman cannot be forgiven”” (Cho 2002:185). Marriage, then, folds into the bio-inequality endemic to Korea’s hyper-competitive systems of hierarchical deference, age- and gender-based obedience through self-sacrifice for the homeostatic benefit of the population as a whole, and self-cultivation to align oneself as a proper subject. The process of competing for a spouse generates both discipline and control through meanings and values that optimize the subject’s conduct in accordance to biopower’s extension of economic rationalization. In short, that beautiful women are considered a better spousal investment demonstrates the pressures exerted upon marked women to remedy their imperfections.

And these imperfections *can* be corrected due to the massive cosmetic surgery machine that has landed Korea on the map as a popular destination for quality medical tourism within Asia. Beauty being unmarked and good has the effect of marking non-beauty as bad, and the only way to unmark oneself is to literally edit one’s bodily appearance. Since fashion and make-up can only go so far, Korean women are turning to cosmetic surgery in increasing numbers to alter their prospects within their lookist society. Sebin, a former student, references this trend, saying, “As we say the first impression of one is important. So, that's why the word [sic] ‘employment surgery’ exists.” In 2009, Korea topped the top cosmetic surgery per capita list logging seventy-four invasive procedures per 10,000 people (Asia Plastic Surgery Guide 2012).³⁶ Many Koreans who opt for “enhancement” are concentrated in Seoul’s larger metropolitan area,

³⁶ Compare this to other nations with high rates of cosmetic surgery (“nation-#” per 10,000 people): Brazil-55, Taiwan-44, USA-42, Japan-32, Thailand-11, China-9, India-6.

and a 2010 survey administered by the capital city government found in 31.5% of residents over the age of fourteen were “willing to undergo surgery to improve their looks”; this was up from 21.5% in 2007 (Choe 2011). Indeed, in 2009, it was estimated that one in five women living in Seoul who were between nineteen and forty-nine years old had had at least one cosmetic procedure done (ibid.). The most common procedures are double eyelid surgery (which removes fat from under the eyelid so that it sits closer to the eye and appears bigger and some say more Western-looking³⁷), rhinoplasty (usually to raise the bridge of the nose with an implant), and facial contouring (which can include shaving down the mandible to achieve a more round face structure). But other non-invasive beautifying treatments such as skin whitening, orthodontics, botox, and hair removal are ubiquitous as well.

Cosmetic surgeons have gotten very good at their craft given the sheer number of surgeries they do on a daily basis. A particularly successful clinic located in Seoul’s most affluent area has been quoted at performing one hundred procedures a day (Lah 2011). As more cosmetic surgeons and clinic sprout up to meet the skyrocketing demand, the price for improving one’s body has become increasingly more affordable. Eyelid surgery, for example, ranges from about twelve hundred to two thousand dollars depending on the invasiveness of the procedure. A nose bridge lift costs approximately twelve hundred dollars while a chin augmentation with a silicone implant runs around fifteen hundred dollars (Seoul TouchUp 2013). Many clinics even offer the “empress package” in which patients receive the eyelid, nose, and chin surgeries in tandem and at a discount. Because medical procedures such as these, which literally edit one’s body in order to unmark oneself and conform to the “norm” of manufacturing an unnatural

³⁷ While it is prudent to analyze and historically contextualize the claim that some want “Western” features, I must forego engaging with particular angle of cosmetic enhancement for a future discussion. In doing so, I wish to focus on the fact that teenage girls are unmarking themselves by editing their bodies to meet an ideal, whatever the standards of “unmarked” may be.

beauty, are becoming more available and affordable to those of lower socioeconomic status, it seems reasonable to conclude that the pressure to undergo cosmetic surgery is increasing as well. Since job and marriage prospects and daily interactions are firmly embedded within widespread appearance-based discrimination and corrective procedures that can transform bad (marked non-beauty) to good (unmarked beauty) are reasonably accessible, then it stands to reason that the line between choosing to undergo cosmetic surgery as an option as opposed to doing it out of necessity grows ever finer. Along these lines, a TV show setup an undercover exposé of a hospital official who bluntly pitched double-jaw surgery to a woman by saying, ““You want to get married?...Then you have to do this, you have to take the risk”” (Choe 2011).

The body image secrets my students submitted reveal how high school girls are acutely aware of their bodily imperfections as they relate to features that are being surgically unmarked.

“My eye is not big. It secret.”
“My eyes are small. I hate my eyes.”
“My eyes are too small.”
“I have black skin...so sad.”
“The leg hair which is abundant.”
“My legs look like jungle...!”

Since eyelid surgery, skin whitening, and hair removal are so commonly utilized to enhance beauty, then not undergoing these procedures results in that marking becoming relatively more visible. In other words, teenage girls know their imperfections are especially noticed if they are not on the routine corrective operation bandwagon. The postcards above demonstrate how this awareness is typically confined concealed expressions of distress and dismay. Made public, one can discern how each author’s expression of discontent regarding her fleshly imperfections articulates a pre-operative moment in which the teenager must soon decide what she is willing to do to unmark herself. However, what options do these girls face in correcting the following perceived flaws?

“My legs are becomes thick!!”

*“I want to be tall more. My complex.”
“I’m very very short”
“I’m not tall.”*

In some cases, “enhancing” one’s beauty is as simple as paying twelve hundred dollars, making time for the procedure and follow-up appointments, and wearing sunglasses for a week - as is the case with eyelid surgery. In others, however, the available services are far more invasive and dangerous - as is the case with leg and height treatments. While botox and massage therapy are recommended for the temporary “thinning” of legs, calf reduction surgery is actually offered as a viable permanent procedure in some clinics. One website proposes the removal or incineration of up to 60% of muscle as a “solution” to make the “safe and ideal ratio for the slimming of the legs” a reality (Seoul TouchUp 2013). This slimming will, they claim, make the patient appear taller as well. These drastic and invasive surgeries are not nearly as common as cheap and less painful eyelid surgery, for example. However, that they exist at all as options on cosmetic surgery clinic websites and are advertised as attainable solutions to what could otherwise be considered a hopeless mark of non-beauty, speaks to the bio-inequality’s salience in Korea.

Koreans who consider themselves short generally can increase their height by wearing high heels or lifts and must come to terms with their marked shortness throughout adulthood.³⁸ But there are a growing³⁹ number of clinics offering services to parents who wish to help their children get taller while their bodies are still fundamentally developing. Another mother, who used to pay \$850 per month for growth hormone injections, brings her children multiple times a week to a clinic that offers stretching, exercises, and acupuncture to lengthen their bodies, says that she doesn’t want her children to “blame [her and her husband] for being short when they

³⁸ There are whispers of adult leg lengthening treatments, in which the leg bones are broken and slowly separated to stimulate bone growth in the small gaps, being made available in underground or unlicensed clinics. While the Chinese government had to crack down on this procedure in China after some botched surgeries, I could not find this service listed officially on any clinic website I visited, nor have I ever seen an advertisement for it.

³⁹ Pun intended.

grow up” (Choe 2009). That cosmetic surgery is now many times given as a high school graduation present demonstrates how parents have internalized their roles in minimizing their child’s potential negative repercussions from relative competition within peer age groups.⁴⁰ While some parents foresee their children experiencing height discrimination (Choe 2009) and others attribute their child’s lack of confidence to low self-esteem associated with her body image, many also cite these circumstances as needing and having solutions.

And it would not be difficult to imagine why an adolescent girl might lack confidence: both in herself and her life prospects. In fact, a study has shown that body image dissatisfaction is linked to increased likelihood of suicidal thoughts even when controlling for variation in BMIs, location, socioeconomic status, family life, and other unhealthy behaviors (Kim, D. 2009). Given the disproportionately high suicide rates in Korea compared to all other OECD nations in conjunction with disproportionately high cosmetic surgery rates, that body image dissatisfaction contributes to the number one killer of Koreans ages ten to nineteen may lay bare more than mere correlation. The researcher goes on further to say, “Parent and peer relationships partially mediated the association between body image dissatisfaction and suicidal ideation in both genders, but these effects were very small” (Kim, D. 2009). This reflects what I experienced first-hand within my homestay family in Korea when no amount of reassurance that she was beautiful from her father could convince my homestay sister that she would not look, and therefore feel, better after having the eyelid surgery. While she had no indications of suicidal thoughts or depressive tendencies, she did focus intently on her perceived bodily deficiencies and was convinced getting cosmetic surgery would make a difference in her life. Interestingly, my homestay mother said she did not mind one way or the other and that she wanted her daughter to

⁴⁰ This raises the issue of the meanings and values of parental responsibility within biopower’s matrix of regulation and control, which is a conversation worthy of extensive review outside of this paper.

do what made her “more confident.” Thus, my homestay sister was being told three seemingly irreconcilable truths simultaneously: she was beautiful enough for her family, the fact that she saw herself as not beautiful enough outside of her family’s perceptions could be pragmatically addressed in order to boost her confidence, and it would be unwise to miss the opportunity to self-cultivate a more secure and prosperous future. These messages originate from multiple scales, the last of which being the ongoing nation-state-wide discourse on beauty’s prominent role in lifelong success. Perhaps these mixed signals may shed light on why those people closest to teenagers have little influence in reducing individuals’ despair at their marked non-beauty, for the material realities of appearance-based discrimination are certainly not lost on Koreans preparing for the job and marriage markets.

It is important to reiterate that parents are not unilaterally pushing their children into clinics and demanding the surgeons fix them. Yet for every parent that tells his or her daughter that she is beautiful just the way she is, there seems to be a peer or other adult in her life that suggests a little procedure might do her good. Take HyeIn’s teacher who, as HyeIn puts it, “said I looked so Asian and need eye surgery!” She follows this with, “I was so sad.” And those who have escaped being directly told they would benefit from editing their bodies cannot escape the popular culture machine that promulgates Korea’s infatuation with manufacturing ideal bodily appearance. Sebin concisely captures its normalizing power in her comment: “If a trend says thin legs are beautiful, other girls are going on a diet, and I am the last one who ha[s] a chubby leg. It makes me depressed. Also the clothes are fit to that trend, so [it would be] better [to] follow it. Also boys like pretty women. That is [another] reason that girls [are] doing that.” Pressures to edit one’s body image - unmark oneself as non-ideal - are exerted from many directions and are buttressed by the increasing availability of affordable cosmetic solutions. Teenage girls are

especially targeted by this hegemonic project as they are made acutely aware of the potential ramifications for future employment and marriage prospects should they to choose to forego the bodily self-cultivation required to out-compete their peers.

The postcards submitted by my students regarding body image take issue with their own shortcomings rather than society-wide pressures to enhance their appearances. This demonstrate how they have internalized the surveillance of their female bodies as part of the neoliberal, post-industrial consumerist nation-state project that renders adolescent girls docile and useful. In choosing to reveal their concern and despair at their mitigated potential for success in the future, my students have also revealed the extent to which they have shouldered the responsibility of their lifelong prosperity or, perhaps more accurately, the prevention of unnecessarily lost potential. Yet, the multivalent, multiscalar discourse that an ideal subject acts now to reduce her potential suffering in the future creates psychological and emotional distress of its own - suffering that these girls are compelled to conceal on a daily basis.

Section 9: Conclusion ***“I am afraid [of] my future.”***

While the “Emotional/Psychological Distress,” “Grades, School,” and “Body Image” categories account for over half of the postcards submitted in my class project, they are by no means the only postcards illuminating the biopower exerted on female adolescents in Korea. Indeed, many other secrets revealed by my students demonstrate how they are embedded within the processes of biopower I have described above. For example, in the “Boys, Love” category, many of my students complained about not being able to “make a boyfriend”⁴¹, which is logistically quite difficult given the division of sexes in education and private life and limited free time to do much of anything outside school and the home in their high school years. Due to

⁴¹ This is the direct translation from Korea to English meaning to have a boyfriend or make a deeper relationship with a boy.

space limitations, I am unable to give a full analysis of every category with ethnographic contextualization in this particular piece. Nonetheless, the dataset is remarkable not only for what it reveals, but also for what it does not. Out of over three hundreds secrets, drug and alcohol use were completely absent from any of the postcards. Though there were some about the author's sexual identity ("*I am bisexuality.* ") and curiosity ("*I read the novel about homosexuality.* "), none referred to their own sexual activity or the consequences thereof: pregnancy, disease, shame, etc. The one postcard referring to abuse of any kind revealed that the author had told a third party about her friend's rape. In their absence, one is left to speculate whether these experiences are less common among Korean teenagers than their American peers (as I would hazard a guess with secrets involving drugs and alcohol) or considered so secret that even anonymously revealing them is unthinkable (as may be the case with abuse and sexual activity). Whatever the case, I am convinced this project has merit to be undertaken again, in more schools and with both genders⁴² participating in order to more fully address these unknowns.

Though I have not had the opportunity to reproduce the postcard project in more Korean classrooms, there are other projects currently in effect that provide a platform for Korean high school students to voice their own accounts of what it means to be them. In *Documentary on Korean High School*, nineteen-year-old filmmaker Kelley Katzenmeyer follows the lives of high school students as they prepare to take the KSAT. Having studied abroad in Korea for a year of her own secondary education, Katzenmeyer took a year off after graduating to finish up a documentary she began as a side project during her initial time in Korea. The film is due to be released sometime in 2013 and centers on the extreme pressures Korean students feel to achieve their dreams. Unsurprisingly, the film focuses on the regimented schedule of studying that

⁴² Gender in Korea is discussed binarily.

defines high school seniors' lives leading up to the college entrance exam. However, in interviews, students also talk about their body image and the psychological and emotional toll caused by the high standards expected of them. Though the finished film is unavailable at this time, the extended trailer⁴³ (over eighteen minutes long) reinforces the data I have provided in this paper. Yet, it raises the questions of how our two projects differ in both method and content and what that might mean for the use of secrecy as an analytic of processes of biopower. Until I can view the final product, these questions must remain unanswered.

Another opportunity for comparison with my students' secret postcards are the student submissions to the *Korean Students Speak* project. Started in 2011, this online photo blog, organized by a few past and present Fulbright Korea ETAs, is intended "to encourage students to creatively voice their opinions" (Korean Students Speak 2013) and includes photos of students holding signs of whatever message they want to share with the online community. Students choose to associate their faces with their messages and do so knowing their peers are likely to see them as well. Some examples of these messages include:

I want to rest. I'm very tired!
Why 'studying' is the easiest or best way to succeed? Everyone has many talent.
Study is not all of your life.
I want to choice myself about my life.
School is not a place to compete.
Think positive.
I want to be a teacher.
I love Korean music.
1 + 1 = 2
Dokdo is Korean territory.
Smiling people make happy world.
I like pizza.
I want to be a billionaire.
I want to go to Paris.
Judgment day is coming.
I want eat more food.
I love you.
I'm pure.
This paper killed. [picture of a tree]

⁴³ See koreanhighschool.com to view the long trailer.

Though the format is similar to the postcard project, there are some key differences in both the method of collection and what the students choose to share. When participation does not require revealing a secret, but rather is open to an unrestricted expression of one's non-anonymous message to an online audience, the categories of content shift drastically. While the blog format encourages students to express whatever they like, the postcard format asks they reveal what they have not and cannot express otherwise. The blog posts "*1+1=2*" and "*I like pizza.*" certainly reveal something about the author,⁴⁴ yet these expressions are not necessarily something the author has felt compelled to conceal.

In framing the postcard project as an opportunity to share concealed expressions of truths, one is able to read not only how secrecy functions as a tool of hegemonic processes (because the silencing of public acknowledgement of these truths reinforces the discourse that failure to consistently perform as an ideal subject is the fault of the individual regardless of the bio-inequalities integrated into ongoing nation-state building and maintenance) but also how norms are internalized by the authors (because what the authors have been compelled to conceal informs the audience of what is particularly subject to disciplinary and regulatory surveillance). In opening up student participation to include any expression of opinion, the submissions from *Korean Students Speak* cannot necessarily be taken as indicators of discursive subject-making. However, it is remarkable that among the student blog posts there are still comments referring to dissatisfaction with the pressures they face in adolescence. Interestingly, the blog posts are far less likely to self-reprimand than the secret postcards. That the messages are traceable to particular students' faces and both boys and girls from schools across Korea participate, I believe, affects the willingness to disclose the sensitive, self-reproaching information that

⁴⁴ Not knowing the students in the classroom nor the method of prompting their participation, I cannot be sure of their intentions in these messages, though I would guess they were less concerned with the textual message than their participation in an online photo blog.

comprise the postcards submitted for my classroom project. That is not to say the photo blog project is lacking; it simply is not intended to provide students an anonymous avenue of airing their deepest, darkest admissions of truth and the submitted content reflects that.

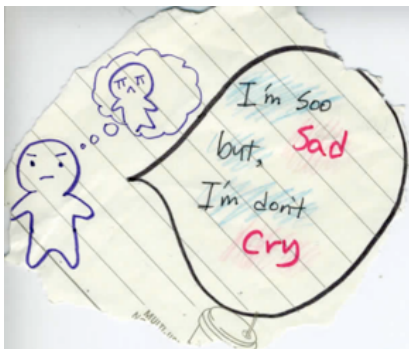
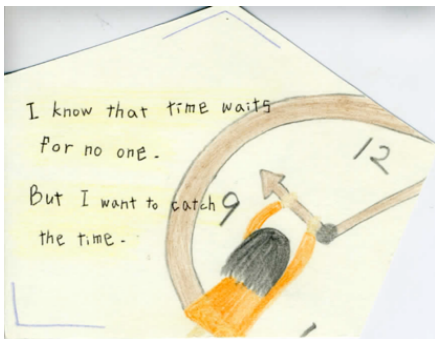
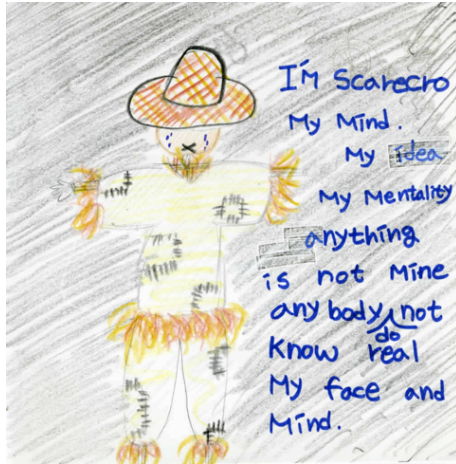
In this paper, I have analyzed the secrets revealed by my female high school students according to how they illuminate and explicate processes of biopower embedded within the contemporary Korean nation-state. When read in ethnographic context, the public airing of the otherwise silenced acknowledgement of the authors' perceived deficiencies and failures allows for these processes to be examined at multiple scales. The dataset paints a picture of controlled female bodies and the discursive underpinnings of coerced conduct according to the nation-state's project of rendering subjects docile and useful. The internalization of norms according to my students' gendered and aged intersectional subjectivity upholds and reinforces bodily discipline and regulation at both the individual and group levels. The pressure for teenage girls to consistently self-cultivate (especially in performing well in school and unmarking their non-beautiful bodily characteristics) in order to minimize lost potential for future success and security, I argue, causes them profound emotional and psychological distress. The self-recrimination and dejection high school girls feel at failing to embody the ideal subject translates into despair at having permanently affected their success potential in the job and marriage markets.

Due to the very real material consequences of being unable to out-compete peers and the inescapability of relative competition in all spheres of social life, I argue there is a strong correlation between the self-blame of failure to self-cultivate and Korea's disproportionately high suicide rates among teenagers. That adolescents are held solely accountable today for ensuring lifelong prosperity, or, alternatively, misfortune, instills in them a sense of urgency and

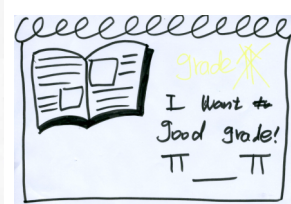
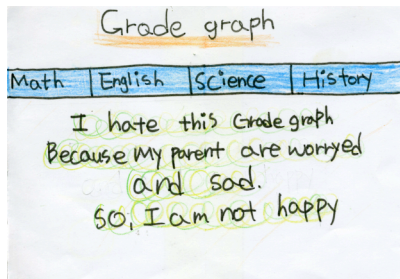
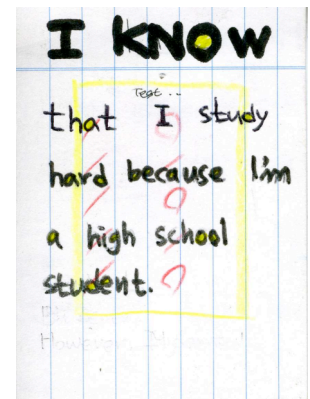
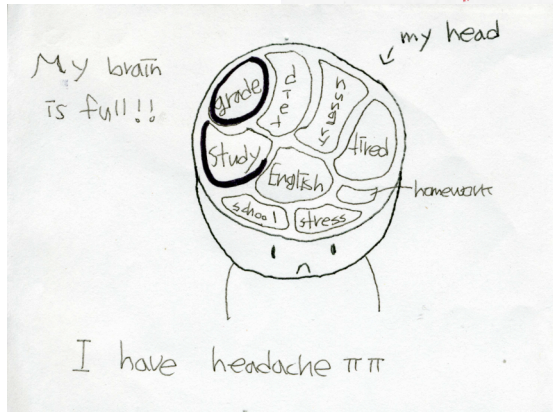
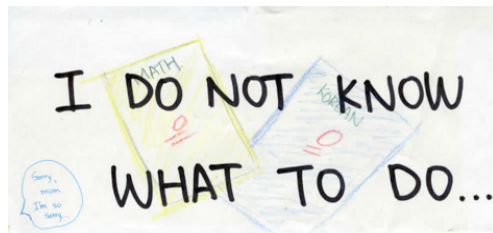
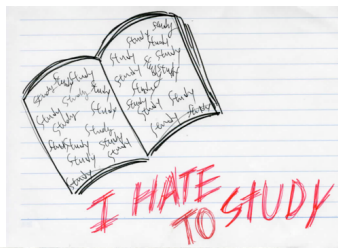
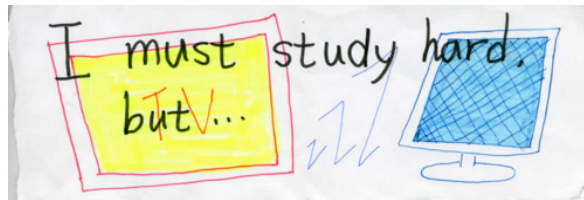
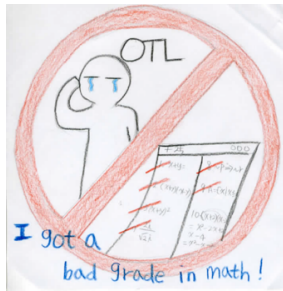
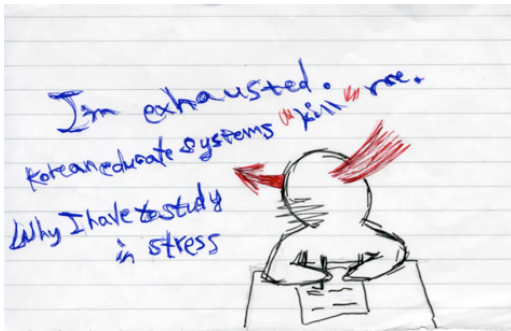
fear. “My kids” were, if anything, constantly afraid: afraid of missed opportunities, miscalculations, misdirected energy, mischaracterizations, etc. Perhaps this student most eloquently sums up the result of biopower’s matrix of regulation: *“I am afraid [of] my future.”* The emotional and psychological distress caused by regulatory mechanisms and disciplinary pressures is experienced daily by Korean teenage girls. Female high school students in Korea, then, not only embody the underpinnings of biopower in the neoliberal, post-industrial consumerist nation-state project but embody the cost of that project as well.

The dataset I collected and have analyzed here is restricted to a particular student body in Korea, but I believe serves to make connections among major concepts and themes addressed in unpacking “life as such”. The secrets would very likely be quite different in content were the postcard project to be done outside of Korea. Yet, revealing what teenage subjects are compelled to conceal produces knowledge that is situated within a discursive system of discipline and regulation regardless of place-specific maintenance of homeostasis. In this case study, adolescence is a time of concentrated subject-making with meanings and values being internalized to discipline and regulate conduct as the nation-state invests in more useful and docile adult subjects in the future. In conclusion, social science, especially anthropology, would benefit from further investigating secrecy in adolescence, in Korea and beyond, since it provides another angle to unpacking and better understanding nation-building and its gendered dynamics.

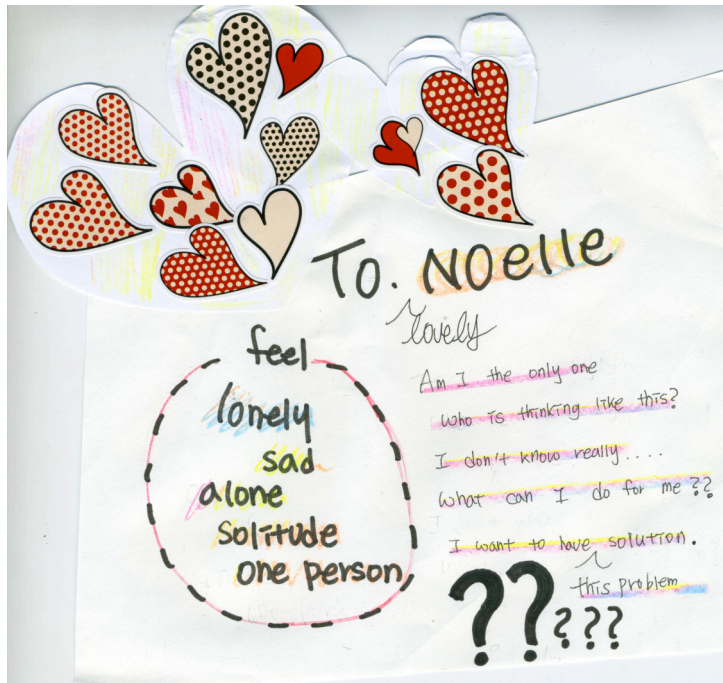
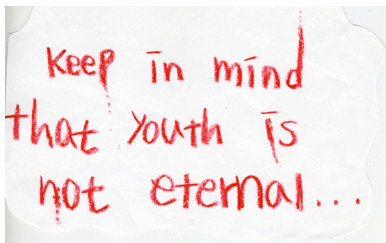
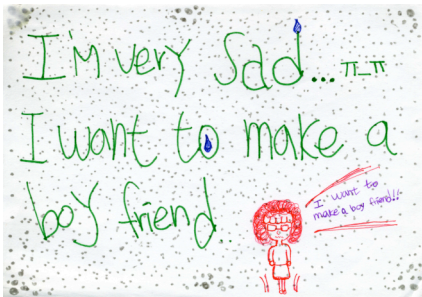
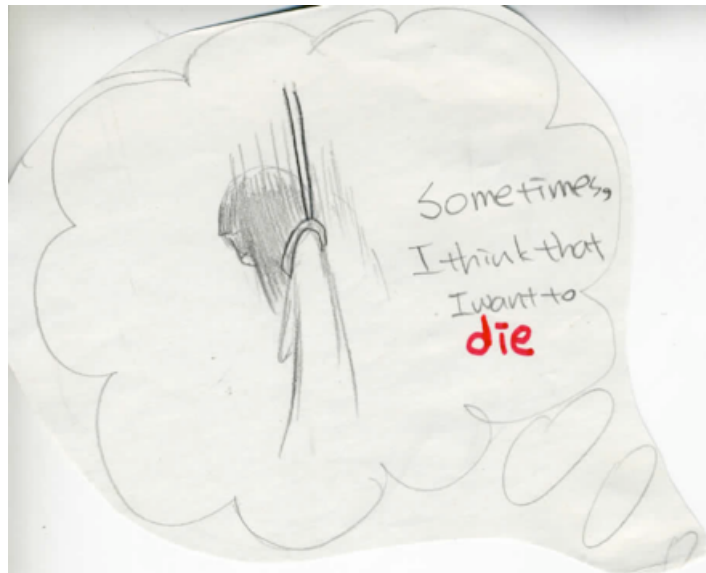
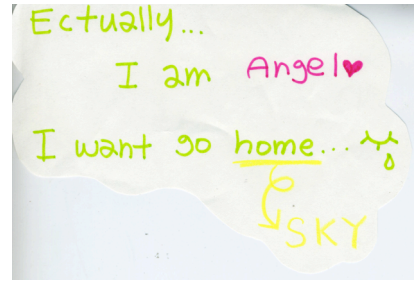
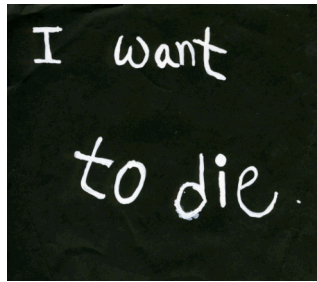
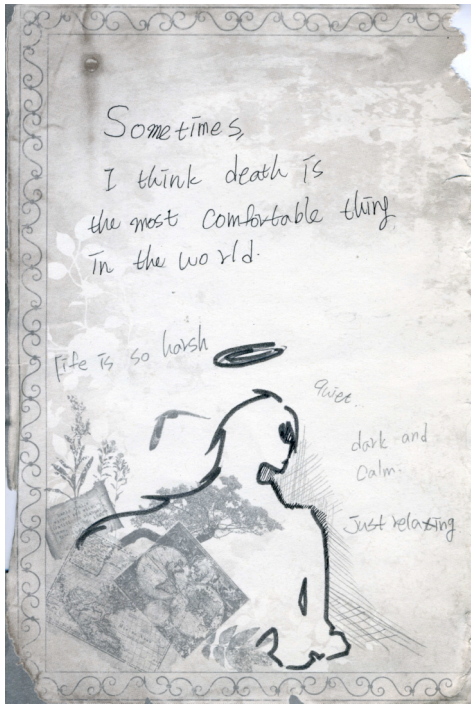
Emotional/Psychological Distress postcard examples.



Grades, School postcard examples

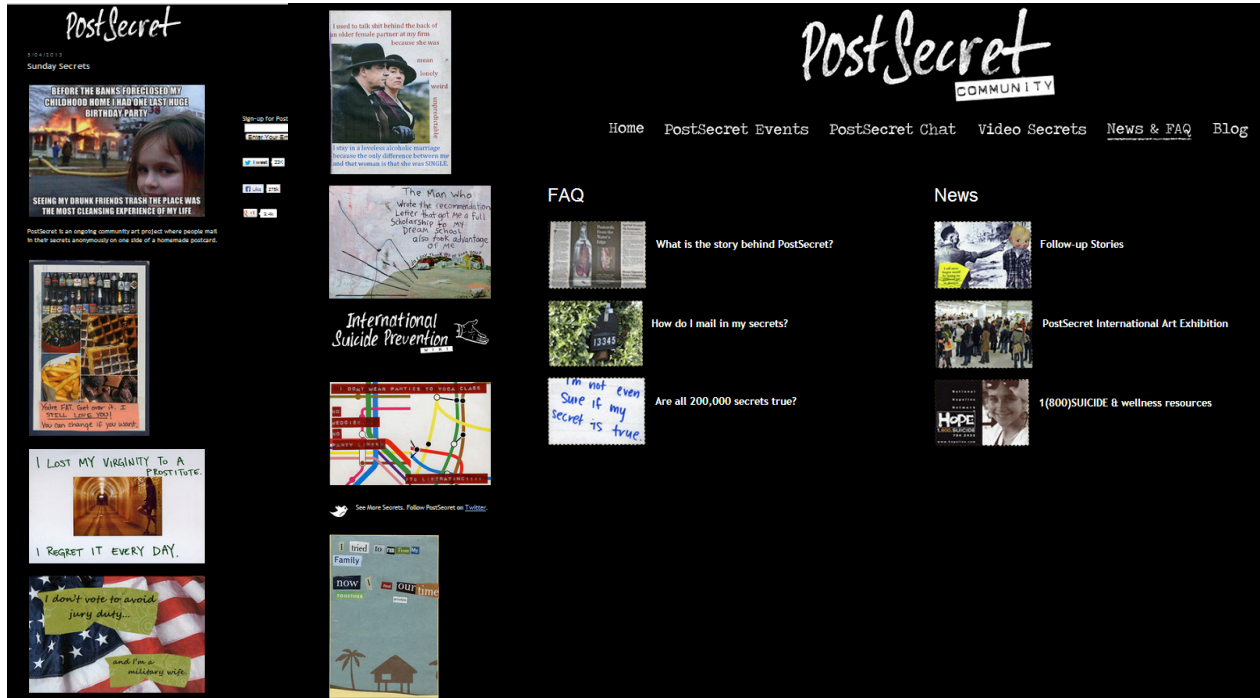


Other postcard examples:



Screen Captures from Websites

Postsecret.com



Koreanstudentspeak.tumblr.com

KOREAN STUDENTS SPEAK



Many South Korean classrooms lack opportunities for freedom of expression. The goal of this project is to encourage students to creatively voice their opinion. On blank paper, in bold letters, these students speak to the world. For more information, please check the FAQ located on the "About" page.

KSS does not encourage, endorse, nor claim ownership of any of the messages, positive or negative, that appear on the blog.



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