Investing in “The Academic 1%”: Caring for South Korean Adolescence at the Junctures of Global Market Volatility, Obsolescence, and Play

by

Hyun Joo Sandy Oh

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses the production of South Korea’s aspirant “1%.” Focusing on affluent adolescents, their parents, and private educators, I show how my interlocutors understand the world to be inherently volatile and uncertain under the current conditions of global capitalism. Understanding their current position to be fundamentally precarious, my interlocutors seek to create new circumstances from which value can be accumulated, invested, appreciated and generated. These orientations towards futurity position adolescents as sites of speculation and investment in the production of human capital. Based on fieldwork undertaken at “IHE Prep,” a private academy (hagwŏn) specializing in American college exam and application preparatory lessons, in addition to international schools (Kukchehakkyo) in the Seoul metropolitan area, I analyse how the South Korean economy, education, and class conflict fuel my interlocutors’ aspirations to embed themselves in global markets. Notably, international schools are vested with special powers by the Ministry of Education to implement their own curriculums in full foreign language immersion. I will argue that these processes rest on social obligations of kinship, intergenerational exchanges of reciprocity, and aspirational classed identity. By tracking the process leading up to admissions into elite American universities, I argue that
adolescents’ pursuits are not effects of rational, calculating individuals. Rather, their aspirations are wrought from their status as debtors to their parents’ enormous investments. Intently focused on American education, the valuation of adolescents is further grounded in English acquisition and university branding, as markers of future leaders, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and innovators. Moreover, adolescents as financialized subjects, constituted through care and capital, are further valued for their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Throughout my examination, I show how processes of investment become a lived reality, contingent not only on the global economy, but forms of embodiment where one should cultivate a creative, playful disposition, compassionate heart, indexing their status as the newly aspirant “1%.”
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................. iv  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... vii  
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... x  

Chapter 1 Investing in “The Academic 1%”: Caring for South Korean Adolescence at the Junctures of Global Market Volatility, Obsolescence and Play .............................................. 1  
1 Introduction: Cultivating the 1% ...................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Education after the 1997 IMF Crisis ........................................................................... 13  
   1.2 Vitality vs. Deflation: Investing in human capital production in the age of obsolescence ......................................................................................................................... 21  
   1.3 A brief history of human capital production in South Korea: The shift from public to private education .................................................................................................................. 28  
      1.3.1 Before the 1997 IMF Crisis ................................................................................. 28  
      1.3.2 The 1997 IMF Crisis and beyond ........................................................................ 35  
   1.4 Investing in human capital: Adolescents as appreciable assets .................................. 39  
   1.5 International schools: Sites of financialized futurity ................................................. 40  
   1.6 Dissertation outline ................................................................................................... 41  

Chapter 2 Studying the “1%” in the Post 2008 Global Financial Crisis Context ................. 44  
2 Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 44  
   2.1 Gangnam in the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis context ...................................... 47  
   2.2 IEP Academy ........................................................................................................... 47  
   2.3 Gangnam Style? ....................................................................................................... 53  
   2.4 Berkeley Institute: Gifting and market economies .................................................... 56  
   2.5 The SAT scandal ..................................................................................................... 59  
   2.6 IHE Prep .................................................................................................................. 62
2.7 Multiple subjectivities: Duties at IHE Prep .................................................. 65
2.8 International schools .......................................................................................... 71
2.9 Adolescents as sites of investment ....................................................................... 72
Chapter 3 .................................................................................................................... 79
Escaping Obsolescence: The Shift from Subject to Skill-based Education in a South Korean International School .............................................................. 79
3 Introduction: Imaginaries of obsolescence ............................................................... 79
  3.1 Williams International: Speculating on Global Capitalism ................................. 83
  3.2 End of Year Ceremony: Liquidity Through Obsolescence ............................... 88
  3.3 Preparedness: Skills-Based Education ................................................................. 96
  3.4 IFEZ: Growth Through Obsolescence ............................................................... 99
  3.5 Human Capital During Turbulent Times ............................................................. 105
  3.6 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 110
Chapter 4 .................................................................................................................... 112
Work Hard, Play Harder ............................................................................................. 112
4 Introduction: Play in post‐industrial times ............................................................. 112
  4.1 From the protestant to the play ethic ................................................................. 115
  4.2 Creative economy: Education in crisis? ............................................................ 119
  4.3 Innovation & pedagogies: The 4th Industrial Revolution (Sach’a sanŏp’yŏngmyŏng) ................................................................. 121
  4.4 The design cycle: “Creative destruction” and the dialectics of failure .................. 127
  4.5 Play as unalienated labour? .............................................................................. 132
  4.6 The unalienated body ....................................................................................... 136
  4.7 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 139
Chapter 5 .................................................................................................................... 142
Venture Philanthropy: Regimes of Care as the Derivative Gamble .......................... 142
5 Introduction: Francis, the Venture Philanthropist .................................................. 142
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>The gift at the centre of financialization: Venture philanthropy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The Infinite Potential of Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Matrices of Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Care: Investor and Investee Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Joy or when students invest in themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Classroom reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Averting a life of mediocrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Experimental Exuberance and Intra-Classed Fissures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Class in Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>The New “1%”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Speculative Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Being a Bad Rich Person: Gapjil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Gapjil in the Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Becoming Human Capital in Hell Joseon: South Korea as a Failed State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Never Being Born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>When value-in-potentia goes unrealized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>After 2008: The end is still nigh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Suicide and hypercapitalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>It doesn’t always work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Vitality and value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

 ix
List of Figures

Figure 1: International Baccalaureate (IB) Curriculum ................................................................. 127

Figure 2: Cartoon from Korea Exposé ................................................................................................... 211

Figure 3: Korea thy name is hell — Joseon Voices from Korea Exposé ........................................... 220
Chapter 1
Investing in “The Academic 1%”: Caring for South Korean Adolescence at the Junctures of Global Market Volatility, Obsolescence and Play

1 Introduction: Cultivating the 1%

On a dreary afternoon in October 2014, I arrived at the Institute of Higher Education Preparatory School (IHE Prep) bearing gifts. IHE Prep is an American college preparatory “cram school” (*hagwon*) that specializes in coaching students through American standardized exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT), as well as a number of other personalized academic consulting services. This private academy was my primary fieldsite and place of employment for my fieldwork in South Korea from September 2014 to December 2015. My selection of gifts — food — was not only a result of IHE Prep’s proximity to certain commercial outlets, but also because I knew that my co-workers would appreciate the spread. The items came at a premium and reflected their cosmopolitan proclivities. I splurged and bought Americanos from the nearby Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, a Los Angeles–based coffee chain that was quite popular in the affluent Gangnam neighbourhood. For treats, I purchased pastries at the Hyundai Department Store, famously known for its careful curation of foreign foods. One would otherwise have to travel to a boutique in Tokyo or Paris to experience the delights of Pierre Hermé’s famed pastries, the very ones that have earned him the appellation of “the Picasso of Pastry” by Vogue Magazine.¹

Although arriving at IHE Prep with gifts of food was hardly out of the ordinary — parents, students, and my co-workers routinely engaged in this practice as a form of gifting that led to impromptu socializing — this day was special.² My boss, Ms. Ha, had generously agreed to a

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¹ In actuality, I purchased pastries from Alaska Bakery, which was substantially cheaper than Hermé’s products. The owner of Alaska Bakery is famed for creating his own brand, after traveling the world and learning various techniques only to specifically tailor them again for a “Korean palate.”

² For the purposes of ethnographic portrayal, I use “Ms. Ha” and “Mr. Huh,” who was the assistant director, as pseudonyms. I picked these polite forms of reference for readability. In everyday interactions, these two individuals, who rarely spoke in English but could understand it, were never referred to by their names. Instead, everyone called them by their titles (*Isanim* for “Director” and *Taerinim* for “Assistant Manager”) perhaps adding their surname as a prefix in front. However, I imagine that a dissertation written in English that repeatedly refers to an ethnographic subject as “Director” or “Assistant Manager” would be a bit awkward and opaque.
formal interview to discuss my dissertation research.³ To show up at IHE Prep without bringing other specialized small tokens of gratitude on a day my busy employer had set aside time to support my doctoral research would have been uncouth to say the very least. Under normal circumstances, my discussions with the Director (Isanim) were limited to scheduling and student progress. Ms. Ha had purposely set aside time to share her theories regarding the evolution of the South Korean private education market over the past thirty years. We discussed the choices she has made and her decision to send her children to an international school outside of Seoul, as well as her views on “cram schools,” such as IHE Prep, for students within this educational stream. Feeling threatened by global economic volatility — the unpredictability of existing markets and the sudden emergence of new ones — upper-class South Korean parents such as Ms. Ha invest upwards of US$35,000 a year in tuition for one child to attend an international school and thousands more on private tutoring.

Although I open my ethnographic investigations with the formal discussion I had with Ms. Ha at IHE Prep, to fully understand how adolescents have become sites of investment and are being groomed to join the ranks of the nation’s “1%” required me to undertake multi-sited fieldwork, where I routinely visited the international schools that Ms. Ha discusses, whose actions in enrolling her own children in these schools proves her beliefs. Throughout my dissertation I switch from “children” to “adolescent” to “student.” The first however should be interpreted as offspring, rather than an utterly dependent subject. For the most part, however, I will interchangeably use the term “adolescent” and “student.”⁴

While I could have selected my adolescent interlocutors from any of the many international schools all over South Korea, I focused on institutions in the Seoul area. My methodology is based on the fact that Seoul and its surrounding cities are all linked through public transportation and connect 24.5 million people in a concentrated area—nearly half of the

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³ All names of individuals and institutions are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.
⁴ My usage of the term “adolescent” is directly translated from my adult interlocutors’ use of “ch’ŏngsonyŏn.” The most commonly used term however was “hak-saeng,” which means “student” but also includes the broader implication of a set of responsibilities to be studious and disciplined. This category also denotes a life stage where one has yet to become economically independent from their parents. For all intents and purposes, I could have used the term “youth” to “admit both the ideological reality of categories and the flexibility of identities” of my interlocutors and to show their agency (Bucholtz 2002: 544).
nation’s population. But more specifically, IHE Prep, alongside most of the nation’s SAT prep schools are situated in the wealthy Gangnam district, which is either home to my interlocutors or easily accessible by subway or bus to other affluent areas where many lived.

Most international schools are legally owned and operated by foreign private companies, either as franchises or international “satellite” campuses, with a few owned and operated by South Korean companies. In one quite singular case, a very well-known South Korean private tutoring chain opened an international school to expand their market. International schools are an anomaly within the South Korean educational landscape and their differences produce configurations that are worth investigating — especially for how they uniquely unite the South Korean state, foreign investors, foreign teachers, affluent parents, and “global” students.

Uniting this constellation of social actors, which includes those working in the after-school private academy industry such as IHE Prep, is made possible by the fact that the South Korean Ministry of Education exempts international schools from their regulations. The Ministry of Education categorizes these schools as “international school,” “foreign school,” “foreign educational institutions,” to specify foreign ownership when ruling on regulations related to admissions for example. However, I refer to these institutions as “international schools” as a direct translation of “Kukchehakkyo,” a term South Koreans use regardless of the legal categorizations of each institution. The used term “Kukchehakkyo” is comprised of two words: Kukche, which means international, and hakkyo, which translates to school.6

Although public schools and domestic colleges are still affordable and financially feasible for most South Koreans, international schools are the preferred choice for the most affluent (and in some cases not so affluent). For parents and students, some of the key distinctions that make international schools so appealing are linked to the advertised state-of-the-art facilities, holistic developmental programs including nurturing a venturesome philanthropic spirit, and promising admission to name-brand American colleges. Granted special jurisdiction by the Ministry of

5 These terms are not my translations but are those that can be found on the Internet in English.

6 Kukche also translates to cosmopolitan, which I would argue is in some ways a more appropriate term, considering that the majority of attendees are Korean nationals with their aspirations set towards an expansive, open-ended horizon.
Education to implement a curriculum of their choice, the English-immersion schools that I examine throughout this dissertation are predominantly staffed by individuals from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. In many cases more than 50% of instructors hold graduate degrees. For the most part, these international schools implement the American Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum while also incorporating key elements from UNESCO’s “global citizenship” educational model (UNESCO 2014), that emphasize the necessity to care for impoverished others around the world.

Most crucially, international schools provide students with the linguistic capital considered most valuable for American college entrance exam preparation and undergraduate education. The fact that many international schools ground their curriculums in UNESCO’s “global citizenship” curriculum will also be examined throughout this dissertation. Notably, this American-centric education pathway is frequently less about emigrating to the United States than it is about cultivating a *habitus* of American Silicon Valley preparedness to thrive in new economies and in some cases create them. The fact that international school teachers, alongside many after-school private academy instructors, come to South Korea from England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, to teach within these largely American-centric institutions evidences how adolescents claim their space in their newly forming global economies (McIntosh 2006, Weiss 2002, 2009).  

This evidences that the primary marker of valuation stems from the ability to speak English with a “native” accent. In addition to subjects being valued for their language skills, in the production of “global citizens” the desire to socialize adolescents so that they may comfortably interact with their teachers from many walks of life speaks to the ways in which they seek to become part of a broader political-economic landscape. Barring the few British international schools (which I did not conduct fieldwork at), international schools inculcated in their teachers the pedagogical approaches that revere technological innovation emblematic of Silicon Valley (McElhinny 2011). As I will discuss, the trajectories of the aspirant “1%” are designed to

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7 I bring this up because there are also international schools that offer full Chinese-language immersion lessons as well. I do not examine these institutions.

8 Amongst the Canadian teachers I spoke with, one was of Francophone descent. She spoke with what otherwise might be recognized as an “American accent.”
produce subjects prepared to move, shake, and innovate global markets — all while dressed in sneakers and hoodies.

That degrees from elite American universities have a globally accepted high valuation is a nation-less passport that removes barriers and gives entrance to new markets and becoming a key player in pioneering new modalities of capital extraction and accumulation. Tech empires are the empires of now and the future, and the lure of giants such as Google and Apple draws students to study more frequently in the US over the UK.

Thus, in producing these distinctions in students that will elevate them to becoming a part of the “global 1%” animates investment in international education that are in fact quite American-centric upon first glance. But the educational practices examined in this dissertation are also signifiers of global anxieties shared by upper-class attendees both in South Korea and beyond regarding the viability of past models, institutions, and practices to reproduce classed status from within shifting global economies (Bray and Yamato 2003; Kenway and Fahey 2014, also see Kenway and Koh 2013). The practices undertaken by the private education industry can also be understood as what Christopher Krupa calls (2010: 320) “state by proxy” where “private groups are often contracted by the state to carry out certain of its functions, may act independently in its name or simply copy its basic administrative techniques.” In many ways, the notion of “investment” in the face of risk and “potentially perishable position” are determine to the political arrangements seen here. Framing my analysis in a similar light but with the production of the “1%” in mind, I argue that the anxious pursuits of private educators and parents tracked throughout this dissertation are state sanctioned practices facilitating social actors’ pursuit of maverick enterprises to establish new markets and possibilities for capital extraction around the globe.

These anxieties were nearly all present in my interview with Ms. Ha, which we conducted in Korean. While she understands English quite well, Ms. Ha is far more comfortable conversing

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9 As one friend put it, “In Korea, if you graduate from Harvard, it is game over.” Holding a degree from the top-ranked American university is still considered the golden key to asserting one’s superiority over others.

10 On a more pragmatic note, parents were less inclined to aim for top schools such as Oxford due to the unfavourable exchange rate between the South Korean won and British pound.
in her native tongue.\textsuperscript{11} The following translations are my interpretations of our exchange. After she called me into her office, she helped me to lay out the desserts in an appealing display. As the bustle of the other teachers who had been invited to share the food subsided, our interview started out on a light-hearted and cordial note, Ms. Ha even confiding that Coffee Bean beverages are her favourite. But the interview quickly took a more serious turn. Apropos of my status as a new instructor at IHE Prep, Ms. Ha took less of an interviewee role and one more of a spokesperson for the private academy. Almost with a sense of pride, my employer told me “all the families who come here are rich.” Not finding it unusual at all, she explained that parents spend large sums of money on their children “to raise their test scores by one point.” One four- to six-week preparatory course for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) could easily cost US$10,000. She asked me to think for a moment and let that sink in: one point as a marker of distinction, a sign of superiority. This is how Ms. Ha saw what many South Koreans called the future “1\%” being produced.\textsuperscript{12}

While students attend international schools during the daytime, IHE Prep is a place for supplementary lessons in the evenings, weekends, and holidays. Private academies (hagwŏn) provide services to boost one’s regular day-time schooling experience, often hiring Ivy League graduates and those with advanced graduate degrees to help teens prep for vital exams. These institutes are typically staffed by a mixture of Korean nationals, many of whom spent considerable amounts of time living and studying abroad, and Korean-Americans. International school attendees are comprised of children whose parents are celebrities, highly successful entrepreneurs, politicians or have direct familial ties to major corporate conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG (chaebol). In some cases, less-affluent professors or higher-level corporate office workers who completed their doctoral degrees in the United States send their children to international schools as a way to create continuity in an Americanized educational path. Likewise, adolescents who attended American-style international schools abroad, usually

\textsuperscript{11} When dealing with teachers who could not proficiently speak Korean, Ms. Ha requested that another staff member act as translator during discussions.

\textsuperscript{12} The reference to “number 1” (iltŭng) is made often, expressing desires to be better than others. The phrase is used in academic and non-academic contexts. Additionally, the phrase “sangwi1\%” is a more formalized term that might be the closest equivalent to “1\%” as used in the North American context.
because their fathers worked for companies that transferred them to other countries, stayed on the same academic course upon their return to Korea. Other parents, usually the mother, migrated with their children to the United States so they could complete exactly six semesters abroad in order to meet the minimum application requirements of international schools. In one unique case, my student Jinny attended a Canadian public school for several years when her family decided to self-fund a move abroad, which was possible due to the fact that her father had a highly mobile, well-paying job as a hedge-fund manager. In other instances, Korean-American white-collared “returnees” elect to send their children to these institutions since they are far more akin to their educational experiences abroad than Korean schools. It is also important to note that parents’ employers will sometimes help cover the steep tuition fees.

This trend toward attending international schools with their promise of accumulated social, cultural, and linguistic capital that translates into socio-economic status has been observed around the world and particularly in developing nations (Dunne and Edwards 2010; Tanu 2016; Tarc and Tarc 2015). International school students across the world, including South Korea, are populated by “locals” who in overwhelming numbers seek to distinguish themselves from their peers by finding new paths to classed reproduction. Moreover, as Bates (2012: 267) argues, “global citizenship” in international schools is primarily defined through global economic participation. Thus, by offering students the means to become globally mobile and affluent, international schools set their students a step above their domestic peers attending “Korean” schools. The focus on American English and education as central to these pursuits are indicative of the future possibilities, though not guaranteed, that they believe this course will afford them.

In some cases, parents and students clearly discuss future careers after completing their studies at an American university in industries such as finance and tech in places like Southeast Asia. They take inspiration from those South Koreans who have graduated from these international schools and American universities and are employed by big financial firms in Korea. They see these individuals regularly take business trips to places like Jakarta, Delhi, Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur, places where the visibility of Korean banks, department store complexes, in addition to

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13 Students did not have to attend school in the United States specifically, but it was overwhelmingly the destination of choice amongst families who took this path. In some cases, the decision was practical — they had family members who had already emigrated to the United States prior and set up a social network that they could use. In other cases, these choices seemed to be the most “reasonable” since the plan was to eventually send their children to the United States anyway for college. In fewer cases, families also headed to Canada.
soft drinks, snacks, and cosmetic products lining the shelves of local shops indicate the presence of South Korean capital.14

The fact that my interlocutors in this dissertation either have both an English and Korean name, only a Korean name, or prefer to be called solely by their English name simultaneously reflects the at times ambiguous designs to navigate and negotiate their place in the world as a “global subject” (see Hillewaert 2015).

International schools pave the way to reproducing human capital by overhauling pre-existing practices they consider outmoded and stale in the interest of creating new markets and forms of human capital. When parents send their children to “cram schools,” which are viewed as international school add-ons, they continue to exercise their consumer rights to selectively choose educators. Only some families from the aforementioned backgrounds are clients of academies such as IHE Prep. In many ways, IHE Prep can be understood as a private academy that caters to the upper-classes, but not the elites. It was not a popular choice for families who held direct, deep ties with politicians or corporate conglomerates.15 Overwhelmingly, the families that do choose academies such as IHE Prep are those who make their money as highly successful real estate developers, entrepreneurs, and hedge-fund managers. Others who send their children to private academies are those who occupy important positions in South Korea’s largest corporations such as Samsung and Hyundai but lack direct familial lineage to those with controlling interest. On occasion, a few students with celebrities as their parents or grandparents

14 As for soft power, in places like Hanoi, one can catch glimpses of K-pop stars populating local youth’s cell phone wallpaper. In Indonesia, the Korean Food Foundation is an NGO dedicated to educating locals about Korean food and culinary culture. They even developed a restaurant guide available in the Google Play and iTunes Store. It is worth pointing out however that throughout the completion of my doctoral degree I encountered some international school graduates who were also completing their PhDs at prestigious American universities (they approached me after workshops where we were both participants). But these cases were few and far between. Even rarer were the international school graduates that I brushed shoulders with who are now working professionals in the United States. One was a journalist. The other, upon completing her PhD at a highly respectable American university, was working as a researcher in Washington, D.C. I also want to highlight that this individual’s immediate family members now lived in the United States, which was a contributing factor in her career decisions.

15 My estimation here is that the owners of IHE Prep were venture entrepreneurs lacking these social ties and Ivy League degrees themselves. Instead, Paul, Ms. Ha’s husband and the CEO, boasted a career as a famous radio show personality who for several years taught English through popular media outlets. This is in stark contrast to other after-school academies in the same neighbourhood where the owners did in fact attend elite boarding schools such as Andover, held Ivy League graduate degrees, or were members of families that controlled South Korea’s corporate conglomerates (chaebol jip).
would also attend schools like IHE Prep. IHE Prep also caters to students who return to South Korea during extended school vacations from boarding schools or living with host families in the United States to maximize their supplementary study time. These are all points that I will return to in Chapter 6: Globalized Adolescence: Investing in Human Capital in a Failed State. There I fully discuss the various intra-classed dimensions of anxiety and precarity, and how though my upper-class interlocutors are not elite, they still incite vitriol from the “have nots.”

While Ms. Ha bluntly discussed the lives of rich families, I remained wary of diving into conversations centred on money and status. Taking a moment to absorb Ms. Ha’s comments, I then asked as innocuously as I could whether there was not heightened academic pressure on “those who live well” (jalsaneum saram)? My attempt at subtlety did not go unnoticed. Her tone sharpened, and she seemed to be filled with palpable impatience. “You mean rich families (pujatchip)? Of course. Look at your situation — you study anthropology and your goal is to become a professor, right? That’s admirable, but is that guaranteed?” I began to argue, “But there are plenty of other things that anthropologists can do. We can go into market research, work for NGOs, or as consultants…” Ms. Ha stared at me until I conceded, “But that doesn’t mean it’s easy or that I will make a lot of money.” Ms. Ha remarked, “See? That’s what I’m talking about. It’s the same thing. I know because I hire Ivy League graduates to work at this academy. They come looking for jobs here because they can’t get jobs elsewhere. These days there are so many ‘kangaroo families’ (k’aenggŏru kajok) — you know kangaroos have pouches where their babies live. We tell our kids we’ll support them until they finish college but who knows how long we’ll help them out. I majored in economics, so I think about these issues a lot…this is the world we live in now.”

At the heart of Ms. Ha’s rumination about “the world we live in now,” is the fact that feelings of precarity even affect those who are privileged. During that same interview, she remarked that her children and students could “become doctors, lawyers, and engineers, but becoming a doctor can be meaningless.” In a political-economic climate where “a lot of doctors these days go bankrupt,” and where “you can’t get a job if you don’t have a law degree from one of the top fifteen law schools,” Ms. Ha asked me to “imagine how much stress a rich kid has growing up with that.” Adolescents’ everyday anxieties centre around their employability — knowing that even if they do secure an advanced engineering degree, it is no guarantee in a dynamically changing global market.
In light of the issues we discussed in this interview, this dissertation focuses on how “the fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 1989; Ortner 2006) manifests in South Korea’s upper class. Moreover, I examine how adolescents become sites of appreciable investments, treated as assets and commodities by parents reacting to their anxiety for the future economic stability of their children. Thus, my two main questions are as follows: In what way do innovations in global economic markets shape pedagogical ones? In what ways do perceptions and imaginaries of a precarious future animate investments in adolescents to secure their familial “1%” status? I specifically focus on South Korea’s “1%” and the new, highly capital-intensive modes of production they create to differentiate their children from their less affluent peers. I also analyse how global market volatility and uncertainty shaped my interlocutors to become “everyday investor subjects,” — an investor working within these subjectivities, crafting the future of South Korean private education, as well as her children and students’ futures (Langley 2008: 33).

I witnessed the drive for human capital cultivation on countless occasions during the course of my fieldwork at IHE Prep and in the international schools I observed. While investing in education may appear to be a “fail-proof” method — especially when considering how capital-intensive these methods are — as I will show, my interlocutors did not deem this as a route to guaranteed success. Instead, a question that plagued my interlocutors was: Will investments in an adolescent’s future yield return-on-investments? I will give an example of how this anxiety even affects instructors by relating a few scenarios involving my co-worker Mark, a South Korean college junior at a highly prestigious liberal arts college in the United States. One afternoon, he was noticeably exhausted and irritable. His students were unfocused and expressed their desire to go to karaoke (noraebang) instead of focusing on their upcoming SAT exam. This was not the first time and Mark was struggling to hold their attention during class time.

In retelling the events of the class, in his frustration, Mark blurted out that his job as a college exam preparatory private instructor was no different from being “an investment banker — all that mattered were results.” Knowing that parents paid approximately US$10,000 for a six-week

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16 In actuality, Mark only goes by his Korean name but requested “Mark” as a pseudonym, at one point joking he could be “Mark Twain” in my ethnographic portrayal.
long SAT course to boost their child’s individual worth, Mark understood that it was his job to make sure economic investments translated into the growth of human capital.\textsuperscript{17}

At all “cram schools,” if growth in the form of high exam marks failed to materialize, parents would take their capital and children to another institute that might procure better results.\textsuperscript{18} For “boutique academies” such as IHE Prep, SAT exam preparation fees are so high that it limits the client pool,\textsuperscript{19} and the stress put on successful results is even more acute than at other academies. At its highest level of enrolment, one SAT course at IHE Prep only attracted twenty to thirty students.\textsuperscript{20}

Due to these circumstances and because the stakes were so very high for the students, parents and the school, Mark and my co-workers felt pressured to deliver results. Students that did not prove themselves as “good investments” reflected poorly on our teaching abilities. Should low grades decrease the number of students accepted to elite American colleges, that would not only damage IHE Prep’s reputation, it would cause future enrolment to drop and negatively impact profit margins. On an individual level, teachers would personally bear the brunt if their methods proved ineffective by being dismissed.

\textsuperscript{17} Arguably, these are the same challenges that private educators in all South Korean “cram schools” face. However, the scale and intensity of investments amongst parents who choose international schooling and American college admissions puts Mark’s comments in a different light. For instance, IEP Academy, which I will talk about more fully in Chapter 2, is a “cram school,” for those with their sights set on Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University — the top three elite Korean universities that are commonly referred to as “SKY schools”. While monthly tuition varied according to grade, fees were significantly lower than at IHE Prep. At IEP Academy, supplementary lessons at the kindergarten level cost approximately $650 per month. At the middle and high school level, tuition was approximately $450-550 per month. Moreover, enrolment at IEP Academy totalled nearly 15,000.

\textsuperscript{18} For private educators working towards securing admissions at prestigious American universities, there was an additional layer of stress simply because of the relatively higher fees that parents paid.

\textsuperscript{19} As one SAT private academy CEO told me in 2012, the individual fees might seem extremely high, but because such a small number of South Koreans could afford this academic trajectory, it was in fact a struggle to make a handsome profit in this highly niche field. The client base was extremely small compared to the already oversaturated market.

\textsuperscript{20} Of course, private academies such as IHE Prep offered a long list of highly personalized academic consulting services to generate revenue. I report these numbers to show the drastic difference in enrolment numbers. Most of my own lessons were one-on-one tutoring, designed to maximize the amount of attention an instructor could give to their student.
To avert failure, Ms. Ha, Mark, and myself, as well as many other parents and educators included in this study, cultivate the social identities and subjectivities that are recognized as the characteristics key to being “investors.” By enrolling their children in international schools where close attention would be paid to the children’s physical, psychological, and social development, parents invested their time, money, and emotional resources into appreciating the value of their children. As educators, it was our job to meet their expectations and give a return on their investment by appreciating the student’s value, evidenced primarily through high marks on standardized tests and school exams. Teachers even went so far as to scold and lecture teenagers about their dietary habits, such as eating too much fast food, reminding them that their bodies were finite entities that needed proper care. Adolescents, on the other hand, demonstrated a self-awareness as investees. As such, students were aware of their role in this triumvirate and were expected to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity that shapes how adolescents become “financial media” (Pitluck et al. 2018; Zelizer 2005:56). Throughout this dissertation, I examine literature on the ideologies, practices, beliefs, and actions that promote monetary growth and apply them to academic aspirations in my effort to suture financialization and South Korean private education together.

As I will argue throughout, the cultivation of the “1%” entailed much more than good grades. Acquiring an American English accent, an entrepreneurial mentality like that of Mark Zuckerberg, a philanthropic spirit, and a disaffected attitude in the face of anxieties about the economic future are all strategies promoted through international school education. Effectively, these are the means through which the aspirant 1% attempts to secure their status as the new global professional elite. These strategies, promoted through international school education, become the means through which the aspirant “1%” attempts to secure their status as a new global professional elite.

My arguments are based on fieldwork that was primarily conducted at IHE Prep. I also observed seven international schools throughout the Seoul metropolitan area during the daytime and some evenings when I was not scheduled to work at the private academy (Chapter 2). I met with parents in cafés, restaurants, and in their homes. I met up with adolescents in cafés and restaurants. I was also invited by some students to observe them in other areas of “study,” one such alternative location was an atelier where a student prepared an art portfolio for college applications. I attended their athletic events and concerts at international schools.
My fieldsite and methodology will be further discussed in more detail in the following chapter, where I give a more robust explanation as to how and why I later decided to include international schools. I focus primarily on Williams International in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 partly because the school extended invitations to take tours of highly specialized classrooms such as the Creator’s Zone and Kinetic Classroom and to several events including the Year End Assembly. The real draw, though, and my justification for focusing so intently on Williams International is due to its uniqueness. The school is located in South Korea’s flagship free economic zone, its pedagogical approaches are specifically designed to prepare adolescents to switch career paths five to seven times over a life course, and it explicitly states goals of modelling a school after Google. Williams International administrators also closely work with the local Incheon Metropolitan government, advise the Ministry of Education on how to revamp “Korean education,” and provide workshops for local public school teachers. These matters will be re-visited in subsequent chapters.

Moreover, Williams International is designated by the South Korean Ministry of Education as a “foreign school.” Unlike other institutions that require students to either hold a foreign passport or spend a total of 1,095 days enrolled in a school abroad, admissions to Williams International is open to South Koreans who can afford to pay the hefty price tag. Thus, while Williams International is a bit of an outlier in the category of international schools, I believe that insights are to be gained in better understanding the ideologies that more broadly structure orientations towards futurity. The focus on placing equal pedagogical importance on technological innovation whilst inculcating a taste for risk in the face of adversity and cultivating a charitable heart were key features of all international schools included in this dissertation. They were particularly pronounced, however, at Williams International, where as I was told, one of the top administrators even had a previous career in Silicon Valley. With the data collected from these fieldsites, I draw a picture of South Korea’s private education and discuss how a host of social actors from around the globe have invested in and reinvented pre-existing educational practices to create the ascendant “1%”.

1.1 Education after the 1997 IMF Crisis

In this examination, I reference and expand on Jesook Song’s (2009) ethnography on South Korea following the IMF Crisis that documents the rise of “creativity,” self-entrepreneurship, self-improvement, and venture capital flooding into the country. In an effort to historicize my
findings, I argue throughout that parents’ investment frenzy can be attributed to the shock and fallout from the IMF intervention in 1997. After decades of rapid, economic growth, the South Korean economy collapsed during the 1997 Asian Debt Crisis, prompting the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to enact a $58.4 billion dollar–bailout package (Lim 2005). The origins of this economic downturn are often traced back to the collapse of the Thai bhat, after the government pegged its exchange rate to the U.S. dollar instead of allowing it to float against the dollar. Southeast Asia and South Korea were immediately affected by the collapse of the bhat and foreign investors losing confidence in this region of the world. As a result, local currencies suddenly lost their value and stock market prices plummeted, leaving individuals saddled by personal debt. The hardest hit countries were Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand.

As one South Korean newspaper put it, the day that the IMF came with the bailout was the most humiliating day in Korean history, second only to the Japanese occupation (see Song 2009). In everyday parlance, The Asian Debt Crisis came to be known as “the IMF Crisis,” or “I am fired.” The country’s financial difficulty was compounded by feelings of bitterness and emotional stress that prompted South Koreans to donate their own personal gold in a nationwide campaign to quickly pay back the loan.

While the final repayment was in 2001, three years ahead of schedule, many scholars argue that the period immediately following the IMF bailout presented South Koreans with even more challenges. For one, labour market restructuring negatively affected career opportunities for South Koreans, including white-collar workers. The IMF crisis was the catalyst for the switch from an industrial to an information-based, knowledge economy as corporate conglomerates (chaebol), which had provided stable, salaried, white collared work for many South Koreans, were deliberately dismantled as a condition of the bailout (Song 2009).

South Korea was also forced to relax regulations on foreign venture capital. International, short-term and hedge funds became regular fixtures as bank loans became less popular (Song 2007). As a result, the emergence of a neoliberal, “self-manageable,” “self-enterprising” subjectivity

21 White-collar workers who previously held secure jobs became unemployed, prompting state-led social welfare programs that were designed to rehabilitate their status as productive subjects in a collapsing and changing economy.
emerged as younger generations became more inclined to take on risky business practices and the responsibility of failure (Song 2007, 2009). The fetishization of “the human capital of youth” became highly visible during this time through the popular images of “productive” labour power — or those who had “cosmopolitan communications skills, such as the Internet, English, or traveling abroad” (Song 2007: 332-333). The up-and-coming generations, as “the new intellectuals,” were valued for embracing start-up, small-scale enterprises that to a degree replaced the corporate conglomerate model (chaebol) (Song 2007: 34). Unemployment rates remained high and to this day, the trauma of sudden economic collapse as a result of global market forces remains present in everyday life. As I will demonstrate, the very logics and ideologies that have been outlined through previous scholarly examinations can also be observed throughout this dissertation, but articulated through the bodily tactics valued for emulating the American tech industry’s commitment to innovation.

Even shortly before the IMF Crisis, parental investments in private education was already escalating. In 1995, South Korean families spent approximately US$21 billion on educational expenditures to supplement costs associated with attending public schools — exceeding the state’s own allocated budget (Seth 2012a: 22). Families invested approximately an additional US$5.8 billion in the private education market at the same time (Seth 2012a: 22). Paul, Ms. Ha’s husband and CEO of IHE Prep, dubbed the mid 1990s as a period of private English education economy in South Korea “the Wild West” ripe with opportunities to profit off newly forming desires to produce South Koreans who could work in a global economy. In fact, it was in the wake of the IMF Crisis that Paul left his position at a major financial firm in the United States and returned to South Korea. With the aid of his schooling, the majority of which was completed in Southern California where his family had lived since he was about nine, Paul’s knowledge and his charismatic approach to teaching English attained him celebrity status in South Korea. Business was booming.

This is all the more astonishing in view of the fact that many South Koreans suffered financially in the immediate aftermath of the 1997 IMF Crisis. Nevertheless, enrolment in private English education rapidly increased. To this day, one of my former colleagues and interlocutors speaks about those days with a sense of awe and amazement. Hye Young, employed by what is now one of the largest English language private academy chains, remembers the days of peering into classrooms where staff amassed cash by the bagful, preparing it for deposit at the end of each
day. She attributed the growth of her place of employment from a small-scale tutoring operation to its current size to the IMF Crisis. She explained that though all parents were worried about their children’s future, middle-classed Koreans’ were limited in what they could afford. Institutions like hers offered tuition fees that were “not too expensive” so that financial sacrifices for education were more manageable.

This is a brief snapshot of Korea’s recent history, showcasing how private education and investing practices — both by oneself and through newly available instruments such as hedge funds — merged in the 1990s for South Koreans of all classes. It is from this milieu that subjects such as Ms. Ha, international school educators, and students are constituted as “everyday investor subjects” (Langley 2008). In an effort to hone in on how some of South Korea’s most affluent re-shape pre-existing academic pathways in the age of financialization, I will elaborate on their investing practices later in this dissertation and reference the monetary totals that upper-classed parents spend on their children’s education. At the same time, I will also show more fully how the intense attention given to an adolescent’s physical development and engaging medical doctors and personal trainers is just an aspect of becoming the “1%.”

However, the most pronounced aspect of cultivating a “1%” subject and the one central to their plans remains the immersion of students in an English-speaking schooling system that also implements “Western” curriculums. It is no secret that the “mania” of learning English has spread throughout South Korea, amongst members of all classes (Abelmann et al. 2009). As one South Korean put it, everyone in Korea — even the butcher at the grocery store — studies for the TOEFL exam. Extending beyond exam-taking however are strategies to physically alter one’s body for the sole purpose of developing flawless pronunciation of American English. While the stories of tongue snipping, a procedure that should only be trusted to a plastic surgeon, were far less frequent during my fieldwork, I routinely heard about this in everyday conversation in 2008 when I first worked in Seoul as an English teacher. Supposedly, this procedure could perfect one’s English pronunciation and was highly sought after for a time.

The procedure fell out of practice, whether because it was no longer trendy or I did not hear of it because my interlocutors did not need it, having spent time abroad starting at a young age in addition to spending an overwhelming amount of time with native English speakers. However, both the tongue snipping surgery and immersing an adolescent in environments specifically tailored to produce a *habitus* of American, tech-savvy cool evidence deliberate strategies to produce a certain subjectivity that is rooted in linguistic ideologies (Gal and Irvine 2000). To that end, the intensive investment in language mimics speech patterns that differentiate classed individuals through the sensory responses to hearing another speak. As Sarah Hillewaert (2016: 50) argues in her analysis of handshakes and *heshima* (respectability) in Lamu, Kenya, bodily interactions are “semiotic techniques,” or “tactile tactics whose sensory details signify separately from but in relation to other visual and discursive aspects of semiosis and societal norms of *heshima*.” These auditory and visual cues are “performative — a form of social action that enables the individual to receive social recognition through the body” (Hillewaert 2016: 54).

For these reasons, the investment practices that I outline in this dissertation can then be more specifically considered as “biofinancialization,” which Dimitris Papadapolous (2017: 139) argues, is a process where “value production becomes embodied: it becomes an indissoluble characteristic of the whole situated social existence of each singular worker.” Most importantly, “One is not only exploited in the present but also one’s future is exploited: one’s own potentials, what one might become” (Papadapolous 2017: 141). My efforts concentrate on showing how investing in what scholars have called the “biofinancialization” of human capital amongst the “1%” is an all-consuming process that extracts value from all aspects of existence and draws from economic practices that are well established in financial domains proper (Feher 2009, Harvey 2005, Ho 2009, Jameson 1997, Langley 2008, Lapavistas 2009, 2013, Martin 2002,

23 As Erving Goffman (1981: 153) put it, “We not only embed utterances, we embed interaction arrangements…with each embedding a change of footing occurs.” Discursive consciousness, after all, is the process of both reconciling and sculpting a new image of the self through the construction of our words, and is fundamental to the existential-pragmatic enterprise (Duranti 2006: 469). But as I will show, these linguistic strategies also entail a specific bodily *hexis*. As Sarah Hillewart (2016: 53) argues “tactile tactics” are “simultaneously intensely intimate and public and always entail judgments of status, power, and interpersonal relations.”
Maurer 2005, Papadapoulos 2017, Song 2014). As Ellen Hertz and Stefan Leins (2012) argue, “[l]ooking at today’s market society, the ideology of ever-growing wealth and economized forms of action likewise goes far beyond financial markets. It reappears in the educational sphere and in large areas of social life and, of course, fundamentally structures the field that is romantically referred to as the ‘real economy.’”

As I will show, investing — the practice of speculating, nurturing, caring for a commodity-in-the-making that will grow in value — is an “economized form of action” (Hertz and Leins 2012) that is taken up by education in seeking to produce specific forms of human capital that will thrive in a volatile market. It is worth noting that in the original formulation of human capital, a term coined by 1979 Nobel Memorial Prize winner economist Theodore Schultz (1961), “investment” has always been a key concept. In the preface of “Investment of Human Capital,” Schultz (1961) states, “[m]uch of what we call consumption constitutes investment in human capital. Direct expenditures on education, health, and internal migration to take advantage of better job opportunities are clear examples.” Schultz (1961) cautiously expounded on his conceptualization of human capital. Wary of pushback, he explicitly stated that “[d]eep-seated moral and philosophical issues are ever present. Free men are first and foremost the end to be served by economic endeavour; they are not property or marketable assets. And not least, it has been all too convenient in marginal productivity analysis to treat labour as if it were a unique bundle of innate abilities that are wholly free of capital” (Schultz 1961: 2). This is diametrically opposed to Michel Feher’s (2009) theorizations where he argues that all aspects of human existence — physical, psychological, emotional, affective, educational — fall under totalitarian regimes of value production. In other words, the liberal distinction between labour and leisure as a fundamental feature of a worker’s life no longer exists. The labour of investing in futures does not afford the marked break from work as expressed through retirement (see Thompson 1967). Instead, it is an ongoing life-making process that harnesses capital to re-create desired social relationships and class status.

Thus, while the concept of “investing” has always been central to theories of human capital, much of the anthropological literature places attention on how these practices play out in “financial” domains. Whether ethnographic analysis takes place in the trading pit or within the purview of “everyday financialization,” the scope of this work focuses on subjects’ relationships with finance capital. The overwhelming majority of scholarship makes compelling arguments
showcasing the ways in which patterns of savings and borrowing, orientations towards futurity, and the shaping of new subjectivities and socialities are results of the rapid proliferation of financial tools (Bear et al. 2015, Erturk et al. 2007, Graeber 2011, Langley 2008, 2012, Martin 2002, 2010, Pitluck et al. 2018). However, I argue that there is an urgent need to also interrogate how humans speculate on one another’s appreciable worth, thereby shaping new socialities.

As I will show, parents and teachers obsessed over the physical, psychological, and emotional health and vitality of adolescents, in addition to their academic performance. These speculative practices transform adolescents into objects of scrutiny, constantly appraised for their capacity to become one of the ascendent “1%” and become “better” human capital than their middle and lower classed peers. In my study, the adolescents are also positioned to become “better” human capital than those attending South Korea’s elite universities.

My intention is to illustrate how the production of the “1%” draws from UNESCO’s “global citizenship” curriculum that South Korean international schools use as a model. The robust development of a student’s “socio-emotional skills and critical thinking” abilities are crucial to a global approach to philanthropic ventures. One’s psychological, emotional, social, and physical health are the key components necessary to “promote collaborative learning strategies and community involvement” (UNESCO 2014: 27). The adolescents I am interested in analysing are involved in these types of appreciation strategies that rely on one’s vitality and are important dimensions to human capital production.


26 In the mid to late 20th century, the state constructed public schooling infrastructure, which is in essence a model for human capital development, that churned out workers ready to join the industrial economy. Under Lee Myung Bak’s presidency from 2008 to 2013, education underwent deregulation “in the name of excellence and diversity” and the types of schools available for parents to choose from expanded (Lee et al. 2012: 313). Currently, “human resource development with a whole-person perspective” that includes “relationships and autonomy” is considered to be the most important of all tasks (Lee et al. 2012: 313).
Ms. Ha, in both her personal appearance and managerial approaches, was the very embodiment of the premium placed on vitality. At the age of forty-six, Ms. Ha has an elegance and almost ageless grace, but it is not without effort. She gets her lean, sculpted musculature from Cross Fit Training, and her voluminously shiny, long hair and tanned but glowing skin are thanks to a diet dominated by ample quantities of vegetables, lentils, and intermittent fruit fasts. Her usual attire is comprised of skinny jeans, baggy T-shirts, and slip-on sneakers — apparel typically suited for women in their early twenties or younger but a style she wore with ease and flair.

Paul, her husband and CEO of IHE Prep, also made similar wardrobe choices: T-shirts with wild, colourful prints, baggy athletic shorts, and running shoes. His style was not only a reflection of his upbringing in Southern California, it was a state of preparedness — Paul almost always played several rounds of tennis in the afternoon. His Instagram posts often showed him wearing the very same apparel to his tennis matches that I recalled seeing him in during class the same morning. Paul and Ms. Ha were not the only ones sporting casual attire. Many international school teachers and in some cases administrators often sported T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. Choice in casual attire frequently reflected interest in cycling, hiking, and surfing, and international school teachers and administrators engaged in these sports made note of these activities in their professional profiles and everyday conversation. These casually dressed educators who also pushed these regimes of education also promoted self-care, showing by example the importance of one’s physical vitality, well-roundedness, and healthful vigour.

It was no surprise then that the majority of my students also dressed in baseball caps, hoodies, jeans, and sneakers. Throughout my fieldwork, I rarely saw luxury labels such as Gucci or Louis Vuitton branding my students’ clothing, though my students came from wealthy families. The brands I saw were nearly all streetwear, including more mid-range priced Adidas and Nike and higher-priced brands such as Comme des Garçons and Anti-Social Social Club. In fact, my students were on the cutting edge as far as lesser-known but extremely high-end fashion brands such as Hood by Air. And while Hood By Air has more of an ostentatious flair than Steve Jobs’ plain black turtleneck or Mark Zuckerberg’s grey T-shirt, it is an aesthetic that is indexical of the successful entrepreneur who blurs labour and leisure — the very same aesthetic also set by the educators in this study.

Youthful appearance aside, Ms. Ha was known for uncompromising control of every aspect of everyone’s work at IHE Prep. Students and some instructors referred to her as “The Terror”
(kongp’o) — a term used in affectionate jest but piercing at the heart of her character. It was clear that Ms. Ha did not cultivate this persona in vain. As her comments evidence, she viewed the world as inherently unstable and volatile, undermining her children and students’ chances of reproducing familial and class status. Anxieties related to the future and not knowing which markets would perdure or what new markets would exist by the time adolescents were ready for work life pushed parents to arm their children mentally and physically for every eventuality.

1.2 Vitality vs. Deflation: Investing in human capital production in the age of obsolescence

According to Ms. Ha, the anxious parental love surfacing in response to these fears for their children is deeply influenced by South Korea’s current political-economic state (Ham 2008). “These days, in Korea, if someone gets a job at Samsung, their families put up a banner and celebrate. It wasn’t like that when it was still a developing economy, back in my day. Companies needed workers.” When asked whether dwindling job opportunities were one of the reasons international schools had become so popular, Ms. Ha replied that “things are different now that Korea is in a global era” (kŭllobŏl shidae) and ensnared in cutthroat corporate, political, and social relationships. She continued to say, “That is the situation and so parents want to send their kids to Harvard, Yale, Columbia, so their kids will be hired over those who went to SKY schools. [the country’s most elite universities: Seoul National, Korea University, and Yonsei University.] For people in lower classes, it’s impossible to move up.”

Ms. Ha and Mark’s combined commentary about his job being akin to an “investment banker” evidence how fears of obsolescence drive parents to invest heavily in a child’s education as an expression of parental love and care. Parents blame a constantly changing, volatile global economy, the disappearance of white-collared jobs and a “flexible” labour market that favours part-time and contract work as justification for a pricy educational alternative. And clearly, blue-collar work was not an option. Adolescents as the recipients of large investments are

27 Though Ms. Ha mentions the lower classes, her true concerns are rooted in the economic uncertainty and pending vulnerability of her family and students’ own positionality, rather than social inequality more broadly. Investing in high-priced international schools, private tutoring services, and international student fees at expensive American universities is a strategy towards solidifying existing socio-economic inequality.
assimilated into their parents’ “horizons of expectations” (Kosselleck 1985) and intergenerational reciprocal relations. My arguments revolve around understanding how adolescents’ production of futurity is wrought from their status as recipients of love and capital, and how their status as investees is shaped by the effects of anxiety and uncertainty. Consequently, adolescents and international schools become sites of financialization and modalities of living.

As I will argue throughout this dissertation, this drive for what many Koreans I met called “the 1%” is the basis for the theories that individuals such as Ms. Ha have on South Korea’s place within an unforgiving global economy. During the same interview with Ms. Ha, my employer almost proselytizes that “South Korea is the most capitalist country in the world (kajang_chabonjuŭi). There is a mentality where people think, ‘I must be better than everyone else. I must eat better food than everyone else.’ That is why parents send their kids here…to be better than everyone else and give them a chance (emphasis added). This is why parents push their kids. For rich kids, they have even more stress and pressure.”

Ms. Ha’s statement that South Korea is “the most capitalist country in the world” is a belief rooted in her position as an upper-class subject, and the reason she engages in fierce competition as a means to secure her family and students that “1%” status (Ho 2009). Affluent South Korean parents however are not the only individuals who eagerly invest in building a new private education niche market that positions adolescents as the future “1%.” As Nicholas D’Avella (2014: 175) argues, “[i]nvestments draw people from disparate worlds into relation.” As I will elaborate on more fully, the promise of yielding profitable returns-on-investments are what brings together a somewhat unlikely cast of characters. Affluent South Korean nationals, foreign and domestic educators, investors, alongside politicians, are united in their entrepreneurial visions to create a “new” type of human capital — one that will endure market volatility to secure the “1%” status.

In order to examine how these diverse subjects became involved in the new private education market in South Korea, I ground my arguments in theories of human capital production. Writing

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28 Nearly thriving on cutthroat competition, investment bankers, parents, teachers, and students all embrace uncertainty — and potential obsolescence — as the primary motives to put in long hours.
in the 1960s, Nobel Prize winning economist Gary Becker (1962: 41) who popularized the term “human capital” admitted that there is inherently “much uncertainty about the return of human capital.” This can be attributed to various factors, but perhaps the most important one is what Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 48) called, “an embodied state,” which is that the value of human capital as it is linked to one’s biological state.29

The structures of feeling (Williams 1977) rooted in uncertainty became the impetus for parental practices fixated on unleashing latent human capital (Anagnost 2004; 2008; Arai 2013; Hirao 2001; Park, S. 2007; 2011; 2012). Most notable is the emergence of the “educational management mother” subjectivity in reaction to parental anxieties ignited by the ebbs and flows of global capitalism (Park 2007; 2011; 2012; also see Anagnost 2004; 2008; Arai 2013; Hirao 2001). The fact that the vast majority of students in my study were born in 1997 and 1998 is significant since this is in the immediate wake of the IMF Crisis — a turning point that prompted a major overhaul of the domestic economy, moving it from traditional industry to knowledge-based industry.30 Documenting the vicious extremes of human capital development, Hae-Joang Cho (2015), one of the most notable scholars of South Korea, has labelled the South Korean youth who engage in an infinite pursuit of degrees, credentials, and personal experiences to increase their marketability as “the spec generation” (also see Kim E. 2007, 2012, Sin and Mun 2014). The term “spec” is colloquially used by young South Koreans in reference to the contents of their résumé. Borrowed from the English word “spec” — short for “specification” — South Korean youth liken themselves to electronic products, machinery, and buildings possessing desirable measures of performance or attributes.

In Hae Joang Cho’s (2015) study, her selected cross-section of interlocutors attending Yonsei University (one of South Korea’s elite SKY schools) all express a resignation to a life marked

29 As Becker (1962: 37) argues, “an increase in lifespan of an activity would, other things the same, increase the rate of return on the investment made in any period.”

30 Conducting a comparative study between the “New Generation” and the “Spec Generation,” Cho (2015) argues that the former who came of age in the 1990s were famed throughout the nation for their rebellious curiosity and creativity. Disavowing the paths to social reproduction in their high school years, these teenagers challenged South Korea’s rigid educational regime, seeking to create alternative paths. However, on the cusp of the neoliberal transformation, following the 1997 IMF Crisis, many of these same subjects resorted to investing heavily in private education for their children.
by difficultly and instability. In her observations, members of the “spec generation” play by the rules, shunning creative experimental exploration in exchange for economic security. Cho (2015) attributes their dejected demeanours to the unceasing practices of calculating one’s self-worth that erodes their physical health, collective social relations, emotional stability, and self-esteem. These accumulation practices are unrelenting and demand concentrated labour and capital investments, draining elite South Korean college students’ vitality.

Indeed, this dejected exhaustion was present in my own observations where adolescents continuously calculated their self-worth while wondering about their future prospects. Michel Feher (2009) argues that uncertainty renders it impossible to determine one’s self-worth. I take up this point as a key factor in how human capital production in affluent adolescents is ultimately a financialized process, where parents and educators embrace uncertainty to invest in an appreciable asset that requires meticulously monitoring appreciation or depreciation. I would like to emphasize that the vantage point from which I argue does not subsume everyone. The practices that I track throughout are specific to the aspirant “1%” in this dissertation.

Thus, I build on Hae Joang Cho’s (2015) work but also depart from it by solely focusing on the making of “the 1%” by selecting an educational path deliberately designed to “bypass” elite, domestic educational institutions. My examinations track the formation of a subjecthood that is constituted through the differentiation of habitus, physical, psychological, and social vitality from those attending SKY schools, such as Yonsei University. For instance, I will discuss how American-college bound students are prepared to “play” through unexpected challenges. Educators’ emphasis on play is geared towards instilling a sense of curiosity, nurturing creativity, and building a positive attitude in the face of unpredictable circumstances. Embraced for its innovation, international school educators harness play to equip their students with the tools they will need to face future market uncertainty with a sanguine attitude (Chapter 4). I

31 In turn, as Cho (2015) argues, “The Spec Generation,” raised in a highly competitive, individualistic setting, is subjected to rote memorization and training for endless exams with the endurance needed for a “marathon.”
32 Citing Michel Feher’s (2009) work, Cho (2015) argues that these students are implicated in a lifetime’s worth of accumulating credentials.
33 While my interlocutors monitor their own appreciation and depreciation, these processes ultimately rest on the sub stratum of the underclass, such as the security guard and janitors that work at private institutions.
show how educators care for their students’ physical and emotional well-being and health at Williams International by painstakingly designing a classroom called the Kinetic Classroom geared towards invigorating exhausted bodies (Chapter 3 and Chapter 5). Taken all together, these practices help socialize students to regimes of self-care that also nurture their productivity.

To that end, I also build on Nancy Abelmann et al.’s (2009) work by explicitly showing how vitality is a crucial facet of self-development for those with upper-classed aspirations. As I witnessed throughout my fieldwork, many of my students (under the direction of their parents) sought the services of medical professionals to predict their adult height (certain heights are considered desirable in the marriage market), personal trainers, and plastic surgeons. In one case, Karen, one of my high school interlocutors, told me that her grandparents offered to cover the costs of vitamins administered intravenously if she felt too fatigued from studying. Saliently, these are some of the ways that my interlocutors are socialized to distinguish themselves from their peers in the “Korean education system” who were perceived as too exhausted to spark the kind of socio-economic changes that might solidify one’s spot as the “1%.” In fact, many parents I spoke with admitted sending their children to international schools as a kind of insurance — to protect their children’s mental health by removing them from the “Korean education system” that is often blamed for bullying, intense stress, and suicide. I continue to build on Hae Joang Cho’s (2015) work by tracking how parents chose to make these intense investments in a quite new and experimental educational path as an expression of care for their children’s well-being.

In an effort to track how parents’ educational choices are also shaped by their concerns for their children’s overall well-being, my dissertation also interrogates the role of care (k’eo). Amongst my Korean interlocutors, native terms such as jeong and maum were used in addition to the English word “care” (k’eo). Parents and educators routinely cited “care” as a necessary element in an adolescent’s upbringing. As I discuss more thoroughly later in this dissertation, “care” and “compassion” were consistently part of each international school’s core principles.

Drawing on the interpersonal relationships between parents and children, in addition to teachers and students, I conceptualize care as a “derivative gamble” throughout my analysis for several reasons (Appadurai 2011). As Arjun Appadurai (2011) argues, investments are based on uncertainty or “a gamble on a gamble.” While parents and educators seek new educational approaches for adolescents, to attain any success adolescents must be invested as well. In
proving they are invested too, their strategies of accumulation can be understood as deeply rooted in reciprocal relations of care, where they are expected to “give back” to their parents. As financialized subjects, adolescents (and adults too) do not always act as rational, calculating actors. Instead, anxiety, a sense of obligation, love, and desires to care for their parents’ psychological and economic well-being are woven into the current conditions of financialization. For adolescents, performing to a high standard academically is understood as a form of both self-care and caring for their family’s financial and emotional health (Chapter 5). Adolescents’ deep-seated understanding of their upper-classed status as a result of their family’s “horizons of expectations” according to Kosselleck (1985) will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5, though my analysis diverges from Kosselleck’s works. Unlike Kosselleck’s more general discussions, I focus on upper-classed reproduction strategies that are deeply rooted in subjects’ reflexive understandings of their place at the top of South Korea’s socio-economic hierarchies.

In fact, international school educators designed lessons that would help students become attuned to their own privilege in a world besieged by social inequalities and cultivate charitable feelings and actions. As I will show, adolescents were socialized to take the initiative and step up as intrepid, compassionate leaders in the face of pressing global problems such as climate change and global terrorism. By being taught to act upon their own privileged status and develop a caring, entrepreneurial spirit, adolescents were assimilated into global regimes of care. The goal was to nurture future venture philanthropists who would have the capacity to care for others in need around the globe (Chapter 5). Throughout, I theorize how the physical vitality, intellectual capacities, and psycho-social development of adolescents provide the grounds to further examine how processes of investment becomes a lived reality, contingent not only on the global economy but their own individual health. These measures are deliberately taken to avoid the types of deflation that Cho (2015) analyses.34

34 Despite these differences in analytical trajectory, like Haejoang Cho (2015) I also follow Michel Feher’s (2009) formulation that human capital is a process of appreciation. Feher (2009) argues that under neoliberalism all activities are subordinated to the appreciation of one’s self-worth. Even more salient is Feher’s (2009) point that, at the very least, preventing one’s depreciation becomes a priority under radically indeterminate conditions (Ehrenreich 1989; Ortner 2006).
If finance is indeed capital’s “central nervous system,” as David Harvey (2005: 272) puts it, then adolescents’ very own bodies become the heart that pumps the flow of capital — even in a turbulent market. Investing in an adolescent’s body however is fundamentally different from investing in portfolios, stocks, bonds, and other financial tools, although similar logics are applied. Broadly speaking, in the interest of contributing to the social studies of finance, my aim is to show how practices such as wagering on “infinity” as core features of finance are also applied to human capital production (Maurer 2002). “Infinity” manifests in the ways in which adults invest in an adolescent’s life to become a good student, a vital human, a caring subject, and a valuable worker in an unknown future global economy. While the potentiality of an adolescent as human capital might appear to be limitless, the fact of the matter is that life itself is finite. One of my aims is to examine the repercussions of taking up these financialized practices in the production of human capital.

To sum up, I track how investing becomes a speculative sociality that is deeply rooted in interdependent relationships shaped by the effects of uncertainty. While the primary focus of my dissertation is on the process of human capital production of the “1%,” the secondary aim hones in on how investing practices drastically alter how certain forms of education are tailored to withstand market volatility. Attempts to create adults who will embrace global market volatility initiate changes within institutional relationships themselves through socialization, pedagogical innovation and cultivating a *habitus* that is not only global but also targets psycho-emotional development. My examinations of human capital development aim to show how changing modes of value production are applied to upper-classed adolescents’ lives. Lastly, I depart from previous scholarly works by showing how market volatility enlivens and invigorates attempts to produce adolescents who will thrive and appreciate their value in the future.

In maximizing future value by investing when the child is young, there is the promise that the total earnings of well-invested human capital will be multiplied if adults make savvy decisions, keeping one step ahead of market volatility. While Becker (1962) and Bourdieu’s (1986) frameworks remain at the core of my interrogation of human capital production, the emphasis on an adolescents’ holistic well-being remains at the centre of my own conceptualizations of human capital. Rather than focusing on investments (Becker 1962) in the “embodied state” (Bourdieu 1986: 48) in its present form, I shift my analysis to human capital as something in the making — the process of becoming. Or in other words, as “value-in-potentia” (Graeber 2001:
The key point here is that adolescents as sites of investment are held to the somewhat ambiguous goal of reproducing familial “1%” status. I present the main themes throughout my ethnographic data via four analytical points: escaping obsolescence, play as a form of innovation, care as a derivative gamble, and upper-classed feelings of precarity. Through it all, I will discuss the financialized subject that will hopefully appreciate in value: adolescents.

1.3 A brief history of human capital production in South Korea: The shift from public to private education

1.3.1 Before the 1997 IMF Crisis

International school communities are ripe for ethnographic examination. In this section, I discuss the South Korean government’s move from prohibiting private education, which at various points throughout the 20th century was even illegal, to inviting foreign investors to start new private educational institutions. This concession can be attributed to the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy that poses new challenges for parents, politicians, and educators who strive to prepare students to become the country’s most valuable resources. Historicizing these political-economic shifts is especially important to South Korea — a country with extremely limited natural resources and an export-oriented economy that depends on creativity and knowledge. In this setting, individuals themselves become the economic infrastructure through the use of their imagination, ingenuity, creativity, innovations, and inventions. In order for South Korea to maintain its standing as a G-20 nation, individuals have to become economic assets (see Elyachar 2010).

In order to understand how the emergence of international schools in South Korea led adults to treat adolescents as “financialized media” (Pitluck et al. 2018; Zelizer 2005: 56), I conduct a brief genealogy of private education. This exercise explains how political-economic changes resulted in the educational choices available to South Korea’s present-day “1%.” I emphasize how parents have long been urged by the government to invest in their children’s education in various ways throughout the 20th century. In the past however, investments were geared towards the construction of physical infrastructure such as buildings. Today, the state sanctions investments in adolescents’ lives and bodies. In tandem with deeply entrenched South Korean everyday investing practices that come with a long history, adolescents are transformed into appreciable assets.
To elaborate, during its push to build an industrial economy, South Korea had a vested interest in building public infrastructure that was strictly controlled by the state. This is in stark contrast to state policy today that embraces privatization, and in some cases welcomes foreign investors to construct international schools. Take for example, the situation immediately following the end of the Japanese occupation that lasted from 1910 to 1945. Though the Japanese colonial empire built educational institutions, most South Koreans were prohibited from accessing the benefits (Gelézeau 1997; Jeong 200; Kal 2008; Pai 1997). With the Japanese occupation of South Korea coming to an end, South Koreans were finally free to pursue their own educational goals. Middle-class South Koreans took this opportunity to expand their horizons and increase their chances for upward social mobility by fervently pursuing an education that was previously inaccessible to them. During this chaotic transitional period, the state lacked the means to further develop educational infrastructures and institutions. Moreover, the end of the Japanese colonial empire in Korea was followed by the Korean War (1950-1953), further devastating infrastructure rebuilding. In the interest of not falling further behind educationally, the government encouraged schools and parents to shoulder the financial burdens of constructing interim facilities and making lessons available to students by whatever means possible (Seth 2002:106; Seth 2012a). Parents put extreme stress on their children’s education success in their drive to create and seize new opportunities in chaotic political-economic circumstances. Abandoned Japanese factories and other run-down facilities were repurposed and used as classrooms. In the midst of ruin, students continued preparing for their domestic high school and college entrance exams (Seth 2002:106).

Against the backdrop of the country’s war-torn landscape, academic aspirations continue to be primarily funded by eager parents. However, unlike the present-day state’s agenda, the South Korean government formed in the wake of Japanese colonialism took punitive measures to prevent a private education market from growing. Despite periodic crackdowns to prohibit private education (also see Deuchler 1992) like those during Syngman Rhee’s presidency (1948-1960), private tutoring (kwawoe) became a central feature of South Korea’s educational landscape.

Thus, while the South Korean government encouraged parents to invest in education, measures were taken to curb these practices. Emphasis was placed on investing in building, classrooms, and blue-collared workers — not explicitly in adolescents’ lives. For instance, President Park
Chung Hee’s time in office (1962-1979) is most famously remembered for his *Saemaul Undong* or “The New Village Movement,” earning him the title “developmental dictator” (Eckhart 2016: 1-2). The state’s efforts to rally the support of parents’ investments in building public schooling infrastructure, but to discipline “overinvestment” in private education should be understood in the specific political-economic context.\(^{35}\)

In an effort to support the creation of an industrial economy, the Ministry of Education (MOE) aimed at developing vocational classes to accelerate the transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one. From 1972 to 1982, the steel industry grew fourteen times in size (Seth 2017: 7), largely the reason for South Korea becoming the world’s second largest shipbuilder by the 1980s. Park’s plan to accelerate national economic growth (see Kim 1997) was being realized, and an unprecedented number of blue-collared workers were needed to fill jobs in factories.

Meeting these developmental goals was made possible by the zealous determination and sacrifice of their parents, but more often by their mothers, or “housewives,” who have long been responsible for managing household budgets, assets, investments, and their children’s education (Kendall 1996; Nelson 2000). They were responsible for enabling “reproductive futurism,” which Anne Allison (2012: 351) argues is “at the heart of modernist politics… a belief in the progressive betterment of life that, staking progress on the next generation, attaches and delimits — sociality to the heteronormative family and home.”

“Housewives,” as the driving force behind “reproductive futurism” (Allison 2012: 351) through their investments in their children’s education, had and continue to have profound effects in the era of financialization.\(^{36}\) South Koreans’ long history of deeply entrenched everyday investing

\(^{35}\) President Park initiated two five-year plans to instantiate capitalist growth. Moreover, commercial banks were nationalized so that the state would control credit. This initiative was instigated in order to underwrite low interest loans to businesses (Seth 2017). The first five-year plan from 1962 to 1967 proposed a 7.1% economic growth rate. In fact, the average was 8.9% with manufacturing growing at 15% per year (Seth 2017: 5). This historic period is often credited for South Korea’s rapid economic growth known as “The Miracle on the Han River.” The second five-year plan was slated for the period between 1967-1971. At this time, concerted efforts were made to invite foreign capital and build up infrastructure (Cumings 1997: 314, Eckhart 2016, Seth 2017). Although President Park had opened the doors to foreign investors, he was wary of subordinating economic control to outside powers and implemented stringent limits. In 1966, President Park introduced the Foreign Capital Inducement Act, relaxing regulations and granting income tax breaks to foreign investors (Seth 2017: 6). This, however, was brief respite and by the 1970s the state reinstated strict control, limiting foreign investment once again.

\(^{36}\) For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, the mothers’ unrelenting pursuit of their children’s educational development captivated the South Korean public’s imagination. The term “skirt wind” mothers (*Ch’ima param I*)
practices draw from a longer lineage of investing practices that in the past were discouraged by the state. Throttling parents’ excessive investments in private education fell in line with the state’s goals to nurture a strong, autonomous, domestic, industrial economy. Park’s efforts were very much designed to build a strong private sector through his support of a state-controlled corporations (Heo et al. 2008, Kim 1991). Private education, however, was not included in this plan. Instead, the state invested in constructing two-year vocational schools to cultivate a population with “technical skills.” Designs to decrease the number of graduates matriculating at higher institutions for developing skilled industrial worker force was less about curbing private education and more about ensuring a steady stream of available manpower. While it was parents’ personal ambition to elevate their children to white-collared jobs through education, this went against governmental goals and was seen as a potential threat to nationalistic, collectivist, economic growth and thus heavily frowned upon.

By the 1980s, the South Korean state’s commitment to extend the economic development policies started in the Park era rendered all supplementary education illegal. There were two main reasons for this. First, the state promoted “education equality” and advocated for equal opportunity during this period. The idea was that the higher ranks of education should be open to all social classes regardless of status (Abelmann 2003). Second, private education was looked upon with suspicion and as the harbinger of social stratification that would undermine the national unity needed for the continued push to expand South Korea’s industrial economy. Defying the government, public school teachers offered private lessons to supplement their meagre incomes, using time spent with parents during routine home visits to gauge those who would welcome additional tutoring for their children (Seth 2012b: 20-21).

SSen yoja) referred to “the force of a woman on a rampage” or one who would stop at nothing in the interest of her child’s success (Sorensen 1994: 26). “Skirt wind” mothers were particularly identified as those who invested exorbitant amounts of money in their children’s education (Abelmann 2003: 49). This is despite the fact that in the 1960s, South Korea’s per capita annual income was $125 and ranked by the UN as one of the world’s poorest countries (Nelson 2006:189).

37 Individualistic pursuits to bolster a child’s chances to attain social mobility, nevertheless, continued. For example, Clarke Sorensen (1994:21) notes that families living in rural areas regularly sent their children to live with relatives in Seoul to secure better academic opportunities — another practice that was illegal until 1979. Parents also organized civic groups that lobbied for changes to the public school curriculum. They demanded subjects they deemed essential and advocated for the eradication of non-academic subjects such as physical education (Seth 2012b: 19-20).
The government’s staunch opposition to private education also extended to strictly regulating the lending of credit and capital. The inability to secure loans from banks was exacerbated by the fact that from 1980 to 1983 the state froze wages and earnings only covered 52% of monthly expenses for a family of five (Nelson 2000: 16).  

With no access to bank loans or formal mortgage lending programs, South Koreans had to devise new ways to invest their income. As Laura Nelson (2000: 16) points out, this resulted in the South Korean economy splitting between an extensive “curb market” and traditional banking sector during the 1980s. In lieu of an official stock market, the “curb market” consisted of numerous money-lending schemes and black-market activities such as currency trading. This shadow market, was an active domain where South Koreans could obtain large sums of capital necessary for the purchase of a house, wedding, funeral, or to pay tuition.

Overwhelmingly, these were activities orchestrated by women whose duties as “housewives” included generating appreciation strategies to increase their family’s wealth. Mothers as the

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38 This despite the fact that South Koreans clocked the highest number of working hours in the industrial world (Cumings 1997: 334).

39 In 1980, 70% of household savings were invested in the “curb” market (Woo 1991: 161 in Nelson 2000). These practices were not limited to individual households investing in the curb market but chaebol or corporate conglomerates seeking the high rates of return as well (Nelson 2000: 17). At its most profitable, curb market investments commanded rates of return as high as 20.9% (Woo 1991: 197 in Nelson 2000). For individual South Korean investors or “citizen-speculators”, curb market dividends financed their real estate purchases (Janelli & Yim 1988-1989, Nelson 2000).

40 For instance, rotating credit circles (kye) became popular. Comprised usually of friends (usually old classmates), neighbours (where community members pool money together, without a rate of attached interest), kin (where housewives might participate in secret, but also introduce other family members in need of financial assistance), and small business owners (who participated in these schemes to accrue interest). Although there are a number of ways that kye can be organized, during the 1980s, ponho kye, was most commonly comprised of lower class and middle-class housewives orchestrating loan-lending schemes pegged to a rate of interest. Ponho kye was popularized with the influx of cash in South Korea during the 1980s. During this period, ponho kye was organized so that members entered into a one to three-year social commitment. The most common configuration was the two-year commitment. Being obliged to fellow members was key, and for the most part easily enforced as participants had face-to-face contact with one another. If a member was not part of the immediate circle of friends, family, or business community, entry was possible so long as the incoming person was properly accounted for. Members pick their turns to meet their financial needs. Often, kye turns are orchestrated so that members can pay for a scheduled financialized event, such as a real estate purchase or paying their children’s tuition. In the event that a single member lacks the funds to pay back a loan, turns can be shared with other participants. This tactic reduces uncertainty to circumstances where a member goes bankrupt or absconds with their share of the money without paying it back. In the event of a member’s death, the family is held accountable to the deceased relative’s debts. Moreover, investing in kye often produced another kind of certainty in terms of transiting between life stages. The reasons for participating in a rotating credit circle spanned from affording commodity objects such as a rice cooker, to funding weddings, to acquiring a piece of real estate (Janelli & Yim 1988-1989, Kendall 1996, Nelson 2000, Kendall 1996, Nelson 2000).
active investors not only in their children’s education but also in other domains such as an illegal shadow economy run parallel with the theoretical trajectory of this dissertation. Until now, scholarly research has kept these investment domains separate, entirely overlooking how these investing practices are also wed together in the “biofinancialization” of adolescents (Papadopolous 2017). According to Fiona Allon (2010: 367) “citizen-speculators” are wrought when “[e]veryday life is increasingly framed as a space of investment yielding both financial and personal return. This not only makes material consumption more and more aspirational, but also positions the individual as an investor in a life project that requires the constant pursuit of opportunities and the negotiation of risks in order to yield rewards.”

In the 1980s, the wedding of educational and investing prospects provided the conditions for Gangnam, which literally translates to “South of the River,” to become an “urban middle-class production factory” (Gelézeau 2008:305). “Housewives” as “citizen-speculators” (Allon 2010) almost literally transformed pear orchards into one of South Korea’s most high-priced real estate markets. Known as pokbuin, which is a derogatory term for “wives who buy and sell real estate on speculation for investment purposes, and engage in money lending” (Abelmann 2003: 49-50), these women came to be the ones steering Gangnam’s appreciating real estate market.

In order to attract potential investors like the “housewives” who would increase the value of land and real estate, the Seoul government re-located the city’s elite high schools south of the Han River (Nelson 2000: 44). The Seoul city government started to aggressively build a high-priced real estate market in Gangnam and developed it as an educational hub and consumerist playground for the wealthy, which is linked to South Korea’s recent economic history and government supported measures.41 Today, it is well known throughout the country that real estate prices fluctuate in accordance with information about Seoul National University’s yearly admissions rate, showing that the overwhelming majority of accepted students are Gangnam residents.

Abelmann 2003).
41 Preparations for the 1988 Summer Olympic Games resulted in some of the most violent removals of low-income inhabitants according to UN standards. As Davis (2011) notes, the apex of forced removal of squatters and low-income peoples happened in the years both preceding and following the games themselves. According to Davis (2011), speculative fever gripped the minds of developers and home owners and the bulk of development actually straddled the Olympic games.
So, even without a mortgage lending system, South Koreans still managed to create a booming real-estate market (Nelson 2000: 17). It wasn’t until 1989 that government initiatives allowed South Korean banks to implement a long-term mortgage system and the slow introduction of credit cards. Long before restrictions on official lending were lifted in 1989, the groundwork for speculative fever was already established (Gelezeau 2008), giving rise to Korea’s nouveau riche (Potzebra-Lett 1998).

Around the same time the government began to relax its position on private education in the 1980s, it also contradictorily established EBS (Educational Broadcasting System), a television channel providing tutoring programmes, in a bid to thwart private education (Lee et al. 2012: 307). Once fully realizing the economic potential of the informal economy, 1991 saw the start of a slow move to legalize private education. The “citizen-speculator” subjectivity permeating parents’ demands and economic practices of investing in a private education market was winning, and this sector began to grow and establish itself as a fixture within the institutional infrastructure (Allon 2010). The floodgates however were only open a crack. Even still, stipulations remained strict. Private academies (haksŭpgwŏn) for middle and high school students were permitted, but not private universities. Working in tandem with the state’s efforts to reform regulations, the “citizen-speculator” subjectivity of “housewives” formed a powerful quasi-public consumer base that challenged the government to continue revising rules that stymied the growth of private markets. It should be noted that South Koreans largely credit today’s high concentration of “cram schools” as the reason for Gangnam’s high real estate prices and proof that real estate as an appreciable asset is directly affected by educational investments.

In conjunction with these endeavours to bring about change and government plans to “globalize” South Korea, stringent regulations on international travel also began to loosen in the late 1980s. The “global citizens” of those days had not quite reached the heights of today’s global citizens who traverse the world, expanding their horizons, cultivating their middle- and upper-class habitus, and becoming multilingual. In fact, throughout the 1980s, South Koreans
were strongly discouraged from traveling abroad.\footnote{The purpose of banning travel was to stimulate the South Korean economy through consumption of domestically produced goods and services (Han and Chun 2015). In other words, government economic policy was fixed on keeping capital within the country’s borders.} As with the legalization of private education and the creation of a mortgage and credit system, the travel ban was lifted in 1989. But South Koreans had to wait until 1996 for the establishment of the KOSDAQ, the South Korean Securities Exchange (based on the NASDAQ), a formal institution where “citizen-speculators” could invest their money. In the interim period, they found their own way, utilizing social networks and pre-existing systems of exchange and credit (Song 2014). These nascent steps set the scene for the international school market that exists in South Korea today. The confluence of these events set the grounds for the government, parents, foreign investors and staff to become enmeshed in the project of institution building in the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis context.

1.3.2 The 1997 IMF Crisis and beyond

As many scholars note, the 1990s were truly a turning point in the transformation of the South Korean domestic economy, specifically the private education market. In a matter of two decades, the South Korean government nearly did a complete about-face. The state’s willingness to embrace free market ideologies as a way to alter their educational institutions marked a distinct shift in favour of growing a private market.\footnote{Preceding the 1997 IMF Crisis, President Kim Young Sam, also known as “The Education President,” embraced an agenda premised on globalization. Concrete steps to make Korea a “global society,” were reflected in his educational policies. President Kim focused on decentralization, English education, and information technology (Lee 2006).} As study abroad and travel became de riguer for middle- and upper-class citizens leading up to the crisis, the private English education industry became one of the fastest growing domestic industries in South Korea (Seth 2002:186).

After the crisis, though, anxieties rose as white-collared employment opportunities in a changing global information economy shrank (Abelmann et al. 2012; Park J. 2009; 2010; 2011). In turn, internalizing “an ethos of globalization” (Park, J. 2010), whilst simultaneously losing faith in South Korean public educators’ ability to produce “creative global citizens” (Kim 2003; 2012; Lim 2012; Song 2006) continuously fuelled the push towards new “experimental” forms of education.
The idea that proficiency in English — the global *lingua franca* — could well secure one’s place in a changing local and global labour market became the main impetus for investing in “experimental” forms of education. Speculative investments in the future now included the concept of “the global” as South Koreans grappled with their role on the world stage. “Sedimented financialization” practices became increasingly speculative in orientation, and investment to gain membership in a “global community” became a widespread practice (Song 2014). Deciding that the path to obtaining coveted white-collared jobs was through English, parents thrust their children into English-speaking worlds. In this context, it is important to outline what differentiates the aspirant “1%” from the remainder of the population. Here, I build on the works of Park and Abelmann (2004) that focus on individualized narratives, life histories, and everyday practices of mothers who chauffeur their children from one after-school private academy to another or temporarily re-locate overseas. Park and Abelmann (2004) show that fulfilling “cosmopolitan dreams” by accumulating linguistic and cultural capital was a nearly ubiquitous ambition for families during the 1990s, irrespective of classed background (Seth 2002). “Pre-college study abroad” (*chogiyuhak*) (Kang and Abelmann 2011), where South Korean students travel abroad to acquire linguistic capital is another example of cultural capital accumulation44 (Abelmann and Shin 2012; Abelmann and Song 2012; Bourdieu 1977; Cho 2006; Kang 2012a; 2012b; Kim 2010; Lee 2010; Lee and Koo 2006; Lo and Kim 2012; Park J. 2009; 2011; Park and Abelmann 2004; Park and Lo 2012; Park and Bae 2009; Song 2012; also see Fong 2003; Weenik 2008; Woronov 2007; Zhou 1998). Though ambitions were not limited by class, the opportunities and aspirations, in terms of education and living abroad, were constricted by a family’s privation or made easy by a family’s affluence. While middle-class parents might invest in after-school private academies and purchase additional worksheets, upper-class subjects could afford to re-locate abroad to fulfil their cosmopolitan dreams.

These new investments are high risk and as such do not come with guaranteed returns-on-investment. Committing to these practices of investment, parents accept the uncertainty, pour

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44 One variant of “pre-college study abroad” (Kang and Abelmann 2011) are “wild geese” (*kirōgi*) families, where fathers remain in South Korea while mothers and children live abroad for extended periods of time. This arrangement is another iteration of how pursuits of global education crystallize as responses to political-economic transformations. As Cho (2006:26) reports, educated parents are more likely to become “wild geese families.” This is not a result of economic privilege, but rather from a heightened sense of insecurity amongst white-collared parents, who drawing from their own work experiences, believe that they must prepare their child to succeed in an imminently precarious world.
money into projects in the present, lock their gaze on the future, and hold tight to even the slimmest possibility of yielding returns. The intense privatization of education has escalated in direct proportion to intensifying anxieties in an age where global market turbulence profoundly affects subjects’ everyday lives. In fact, during the 1997 IMF Crisis many turned to shamanistic rituals (*kut*) seeking reassurance. Laurel Kendall (2009) discusses how commercialized shamans marketed and sold their services, observing that the majority of the clients were women. Some women were real-estate flippers while others were involved in risky business practices. Regardless of background, those who participated in *kut* ceremonies did so in an effort to realize both their own working identities and labour, as well as that of their families.

Women invested in shamanistic ceremonies in an attempt to accumulate capital by securing their family members’ economic subjectivities. Faced with political-economic shifts, private education and *kut* services become odd bedfellows in their shared aim of producing human capital that would withstand market turbulence. The structures of feeling (Williams 1977) that compel mothers to simultaneously grasp at a practical education and “superstitious” *kut* are rooted in uncertainty, and while these practices might seem disparate, they are oddly similar parenting strategies with an unswerving underlying “logic” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) fixated on extracting latent human capital (Anagnost 2004; 2008; Arai 2013; Hirao 2001; Park, S. 2007; 2011; 2012). In the end, the fashioning of oneself then becomes the fashioning of “the economy,” where one embodies the ebbs and flows (Zaloom 2009).

These paradigmatic shifts could not have come about without changes to government policies. However, as I have demonstrated, this has not been a simple “top-down” process alone. South Korean parents have long voiced demands to expand their children’s educational horizons, and in some cases, they have banded into powerful lobby groups. In other cases, they have allowed their money to do the talking, creating a powerful quasi-public consumer base by investing in private education and becoming key protagonists in the making of new markets. As Laurel Kendall’s (2009) ethnographic examination of the efflorescence of shamanistic practices evidence, investing in the production of social beings extends far beyond financial domains

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45 To give an example of the many forms of petty entrepreneurship undertaken by South Koreans, the client base in Kendall’s (2009) observation includes entrepreneurs running small factories, restaurants, a mushroom importing business, and a flower shop, amongst other businesses.
proper. Thus, my work documents the “sedimented financialization” that is the foundation for transforming South Korea’s educational landscape and turning adolescents into sites of investment (see Song 2014). As Jesook Song (2014: 41) argues, “sedimented financialization” differs from “global financialization” by “tak[ing] into consideration how ‘informal financial markets are profound infrastructures for household economy.’”

It used to be that South Koreans invested in education to attain upward mobility by differentiating themselves from blue-collar workers, but now the goal is to remain relevant in a drastically shifting political-economic milieu. As ventures in education and kut evidence, individuals feel that the responsibility falls on them and their privatized, highly speculative investment practices. While South Koreans adopted and adapted new investing schemes, the state also played a crucial role in excavating many of these value-producing projects from informal markets. The purpose of this historical overview is to illustrate how the “1%” adapted investment practices to produce “global citizens” as a form of vital human capital in a highly privatized education market.

In 2002, the South Korean Supreme Court decided to completely lift the state’s ban on private education. In many ways, the advent of the international school industry in 2002 is a watershed moment for South Korea. This move also prompted the move from “education equality” to “the right to choose” one’s academic path (Abelmann 2003). Most importantly, these changes freed parents to wholly embrace the myriad opportunities to produce a new form of human capital — one that could potentially traverse the world with an intrepid, entrepreneurial spirit.

However, the current turbulent political-economic climate combined with “diploma disease” (Dore 1976) has the power to render even international schooling null and void. A South Korean professor and alumnus of one of these institutes was shocked when nearly one thousand

46 A key marker of distinction is that, “sedimented financialization does not just coexist with global financialization shaped through the formal financial market. Rather sedimented financialization propels the new financialization with accelerated speed (of circulation), intensity (of anxiety), and effect (of polarization of financial classes) in the current moment of capitalism, as we see in South Korean quotidian practices” (Song 2014: 41).

47 Following the 1997 IMF bailout, not only were financial markets liberalized to accommodate capital movement (Kalinowski and Cho 2009, 2010), the private education industry also operated according to the logics of “free-market” expansion.

48 Indeed, the state rationalized their amended stance on education by stating that the government should no longer interfere with a “student’s right to learn” (Seth 2002:186).
applicants responded to a posting for a secretarial position at his university. The vast majority of applicants already had white-collared work. Perhaps most upsetting was the number of potential secretaries who had graduated from SKY schools. Historically, these were not institutions that produced secretaries. Discussing this further, he scratched his head, coming to the conclusion that while the position was “dead-end,” and “low-pay,” it was “stable.” Resigned, he closed the discussion by stating in English, “This is what neoliberalism does to us.” These sentiments about the current labour market are a far cry from the labour opportunities at the height of the industrialization process, another topic Ms. Ha remarked upon during our interview.

These orientations towards futurity also drive South Koreans to latch onto financial investment schemes. In critiquing capitalism in the South Korean context, Bohyeong Kim (2018) coins “thinking rich, feeling hurt” in describing some individuals’ attempts to push back against the global capital they feel has hurt them by investing in financial markets on their own as a form of resistance. Both in the context of my dissertation and Kim’s (2018) research subjects’ investment practices, the backlash is to feelings of economic injury. In fact, many scholarly accounts have discussed how increasing accessibility to the financial tools needed to navigate the global marketplace plays a prominent role in shaping affects, subjectivities, identities, and social relations (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009). So many individuals are taking advantage of these tools that now “everyday investor subjects” (Langley 2008) also “massage, move, listen to, feel and manipulate” the market as it “also pushes back on them, feels them, changes them and either offers or withdraws its love” (Maurer 2005: 190).

1.4 Investing in human capital: Adolescents as appreciable assets

International schools and American college preparatory academies like IHE Prep are places where students’ lives are consumed by educational aspirations that are directly connected to investment practices. As different as education and finance are on the surface, there are strong grounds for the argument that they share many of the same underlying traits. If one follows Horacio Ortiz’s (2017: 327) argument that “finance” is a set of social practices warranting examination in the making of quotidian life, it becomes possible to see how the logics of capital extraction and production are being adopted in forming the human capital investments unfolding in the rapidly shifting South Korean education system. And when Mark compared himself to an
“investment banker,” this implied that though adolescents are crucially important to weaving social relations (Pitluck et al. 2018; Zelizer 2005: 56) they too are treated as “financial media.”

As I will show throughout my dissertation, parents and private educators not only take up investing practices that have a long history in South Korea, they also prognosticate their adolescents’ worth in accordance to their academic performance within broader turbulent global labour market trends. At the very heart of financialization is the process of re-configuring, re-combining, and re-defining the parameters under which value is produced. As Judith Farquhar and John Kelly (2013: 554-555) argue, “Financial entities are not intrinsically material, but they change the situation of various materialities profoundly. Finance readily translates into a myriad of other things, material and immaterial, into the terms of its own codes, expansively and productively, but within rules and on vectors of movement that we need to better track and understand.” Likewise, Dimitris Papadopolous (2017: 139) argues that “[t]he principle of investment value hinges upon the belief that the future is exploitable.” Much in the way that many scholars turn their analytical attention to the housing market to examine how a new “frontier of accumulation” (Cooper & Mitropolous 2009) shapes the emergence of new subjectivities and socialities, so too does my examination of adolescents as biofinancialized products.

1.5 International schools: Sites of financialized futurity

There has been enormous interest in the rapid proliferation of the South Korean private education industry in the wake of the 1997 IMF Crisis. The post 2008 Global Financial Crisis also has presented a number of new (and in many cases old) circumstances deserving of ethnographic attention. As I have shown, scholarly works highlight crucial links between political-economic shifts and educational investment practices, but now “sedimented financialization” (Song 2014) becomes fused as a pedagogical approach within international schools. This has increased classed polarization whilst also exacerbating the gap between those who have the money to invest in the future (adolescents) and those who do not.

To what extent then can international schools be understood as a financial institution? There are three distinct aspects to international schools that set them apart from public schools and mark them as businesses over purely educational institutes. First, international schools are not only free from educational regulations but are also free to charge what the market can bear. A hefty
annual tuition of approximately US$35,000 ensures that these spaces nearly exclusively cater to South Korea’s most affluent families. Second, these institutions are either owned by domestic corporations or are the franchises or satellite campuses of foreign corporations operating in South Korea — a point I will return to momentarily. Moreover, as I will discuss in Chapter 5: Venture Philanthropy: Care as the Derivative Gamble, some international schools are Christian while others are secular. In both cases, care, compassion, and charity are main principles for students to abide by. Third, these institutions are all granted government permission to conduct courses in a foreign language. The overwhelming majority elect English as their main language of instruction.

As I will discuss in further detail, these qualifications are utterly crucial in understanding how private education, like other markets, flourishes due to “deregulation” and the state’s desire to grow capital. Although it appears as if the attendees of international schools are free to pursue as much education as they can afford, that was only true until 2009 when the Seoul Ministry of Education (SMOE) stepped in to curb supplementary private education once again. By 2011, a 10 p.m. curfew was imposed nationwide,\(^\text{49}\) rendering all supplementary lessons illegal. Not quite as stringent as deeming all private education illegal to curb social stratification, this curfew was nonetheless designed in response to governmental concerns over growing inequality. By putting a limit on the amount of time that parents could potentially invest in private education, the state attempted to institutionalize an antidote to growing social problems linked to social stratification. The idea was to limit the excessive investment in private education by the same families who already sent their children to elite institutions so that middle- and lower-class families at least had a chance at white-collared jobs.

1.6 Dissertation outline

In Chapter 2, “Gangnam Style? Anxiety and Exuberance in the Post 2008 Global Financial Crisis Context,” I offer a sense of my ethnographic fieldsite and discuss the methodology of “studying up” (Nader 1972). By giving a history of my personal experiences in my multiple fieldsites, I map out the long-standing professional and personal ties that made my research

\(^{49}\) See *Time* magazine’s sensationalized coverage of this story: http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2094427,00.html.

possible. These networks were incredibly important in gaining access to the population included in this dissertation. Adolescents — affluent ones at that — were hopelessly bound to intensive regimes of labour fixed on unleashing their value-in-potential. To say they were protected and prized commodities-in-the-making whose lives should not be disrupted would be understating their acutely intense circumstances. As I show, it was only because I met Paul, Ms. Ha’s husband, when I worked in the Daechi neighbourhood in 2008 that I was granted permission to conduct participant-observation at IHE Prep. However, as time passed, I recognized that international schools had much to offer in terms of insights as well. Due in part to my position as an instructor at IHE Prep and in part to their curiosity of the “mysterious” after-school private academy industry, I eventually gained consent to conduct research and interviews at several international schools in the Seoul area.

In Chapter 3, “Escaping Obsolescence: The shift from subject to skill-based education in a South Korean international school,” I interrogate how upper-classed students are prepared for their own obsolescence. More easily monetized — especially in an uncertain future — the accumulation of skills is highly valued for its flexibility in application to unpredictable events. The combination of skills, however, is represented by teachers and staff as allowing the students to embody almost infinite permutations of themselves as hyper-flexible labourers. The goal is to cultivate subjects who can draw from their imaginative capacities to find new and novel solutions to pressing problems. Drawing from the imagination, the ability to cultivate social relations is viewed as a form of “resilience,” an essential trait for surviving a volatile global economy. This particular chapter exclusively focuses on Williams International — a core institution in South Korea’s flagship free-economic zone.

In the interest of expanding on my argument that centres on the accumulation of skills, Chapter 4, “Work Hard, Play Harder: From Max Weber to Pat Kane,” goes on to interrogate how adolescents are socialized into regimes of play, which are considered necessary for innovating and creating new markets in an uncertain future. The bulk of my ethnographic data for this chapter was also collected at Williams International. To further situate my research findings, I also delve more deeply into some of the curriculum materials and how they fit into the current South Korean government’s obsession with encouraging “the 4th Industrial Revolution.”

In Chapter 5, “Venture Philanthropy: Care as the Derivative Gamble,” I examine how international schools encourage adolescents to embark on projects to help those less fortunate, in
the process nurturing a compassionate heart as part of their human capital production. These projects bypass the state in terms of providing services and goods (such as houses through Habitat for Humanity) and catapult adolescents into positions of power. I analyse how “financialization” becomes a social practice, undergirding investments in urban infrastructure, educational institutions, and the flesh and blood of humans who inhabit them to create new markets while facing global market volatility (Cooper 2010). Additionally, I argue that the construction of these global regimes of care are firmly rooted in the intergenerational, reciprocal relationships of obligation and debt between parent and child.

Conversely, Chapter 6, “Globalized Adolescence: Experimental Exuberance During Turbulent Times,” analyses how upper-classed adolescents fundamentally understand their classed subjectivity as one that is inherently precarious and unstable. I analyse notions of precarity from several angles to show how discourses hurling vitriol at the elite and upper-class affected my interlocutors’ reflexive understandings of their social positioning. In particular, I focus on the neologism gapjil and Hell Joseon discourse that became wildly popular during the time of my fieldwork, identifying how those “at the top” who are “born with gold spoons” are solely responsible for the misery of the vast majority of South Koreans. The production and circulation of these discourses had profound effects not only on my adolescent interlocutors’ psyches but also the political outcome of President Park Geun-Hye’s impeachment in 2016.

Lastly, in Chapter 7, “Suicide or When Value-in-Potentia Goes Unrealized,” I discuss how one international school administrator and other South Koreans come to understand suicide, crises, and precarity in our times of biofinancialization. I discuss how death and destruction — literally and figuratively — are part and parcel of quotidian life in South Korea. Specifically, I discuss the ramifications of living in a “hypercapsitalist” economy, where capitalism has been so refined and perfected that it quite literally kills labourers through the violent means of value extraction. By examining the “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977) pervasive throughout Seoul during my fieldwork, I argue that a loss of faith in both public and private infrastructure contribute to the overwhelming consensus that the next catastrophic economic crisis is on the horizon, threatening a bleak future and the viability of living a good life.
Chapter 2
Studying the “1%” in the Post 2008 Global Financial Crisis Context

2 Introduction

At the beginning of my fieldwork in September 2014, I faced a number of obstacles in gaining access to my highly affluent interlocutors. My aim was to conduct participant-observation of high school students in their sophomore, junior, and senior years while their American college preparations were the most intense. This period of intense study even has an official title and is referred to as “chungyohan shigi” or “a crucial time” as my students referred to it in English. The South Koreans I spoke with about initiating this research nearly all expressed some interest in this “juicy” topic — exam preparation amongst some of the most affluent. However, regardless of how interested they were in the topic, South Koreans, academics and non-academics, told me over and over again that my project was “impossible.” High school students, in their “crucial time” were not to be bothered. Their time was precious and the stakes were high. They were expected to dedicate every moment to their studies to maximize their results.

Indeed, in the first months, I started to believe everyone was right. What parent or educator in their right mind would let a “stranger waste the time” of these financialized subjects in formation? These are the exact words of one private academy owner who operated her institution in the same neighbourhood as IHE Prep. She went on to explain that many of her students had personal chauffeurs to drive them to and from school and the private academy. These were her justifications for politely refusing my request to study her students in the early days of my fieldwork. This is despite the fact that I was introduced to her by one of her alumni who now works as a professor at her school.

Private academies (hagwŏn) were not the only ones to decline my requests. One international school, in a face-to-face meeting that included the principal and two guidance counsellors, expressed anxiety over my research proposal because their clientele was too “high profile.”

50 I heard this a lot — students having personal drivers. For the record, none of IHE Prep’s students had this service, at least none that I was aware of.
51 Notably, this professor and mentor during my fieldwork seemed surprised by his alma mater’s refusal. He even called her on my behalf, asking her to please sit down and talk with me.
Nevertheless, they tentatively agreed to participate, only to retract their offer after reviewing sections of my approved Ethics Review Board proposal, an informational letter that would have been sent out to the entire school’s population, and carefully crafted consent forms. In an email, the principal stated, “this type of qualitative study could prove a distraction and unnecessary disruption to the educational environment and school climate we take great care to nurture.” Similar to the concerns expressed by private academy owners, they were anxious that my study would undermine their duty to protect students, their parents, and their enormous investments in their children’s uncertain future. And while the cause of these anxieties could be understood on an individual and institutional level, they too are shaped by the broader “structures of feeling” associated with global market volatility (Williams 1977). In this chapter, discussing the ethnographic scene and methodologies underpinning this dissertation, I aim to paint a broader portrait of the issues involved by studying upper-classed adolescents as financialized value-in-potentia (Ho 2009, Nader 1972).

International schools emerge from the nexus where “public” and “private” meet, then go on to chart their own path. This development in private education would not have been possible without the South Korean Ministry of Education’s renewed commitment to supporting the expansion of the private education industry and welcoming foreign investments. Various internal and external forces affected this pragmatic shift, including the quasi-public consumer-citizen base created by South Korean parents’ spending power, global market volatility, and changes in technologies of governance (Foucault 1988). The circumstances that have led to this shift are at the heart of my study on students attending international schools and private academies are pertinent to both my theoretical and methodological trajectory.

In addition to looking at the parents, students, teachers, and schools, this chapter also discusses Laura Nader’s (1972) term “studying up” in her essay “Up the Anthropologist — Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” and its relevance to the scope of my research. Writing more than four decades ago but as relevant today as it was then, Nader (1972) pleads for anthropologists to theorize the inner workings of “faceless” institutions, corporations, and bureaucracies, to study those people in positions of power in order to best assess the situation as a whole. One of the main reasons for this need is to better understand the practices, ideologies, and socialities shaping the public sphere. Until Nader’s essay (1972: 304), anthropological studies tended to focus on the private sphere: families and other small groups that are part of “communities.”
In “studying up,” I could gather information on global economics from an “impersonal” position through easily accessed media reports, policy and discourse analysis. However, interrogating how imaginaries of a precarious future animate investments in adolescents required activating my own personal networks — some of which date back to childhood friendships. Likewise, my positions as an instructor at IHE Prep during my main fieldwork and as a part-time employee at Berkeley Institute in the preliminary phase of my research were almost entirely responsible for me gaining consent to carry out this project. While my status as a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto qualified me to work as an instructor and get my foot in the door, the personal networks were what truly made the difference.

I cannot emphasize this enough. As a University of Toronto Ph.D. Candidate (not an Ivy League college), I would not have been able to conduct research on this population without these connections.52 In this chapter, I discuss how the connections I made and social relations I maintained before I ever chose my doctoral fieldwork became inadvertent assets in “studying up.” It was due in part to this invaluable resource that I was able to analyse the innovations in global economic markets that shape pedagogical approaches to gaining the “1%” and lend credence to my research.

The last point I discuss in this chapter is closest to my heart. I reveal the ways in which an individual’s education becomes conceptualized as a public advantage (that is repeatedly threatened under neoliberalisation), outlining the potentiality for social change and why this warrants ethnographic examination. The making of the international school community is a process that shifts the public sphere into a private one, erasing and redrawing the borders until a new system is created that straddles both domains (see Muehlebach 2012) and depends on the anxious love that propels these investment practices.

Thus, rather than interrogating a “private” or “public” sphere proper, my ethnographic analysis incorporates both so as to show how one set of practices and policies bleeds from the public into the private and back again. For example, the cultivation of the “1%” is rooted in the construction

52 Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I met with my colleagues and friends at Ivy League institutes who were repeatedly asked by eager parents to hold “information” sessions, revealing the “secrets” to securing a place in one of these institutions. Likewise, others were invited by international schools to work as consultants. I wouldn’t discount differences in say, personal affability to be some of the reasons why I was not invited to undertake such tasks, but I also believe lacking Ivy League credentials was a factor.
of an international school market that reflects not only the practices of individualized subjects, but also governmental policy as previously discussed. This analytical trajectory allows me to interrogate how classed boundaries of belonging are constructed and solidified through investment practices that are wholly private but at the same time supported through public governmental policies.

2.1 Gangnam in the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis context

Before the Global Financial Crisis came the historic 1997 IMF Crisis, an event so momentous and far-reaching that it shaped my own ethnographic sensibilities. In fact, my very first visit to South Korea was in July 1998, only months after the IMF bailout on December 4, 1997, left South Koreans reeling and in a state of disbelief. After experiencing the exhilaration of unprecedented growth for nearly three decades, the sudden collapse of the domestic economy was shocking. As mentioned in Chapter 1, what made the shock worse was that it was all due to a seemingly unrelated and unforeseen cascade of events that started with the collapse of the Thai bhat and ended with an IMF bailout of South Korea. At the time, I knew virtually nothing about global economics (I was fifteen and uninterested) or South Korea for that matter. It did not take long however to become aware of the grimness all around me. There was a sobering solemnity in the air, and the South Koreans I met, namely through personal family networks, wondered at what had happened and when these maddening aftershocks would come to an end. That summer, my relatives explained to me that “IMF” was not short for “International Monetary Fund” but “I am fired.”

2.2 IEP Academy

Just months preceding the Lehman Brothers collapse on September 15, 2008, I returned to live in Seoul in April 2008, working full-time at the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Academy in the famous Daechi neighbourhood in Gangnam. In the months leading up to the Lehman Brothers collapse, those working within the English language “cram school” (hagwŏn) industry felt a sense of optimism. In their world, there was more buzz regarding then President Lee Myung Bak’s plan to implement a new policy requiring all public school classes be taught entirely in English than the foreboding signs of global economic crisis. Lee believed that by adopting English at every level, it would help South Korea continue to grow as an economic powerhouse and remain competitive on the global stage. It was when Lee tried to promulgate
policy initiatives such as these that one was reminded that he was the former CEO of Hyundai Engineering and truly made to feel as if one was living in “Korea Inc.”

After-school institutes, including IEP Academy, seized upon this idea and went on a bit of a hiring frenzy. Most students at IEP Academy attended public schools and had set their sights on domestic elite colleges, and while English language was a large part of their education, fluency was not necessarily the goal. Instead, academies such as IEP produced lean, mean test-taking machines who could ace their public school examinations and other standardized tests such as the Test of English Language Fluency (TOEFL). Anticipating that students would struggle in adjusting to Lee’s changes, “cram schools” prepared for a rush of new students whose academic responsibilities were about to become even more burdensome. In early April 2008, the hiring frenzy was at its peak and it took me a grand total of forty-eight hours to land an interview for the job I would keep for the next three years, quitting only after being accepted to the graduate studies program at the University of Toronto. I received a call from my then prospective employer at 4 p.m. They requested an interview at 10 p.m. the same night, to which I declined, asking for an appointment the next day at a more “appropriate” hour. Little did I know, working late into the night was the norm — something I quickly acclimated to. At my interview, I met Paul, Ms. Ha’s husband, who would later become CEO of IHE Prep where I conducted my dissertation fieldwork from September 2014 to December 2015. The hiring experience itself was deeply ethnographic and offered insights into how my full-time participant research in 2014 eventually became possible. Moreover, it was through this experience that I first became attuned to the constant frenzy to remain competitive in the South Korean private education industry.

Paul, then the Human Resources Manager at IEP Academy, interviewed and hired me, citing my time in the Juilliard Pre-College Program — not as a University of Toronto graduate with an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree — as one of the main reasons. In many ways, my serendipitous meeting with Paul that day marks the beginning of my official fieldwork a few years later. At IEP Academy, Paul was not only my manager, but eventually became a mentor and friend — more of a personal connection than a professional one. Paul trained and advised me throughout the first year of my employment.

Unlike Ms. Ha, who spent her entire life in South Korea apart from the few years she travelled abroad with her young children to attend school in Southern California, Paul was a Korean “returnee” (Lo and Kim 2012), bilingual and raised in both South Korea and Southern
California. Completing his undergraduate degree in the United States, Paul became an employee at a major financial firm before returning to Korea and becoming a public figure. In the 1990s, Paul had a hugely popular radio show, teaching Koreans English. It is for this reason IEP Academy hired him, to raise their own profile. Paul adroitly navigated both social landscapes, maintaining his American identity and subjectivity. Nowhere was this most acutely evident than the linguistic practices of teachers and students — even young students — addressing Paul casually by his first name. It is highly unusual for two people of a similar age and social ranking to refer to one another by name without attaching at least some polite signifier other than in cases of very close friendship. For younger South Koreans to refer to their elders or social superiors by name instead of a designated social title that identifies the positionality of both parties is unheard of. In a social setting rigidly structured by hierarchies and the use of honorifics, was quite the anomaly.

It comes as little surprise that IEP Academy was situated in the Daechi-dong, another neighbourhood also located within the Gangnam district. Daechi-dong most famously known for its extremely high concentration of “cram schools” (hagwŏn). In the humbly sized four-story building where IEP Academy was located, there were approximately fourteen other “cram schools.” This is quite remarkable, considering IEP Academy took up one and a half floors and the building also housed medical offices, a post office, a pharmacy, numerous clothing stores, electronic dealers, eateries, and a full-sized grocery store in the basement.

This, my first job in Korea, felt not just foreign but surreal with its long hours and intensive demands on both teachers and students. In 2008, my classes started at 5 p.m. and ended at 11:25 p.m. Most of my students were twelve and thirteen, in their first and second years of middle school, where they had to be by 7:30 a.m. the following morning. There was a proliferation of words such as “pernicious” in their daily vocabulary lists, words so uncommon that even the Korean equivalent was beyond their grasp. If they performed poorly on their daily vocabulary quiz, they stayed until they had memorized everything. Most days I had to stay at work until 1 a.m. Specializing in high-level middle-school students, my role was to prepare them for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and help them write the “academic style” essays required by TOEFL. Though my students had earned the designation of “high-level,” which is calculated through their mock TOEFL score exams, and were undoubtedly sharp and witty, they struggled to form a coherent sentence in English — both verbally and in writing. They were
however, expected to be able to at least understand the requirements of an academic style essay, including the formulation of a thesis and the ability to substantiate their arguments with evidence. Even more remarkable, these students would not have to officially write this exam unless they prepared to enter a foreign language university. In that case, it was quite possible that none of my students would ever take the exam for this purpose. The academic goals of my students at my first job were to attend Korea’s top three elite SKY schools: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. Even still, it was considered a measure of their future success and a high score showcased a student’s academic prowess.

As mentioned previously, I became employed in the midst of a hiring frenzy motivated by the prospect of increased enrolment due to the policy that President Lee was trying to put forth. While the initiative was never put in place, the number of students increased through the early stages of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. However, at the onset of the December 2008 “Winter Intensives” — the month-long winter vacation when students would attend IEP Academy starting at 8 a.m. in lieu of a break — native English teachers were called into a meeting by the grave-faced HR manager, Mr. Choi. He informed us that the Financial Crisis was hurting enrolment numbers, and he had no choice but to administer layoffs effective immediately. He advised those of us who were staying that we would have to work doubly hard to keep our classrooms full.

I sadly said good-bye to some of my colleagues, many of whom were E-2 visa holders, a teaching visa that require an employee sponsor, and would have to hastily pack their belongings and leave the country upon termination of employment. The story about dropping enrolment

53 This included Christmas and New Year’s Day (according to the Solar calendar — so not the “Chinese New Year” Seolnal that Koreans also celebrate). Arguably these are holidays that are not nearly as important in comparison to North America but still celebrated nonetheless. It warranted the sense of defeat that both teachers and students felt, congregating in a classroom on these days.

54 In contrast, I held the F-4 visa, limited to diasporic Koreans from wealthy countries. Effectively, this visa class granted me status as a permanent resident, barring holders only from large venturesome investing schemes and manual labour. Notably only diasporic Koreans from select, wealthy countries are eligible for the F-4 visa, which grants the ability to freely work, in “almost all employment activities excluding unskilled manual labour and speculation activities.” Those who are qualified for the F-4 visa are the following: a) Those who have Korean nationality but have acquired permanent residency in another country or have permanent residency in another country b) Those who had Korean nationality in the past, but have acquired the nationality of another country c) Those who have acquired the nationality of another country, but either of whose parents or grandparents had Korean nationality in the past. Since this an “ethnic” visa class, Korean adoptees are also eligible (see Kim, Eleana 2012).
rates, as linked to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, was not cause for suspicion until a subsequent staff meeting. While I was employed as “a native English speaker,” as a Korean-American who maintained good relations with the “Korean-Korean” staff, I was often invited to their staff meetings. During one of these meetings, I learned to my dismay that in actuality enrolment had increased and continued to increase because of the crisis. The crisis was merely used as a convenient excuse that would go unquestioned when the private academy arbitrarily fired teachers it now longer wanted. During this meeting, teachers were commended for their efforts in keeping the classes full. I learned afterwards from my Korean colleagues that in some cases mothers had reached out, asking for tuition relief or whether financial arrangements could be made. Even though their husbands had been laid-off during the 2008 Financial Crisis, sacrificing their children’s private education was not an option — especially in light of these dire circumstances. Due to this awful string of events, I witnessed first-hand the relationship between global economic volatility and parental investing practices in private education.

These incidents in 2008 in some ways mirrored the rapid growth of the after-school industry following the 1997 IMF Crisis, as discussed in the previous chapter. Mounting enrolment in English schools in 2008 also parallels IEP Academy’s particular history after the 1997 Asian Debt Crisis. Just as IEP went from a small operation, with a few teachers and students, to a full-blown private academy in 1997, so too did the education industry after the 2008 Crisis. Crises aside, the reality is that if parents did not continuously seek new means to keep their children abreast of changing times by arming them with English language skills and credentials such as the TOEFL exam score, the education industry would not be thriving as it is. The ideology of acquiring the English language was viewed as intimately bound together with the broader strategies of capital accumulation in a global economy.

IEP Prep greatly benefitted from parental concerns, growing from a small operation to one of South Korea’s largest private academy chains — not franchise — after the 1997 IMF Crisis in what Emily Martin (2009) refers to as “manic capitalism. Martin (2009: 234) argues:

In the world of financial markets, commentators on the economy often speak of alternation between extreme highs and lows as a disease, and sometimes describe it as a form of “manic depression.” But in practice, for the adept, such volatility can act as a resource, because the volatility provides profit-taking possibilities for those who can anticipate when the market will shift either way. Mania’s interstitial position between
mood (floating, changeable feelings in the psyche) and motivation (organized, goal-directed behaviour) is crucial for understanding why the “manic” artist or CEO seems to function well in the corporate world of the twenty-first century, but a “manic market” is a harbinger of disaster.

The “manic market” emerging from the 1997 economic crisis in South Korea may have wreaked havoc, but the ensuing disruptions were opportunities to be seized by private educators commodifying English language acquisition. In that sense, the “mania” of investment became an asset to this rapidly expanding sector.

In the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis, I listened as co-workers, parents, and students expressed trepidation regarding the viability of their future as desirable workers in an unpredictable global economy. Parents looking for an edge and a way to assuage their fears in light of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis turned to education as a coping technique. Perhaps the most explicit example of the lengths that parents will go came in 2009. During this time, the South Korean government had declared the economy to be stabilized. Simultaneously, the Seoul Ministry of Education (SMOE) introduced a 10 p.m. curfew, declaring all supplementary lessons after this time illegal. Private education had raised red flags concerning the public education system, a child’s right to rest and relax, individual health, and growing income inequality as a result of intensive investments in education. As mentioned in the introduction, this new law was met with considerable resistance. Parents who sought to exercise “one’s right to choose” in achieving “education equality” requested that the IEP Academy ignore the government’s orders. Anxiety manifesting in this pinnacle of parental investing practices was in fact a product of the smothering care and attention parents lavished on their children (Hamilton 2013).

The state’s attempts to curb the flow of capital into the private education industry ultimately backfired. This legislation awakened paranoia and heightened anxieties that created an almost black-market private education industry as teachers complied with parents’ demands. In the early days of the curfew’s introduction, my colleagues would meet with middle and high school students on dark rooftops, dimly lit corners of parking lots and alleyways, to memorize English vocabulary words at midnight. Walking through the Daechi neighbourhood, it was a common sight to see private academy windows suddenly covered up to avert the gaze of the Ministry of Education and hide illegal lessons going on in the middle of the night. As time passed, it became
clear that the Ministry of Education’s seriousness regarding the matter was not going to wane. When inspectors started to do random searches of private academies for illegal activity, IEP Academy along with many others caved and obeyed the laws to avoid hefty fines or a mandate to cease operations as punishment. Some continued to resist, taking their lessons deeper into the private markets, moving students to privately rented studio apartments functioning as classrooms.

2.3 Gangnam Style?

Though IEP Academy is located in Gangnam, the neighbourhood’s image as “South Korea’s Beverly Hills” is a far cry from the cult of overwork and anxiety that I experienced. While one might see the fresh, glassy faces of women and men who spend exorbitant amounts of money and energy on preserving their youthful looks, the vast majority of people I interacted with appeared beyond exhaustion. Moreover, none of my students or their parents seemed to find solace in their family’s socio-economic position. However, over time I realized that everyday life in Gangnam is built on a paradox of conspicuous consumption of expensive real-estate, foreign automobiles that are subject to heavy import duties, designer clothes from luxury boutiques, and plastic-surgery clinics. Often however, there seemed to be palpable anxieties regarding one’s classed positionality.

There is a plethora of plastic-surgery clinics catering to those who believe achieving heteronormative standards of beauty are a prerequisite for securing a job and desirable spouse. On any given day, one could walk along Apkujeong’s Line 3 subway platform and drown in plastic surgery advertisements for nearby clinics. Going to IHE Prep, my main place of fieldwork during 2014-2015, on a daily basis, I was bombarded by print ads and other marketing

55 “Glass-skin” is a look that was popular in South Korea during the end of my fieldwork. This look can be achieved through intensive cleaning and moisturizing to make the skin appear luminous. There are a number of YouTube tutorials by beauty vloggers now that give step-by-step instructions and the look has become known beyond South Korea.

56 See an article by The New Yorker for a sensationalized piece on plastic surgery in South Korea. Note the images are true to what I saw on a daily basis working in this neighbourhood. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face.
props such as mirrors typically found at a carnival funhouse that distort one’s proportions.\textsuperscript{57} Other mirrors taunted passers-by with the addition of text such as the famous line from \textit{Snow White}, asking, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall — who is the fairest of them all?” These advertisements relentlessly prod the psyche and are enough to make anyone feel anxious and insecure about their place and prospects in life.

While those are just snippets of daily life in Gangnam, a sum total of this neighbourhood’s image was catapulted to global fame thanks to South Korean pop star PSY (short for “Psycho” — a name that refers to how “psycho” the pop star is to entertain his fans), whose YouTube video “Gangnam Style” went viral. On December 21, 2012, “Gangnam Style” became the first YouTube video to reach one billion views, breaking the streaming platform. It was much adored for the quirky, comical “horse-riding dance,” the foreign, flashy aesthetics, and “sexy ladies” that were featured in the video. In interviews, PSY claims his aim was to entertain South Koreans in a way that made them laugh, “because these days everyone seems so stressed.”\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, the song is a satirisation of those aspiring to the “Gangnam lifestyle.” As PSY explains in an interview, “Gangnam means, it’s like Beverly Hills of Korea. But the guy doesn’t look like Beverly Hills. Dance doesn’t look like Beverly Hills. … And the situation in music video doesn’t look like Beverly Hills. But he keeps saying I’m Beverly Hills style. So that’s the point. It’s sort of a twist.”\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, in the lyrics, PSY refers to his less than desirable physique, stating that what he lacks in muscles, he makes up for in brains. He is a go-getter who plays — someone who “one-shots his coffee before it cools down.” He implies that prospective female mates should take note.

Undoubtedly, the song and video brought relief through laughter, parodying social climbers and “wannabes” and ridiculing the absurdity of materialist ambitions. The pop culture song also pokes fun at Gangnam’s social infrastructure, which in fact has its own “Rodeo Drive” named

\textsuperscript{57} It is not exactly clear the number of South Koreans who undergo plastic surgery, since this information is hard to amalgamate. Statistics often reveal the number of procedures, but in many cases one person will undergo several operations. However, a common statistic that circulates is 20% of the population, putting those who receive plastic surgery in the minority.

\textsuperscript{58} For the full interview with PSY, see the article by \textit{Time} magazine: http://entertainment.time.com/2012/09/28/psy-talks-gangnam-style-and-new-found-fame/.

after the famous shopping district in Beverly Hills. For South Korean viewers at any rate, the video satirizing Gangnam afforded an opportunity to laugh at the wealthy, giving them a sense of consolation in the face of classed injustice. But is the joke on the audience? Who gets the last laugh? PSY is actually a native of Gangnam. According to Business Insider, PSY does in fact own a $1.25 million-dollar condo in the outlying area of the Beverly Hills neighbourhood in Los Angeles. In some ways this seems like a cruel irony because now satirizing Gangnam as South Korea’s “Beverly Hills” itself seems to be a mockery.

Yet, the combination of PSY’s subjectivity and artistic expressions is just another dimension of the many paradoxes that comprise Gangnam. While PSY might showcase Gangnam’s glitz and glamour through his song lyrics and carefully constructed clownish choreography, the reality is that citizens living in this wealthy neighbourhood are plagued by feelings of precarity while privileged. Though PSY primarily targets Gangnam in the song, he also creates a character that feels fundamentally insecure and thus overcompensates. Or perhaps the opposite — someone who feels superior and is utterly oblivious to his status as an outsider, making nothing more than a fool of himself. Either way, whether insecure or a buffoon, the social standing of the character in “Gangnam Style” is at risk just the same as everyone else.

Gangnam functions as an “imaginary community” (Lee 2004:124) that is contingent on conspicuous consumption coupled with global-facing orientations and aspirations. Dong Yeun Lee (2004: 117) argues, there is a difference between “how people who consume commodities within a space differ from those who consume the spaces of the commodity.” Utilizing Bourdieu’s idea of the *habitus*, Lee sees consumer spaces garnering their viability and validity through people’s class consumption practices. Apkujeong-dong in many ways exemplifies these theories, as it is the quintessential example of how speculative booms give rise to exorbitant real estate prices. Accumulated wealth is used in turn to transform the neighbourhood into a place where global imaginaries are exercised and realized through consumer behaviour and the consumption of premier luxury brand goods. Those who enter these spaces without the appropriate class *habitus* are rejected and barred from reproducing the consumer culture filled

60 In 2014, Forbes estimated that PSY made approximately $2 million dollars from YouTube advertising alone https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2014/06/16/at-2-billion-views-gangnam-style-has-made-psy-a-very-rich-man/#1ec4203b3fdb.
with tailored suits, perfectly coiffed hair, luxury cars, and stables that PSY documents in his video.

Luxury lifestyles aside, many South Koreans identify Gangnam as the hub of “all the country’s social problems.” This is the Janus-faced coin of Gangnam’s identity. It is simultaneously an emotional target for feelings of desire and disgust. Though outsiders see the glamour, they also see high real-estate prices, educational pressures, and high divorces rates resulting from families fighting over their children’s academic trajectory. They see educational ambitions split a family into “wild geese” (kirŏgi) patterns where the mother travels abroad with children while the father is the breadwinner and remains in South Korea (Cho 2006, Kang 2012, Kang and Abelmann 2011, Kim 2010). The strain of this set-up often ends marriages. They also view Gangnam as the epicentre of numerous scandals many of which are related to private education, which I will now turn to.

2.4 Berkeley Institute: Gifting and market economies

Realizing how protective parents and teachers are of students and the high stakes of sculpting their future, “cold-calling” to find willing research participants at cram schools was unproductive. As I briefly mentioned early in this chapter, this project was only made possible thanks to the networks I developed years prior to entering graduate school. In fact, one formative relationship went all the way back to a childhood relationship with my friend Janice. We have known each other since we were both twelve and our families lived near to one another in the New York area.

Janice is Korean-American, was born in the United States, was in her late 20s at the time of my fieldwork, and grew up speaking both Korean and English. She is also an Ivy League graduate and as an adult, completely bilingual. Her language skills are so excellent that she translated a Korean novel for which she won a major award. Despite a promising career in the United States, Janice elected to spend several years as a SAT instructor in Seoul where her students provided endless hours of entertainment. The pay cheque and low income-tax rate afforded her a lifestyle that would be hard to come by living in the metropolis that she loved most: New York City, a place that offered her close proximity to her family and childhood friends, regular access to Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera, and networks full of individuals with a similar educational background to hers. In a serendipitous turn of events however, Janice’s time in
Seoul overlapped with my own fieldwork. Quickly reconnecting when I arrived in Seoul in 2012 to complete my language training at Sogang University, Janice and I rekindled our friendship. Janice offered to let me live with her for free, which led to the invitation to “hang out” and see what piqued my interest at the SAT preparatory school of Berkeley Institute where she worked.

I took her up on the offer and much of our time “hanging out” as friends happened at her place of employment because any given day Janice spent fifteen hours at Berkeley Institute.

During the summer of 2012, at one point, I was asked whether I would teach a crash course on U.S. History to prepare students for the Advanced Placement (AP) exam the following spring. While it was only one course, I would have struggled to teach it while being a full-time student and so declined. But I could only afford the luxury of declining because of my living arrangements with Janice. Even though I wasn’t teaching there, I “hung out” at Berkeley Institute to finish my own homework from Sogang University and jot down preliminary fieldnotes. On a day-to-day basis, this meant that I spent my time in the lobby, in the CEO’s office where students were sometimes advised or engaging in convivial banter with the teachers. I also ran quick errands, like picking up food for Janice, her co-workers, and students. I ate with the students, talked with them in empty classrooms, and spent countless hours watching Janice as she simultaneously taught and “played” with her students. I witnessed interactions between Janice, the CEO, and parents. I stayed well past midnight, hanging out with Janice and other teachers as they prepared their next day’s lesson materials. This afforded me the opportunity to — in Janice’s words — “just chill” and get to know students, their families, and other teachers.

It was at this time that I became cognizant of how the reciprocal exchange of feelings of compassion was a crucial ingredient in holding together social relations. Middle and high school students, rather than displaying anger and resentment towards their teachers, transformed their educational settings into spaces of mutual empathy and understanding by acknowledging that their teachers laboured under the same conditions that they did. Remarkably, convivial banter, affectionate teasing, and sharing of personal stories created an atmosphere where laughter, food, and beverages were routinely gifted (Graeber 2001; Mauss 1950; Riles 2010). Students used humour to revitalize an atmosphere overcome with exhaustion by satirizing their instructors through impersonations and drawings. Most strikingly, some adolescents even returned to the private academy at midnight, not to study, but to present their fatigued teachers — who were busy preparing the next day’s lessons — with food and drink.
To that end, Adrienne Lo’s (2009) examination of the formation of intergenerational relations between students and teachers in her ethnographic study of Korean heritage schools in California is foundational to my research. Throughout her argument, Lo maintains that respect for teachers is indexed beyond linguistic practices through the production of feeling (gibun) and soulful exchanges of affection and emotion (maum), which are expressed through one’s bodily disposition and pace of breath. Ethnographic documentation shows that a “well-mannered” child is one who has the ability to subtly read the psychological, affective conditions of others — in this case their teachers — and modify behaviour to exhibit consideration for others. Within a hierarchy of emotions, where teachers’ feelings are prioritized, the burden of emotional labour disproportionately falls on the shoulders of high school students.61 These findings underscore my own research questions, which focus on how affective exchanges and embodiment may be influenced in circumstances where students attempt to secure a spot in the “academic 1%.”

The summer of 2012 was my first long-term encounter with the demographic that would become the main scope of my dissertation research and launch my preliminary fieldwork in 2013. My ethnographic insights were enriched by the personal ties that granted me initial access to this affluent population and allowed me to spend time with adolescents as they were being transformed into financialized subjects. These relationships of reciprocity course through the entirety of my dissertation and overwhelmingly shape my perspectives.

But the conditions under which I started my preliminary fieldwork were drastically altered from my time in South Korea in 2012. In 2013, Educational Testing Services (ETS) made an unprecedented move to cancel the administration of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in South Korea that was scheduled for the month of May. This was the first time that the American college entrance exam was cancelled for an entire country. The cancellation came after a series of allegations of wide-spread cheating, putting South Korea on the ETS’ radar for several years.

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61 One example cited by Lo (2009) is the act of crying, which becomes a problem because it might hurt the teacher, not because it draws attention to the emotional injuries of a child.
2.5 The SAT scandal

The decision was so shocking that it caught the international media’s attention, including *Time* magazine,62 the *Wall Street Journal*,63 and CNN.64 This event occurred one month prior to my start date at Berkeley Institute, the Gangnam SAT preparatory private academy “cram school” where I would conduct my preliminary dissertation fieldwork. I arrived in June to be greeted by Janice, who was still working as a SAT instructor at Berkeley Institute, but before I could fully exit the taxi, Janice related the events leading up to the ETS decision in a harried state. Following the cancellation of the SAT test, President Park Geun-Hye had issued a raid of all SAT “cram schools” located in the Apkujeong and Daechi neighbourhoods of Seoul — places with famously high concentrations of wealth and after-school private education options. Announcements that the Ministry of Education would send officials to search for “cheat sheets” were nationally broadcasted.65

Berkeley Institute was declared clean. No stolen exam papers or answer sheets were found. The private academy however was slammed with multiple fines and an order to close its operation for thirty days for committing several bureaucratic offenses unrelated to leaked questions *(munjeyuch’ul)*. This closure came during the “Summer Intensive” season when students spend ten or more hours per day preparing for their American college entrance exams and is seen as their chance to improve their scores before applying to American colleges in the coming fall. For those in their sophomore or junior year in high school, the situation, while less pressing, was equally harrowing. Families trusted Janice and her colleagues to prepare their children as well as possible for life on American college campuses. Losing one summer of studying was hardly a

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62 See *Time* magazine’s coverage of the story: http://world.time.com/2013/05/10/for-the-first-time-sat-test-gets-canceled-in-an-entire-country/
63 See Wall Street Journal’s coverage of the story: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1000142412788732374604578472313648304172.
64 See CNN’s coverage of the story: https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/09/world/asia/south-korea-exam-scandal/index.html.
65 The scandal was built upon layers and layers of scandals. This following story is anecdotal but worth telling to give a fuller picture of the intensity and depth of this entire ordeal. In one case, a SAT private academy instructor who was accused of signing up to take the SAT test in order to video tape the exam for his students fled to Guam to escape authorities. However, since Guam is a U.S. Territory, the FBI arrested him, but he was eventually let go. Photographing or videotaping the exam was a common strategy enabling cheating since the exams in a designated zone are all the same but not necessarily in the same time zone, allowing students to preview the materials before taking the test in South Korea.
minor event when nearly every phase of an adolescent’s path to adulthood was meticulously planned out. With college applications pending for older students, Janice, her colleagues, and students scrambled to find alternative courses of action to deal with this massive hiccup.

While I was at Berkeley Institute to only conduct preliminary research, it was in the midst of this chaos that I was brought on as “emergency staff” to handle administrative duties — a position normally reserved for high school students. I did not receive a paycheque or contract. Instead, I was granted endless hours of participant observation, and free food and board from Janice. Gifting exchanges are tantamount in structuring social relations not just between teachers and students. These dyadic relations of credit and debt also shaped my status as a researcher turned emergency part-time employee at Berkeley Institute. For example, while window-shopping one day I pointed out clothes that I wanted but could not afford on my graduate student budget. As an expression of gratitude, Janice purchased them for me. She mentioned several times that they were in dire straits and that my help was invaluable. At the end of my one-month stint working as an administrative assistant, the CEO handed me an envelope with 1 million won (US$1,000) in immaculate crisp bills: not as an official form of payment but as a thank-you for helping them through a crisis.

As a part-time administrative assistant, I made photocopies and ran scantrons. I also amassed a full daily report on each student using software that pumped out elaborate graphs charting a students’ progress and analysing what type of SAT questions students repeatedly did well on or failed to answer correctly. This was when I first became highly sensitized to students’ reflexive understandings of themselves as quantitative data. Handing over their daily reports, I repeatedly witnessed the same reactions that I would see again later at IHE Prep: emitting painful cries, burying one’s face in hands, declaring that they were “wasting their parents’ money.” The fact that these students, like the ones at IHE Prep, were some of South Korea’s most affluent did not prevent them from experiencing feelings of guilt, regret, and anxiety over their status as sites of investment and appreciable assets. These findings often surprised my South Korean friends who were more firmly rooted in the middle and lower classes. In everyday conversations with my American and Canadian friends, the worries of wealthy individuals and adolescents were roundly dismissed, the pervasive belief that “everything is set up for them” seemingly proved they had not real concerns in life. Conversations about the rich usually went something like this: What could they possibly have to worry about? They would never work a minimum-wage job
(unless it was of their own choosing to experience something “different”). “Mommy and daddy” would to pay their college tuition. They have trust funds awaiting them. In many cases when I tried to explain that affluent adolescents, as well as the adults in their lives, also experience severe anxiety — albeit specific to their classed positionality — I felt my peers immediately lose all interest in the discussion.

It is one of my goals to demonstrate how at their core, the students in this study understood that they were part of an intergenerational contract of reciprocity. To date, anthropological scholarship examining South Korea’s “education fever” (kyoyukyŏl) (Seth 2002) in the post 1997 Asian Debt Crisis context overwhelmingly focuses on these issues as highly individualistic, personal drives of self-fulfilment thereby dismissing the formation of collective alliances (Abelmann et al. 2009; 2012; 2013; Cho 2015). Thus, largely absent from discussions about South Korea’s “education fever” (kyoyukyŏl) (Seth 2002) are the ways in which intergenerational gifting and market economies coalesce (Graeber 2001; Mauss 1950; Muehlebach 2012; Riles 2010). However, middle and high school students, as those fundamentally dependent on adults for emotional and financial support and subjected to educational aspirations (Deleuze 1992), are caught between the poles of parental desires and anxieties about their future. By building on these previous studies, I aim to conceptualize how individual pursuits of “academic 1%” status might also be part and parcel of a larger cosmology oriented to nurturing others’ investments in their future (Chu 2010).

As I began to collect information, the unforeseen circumstance of SAT exams cancellations actually opened my eyes to motivations behind adolescents’ actions that under less chaotic circumstances might have taken longer to notice. It turns out their actions are not strategic, rational decisions aimed at soliciting the attention and care of their private academy teachers and parents, but rather borne from the circulating effects of uncertainty and precariousness in a “post-crisis” climate (Mazzarella 2009; Roitman 2014).

Eventually the hoopla from the SAT “Cheating Scandal” had settled, and in our little corner of South Korea, Berkeley Institute underwent a quick merger and acquisition, operating under another private academy’s license in a nearby neighbourhood to save themselves from financial ruin. But the fallout lingered. International media outlets continued to follow the story and focused on the drastic measures implemented by the ETS, which exacerbated the worry and desperation of South Korean students and their families were experiencing. Citing the “cheating
scandal” in South Korea as the main reason, the ETS announced that a new version of the SAT would be rolled out by March 2016. Leading up to the implementation of this new version, there was a scramble to have students finish their tests as soon as possible. At least the current exam was predictable. Teachers could formulaically prepare their students by forcing them to memorize the most frequently occurring vocabulary words, training them to tackle the various types of questions in a specific way, and preparing a few “stock” essays that could be easily manipulated the day of the exam. Moreover, with the existing exam, leaked questions were randomly recycled from times previous. One might get lucky.

There was considerable speculation on what the new exam might entail, and most believed it would make life more difficult for students. Or maybe not? Parents and teachers devoted considerable time and energy trying to assess what course of action might be the best for the students. These were the main concerns facing parents and teachers as I started my fieldwork in September 2014.

2.6 IHE Prep

By the time I started my official fieldwork in 2014, Janice had left her job and worked as a private tutor. With Janice’s departure from Berkeley Institute, so too did my time come to an end. Nevertheless, this project would not have been possible without Janice’s support and the insights gained during my time at Berkeley Institute. Moreover, in 2014, though Janice insisted I live with her for free again — something I did for two summers previously — we eventually agreed that I would pay a flat fee of 500,000 won per month (US$500) for a room in her rather comfortable two-bedroom apartment. Given the down-payment system in Korea requires an up-front lump-sum fee of at least US$10,000 for a key deposit — and much more than that in Gangnam and its immediately surrounding area — securing housing in this pricy neighbourhood for the duration of my fieldwork would have been virtually impossible for me (see Song 2014). Most importantly, though, Janice was an incredible support and an attentive sounding board for my observations, helping me navigate this sticky terrain, advising me along the way, and providing feedback on the excerpts of my dissertation.

Since I was interested in “institutional channels proper” and Berkeley Institute was not open to me any longer, finding other sources for my investigations seemed like the wiser choice. However, as I briefly mentioned earlier, in a fortuitous chain of events I soon came to learn that
Paul left IEP Academy and opened IHE Prep — a SAT preparatory private academy — just down the street from Berkeley Institute. Although Paul was my HR Manager when I first started at IEP Academy, he was later laterally moved to the Research and Development (R&D) Department. Eventually when I stopped teaching, Paul also moved me to the R&D wing to help develop curriculum and content that would be purchased by students in addition to my duties leading workshops and training new teachers. During this time, I shared an office with Paul that thanks to our daily interactions strengthened our professional trust and friendship. It was due to his trust in my abilities that I was allowed to continue to develop content for the school while I began my masters in anthropology at the University of Toronto. Distance and time zone differences were not a deterrence. It was only when IEP Academy decided to innovate their curriculum (again) that our working relationship in this context ceased. Given our history, upon arriving in Seoul in 2014, I contacted Paul to say hello and see if there were any opportunities there.

In our initial texting exchange, Paul invited me to meet him at IHE Prep the next day. Our meeting took place in the stairwell of the building where he smoked cigarettes during his break while students cracked open the door to joke and remind him of his teaching schedule. While we filled each other in on what we had been up to, our catching-up chat converged at the node of education. Discussing our lives as educators, Paul said to me in English, “The most important thing is that a teacher cares.”

This notion of care was ever-present throughout my fieldwork, in various iterations. The word “care” was used by individuals such as Paul and other international school educators. As mentioned previously, “compassion” was a core principle at each and every international school. When my interlocutors spoke in Korean, a number of different phrases were used, but often, it was the English word, phonetically translated, “care,” (k’eô) that was inserted into an otherwise Korean sentence. But commitments to providing forms of care in an educational setting extended beyond marketing and mandate. To be able to care meant the capacity to make students feel a sense of warmth. It is worth mentioning here that my status as a Korean-American (kypo) was considered an asset. Paul’s wife, Ms. Ha, confessed that she seeks to employ Korean-Americans (kyop’o) because in her opinion, we are predisposed to connecting with students on an emotional level. Chông is the word Ms. Ha used to explain her motives for hiring Korean-Americans. According to the Naver (South Korea’s largest search engine)
dictionary, *chŏng* translates into “affection” or “attention,” but according to every single Korean native speaker I spoke with, there is no precise English equivalent (Naver dictionary n.d.). This feeling of attachment could indeed be affection. It might arise from feelings of warmth, but it could also be generated over the course of time with the solidification of loyalty, even if feelings of tension or conflict may at times exist. The rationale for hiring instructors who supposedly had “*chŏng*” is based on an affective orientation that seeks to tap into the psychological-emotional registers of need, care, and empathy (see An 2014, Chŏng 2014). Ms. Ha painted for me a picture of a hungry, sad student and explained her expectation that a Korean-American teacher would have the sensibility and generosity to buy lunch for their student — the act of a caring teacher who is affectively attuned.

Based on my former experience and because I am a Korean-American, it didn’t take long for Paul and Ms. Ha to offer me a job at IHE Prep although the negotiations regarding my status as a researcher took some time. Initially, I was conflicted about Paul’s offer to work as an instructor. On the one hand, working as an instructor would favourably position me to conduct this research. On the other hand, I knew how demanding and exhausting working in this industry could be. Students spent a solid ten hours at IHE Prep during the “Summer Intensives,” where they devoted their vacation to boosting their American college entrance exam scores. Would I be able to juggle both?

In the end, I was invited to conduct research at IHE Prep, so long as I agreed to work as a teacher. Throughout our negotiations, I made clear the terms of my research project and was adamant about avoiding “overwork” as an instructor. It was an ongoing struggle throughout the entire term of my employment, as I was called to hold “emergency” lessons on a number of occasions, sometimes after 12 a.m. over Skype for those who had exams the following morning. During busy seasons such as the Summer Intensives, when I needed to gather as much data as possible, I struggled to push back on what would have been an overwhelmingly full teaching

66 It is true that nearly all my native English-speaking colleagues were Korean-American. But there were exceptions to this hiring rule. For instance, my coworker from the first private academy that I worked at who was a Caucasian British man was also offered a job (which he rejected due to other life circumstances at the time). He had a good reputation as an effective and experienced teacher and also worked with Paul for many years. The other Caucasian coworkers I had at IHE Prep all boasted many years of teaching in Korea, so understood the demands and expectations of students and parents quite well.
load. These struggles to find balance became particularly difficult when Paul was battling the late stages of pancreatic cancer. On numerous occasions he asked me to please help IHE Prep succeed. His family depended on it. I did what I could within my means.67

Working as a teacher at IHE Prep, at any rate, was a boon. As a teacher, I wouldn’t be perceived as “wasting” the precious time of adolescents who needed to be intensely focused on chasing their future. Moreover, as a teacher, IHE Prep “vouched for” me as a person that adolescents “should” spend time with. My educational branding however did not carry as much weight in an American education-centric landscape that focused primarily on gaining admissions to Ivy Leagues. But it was “enough.” Similar to the parameters of my employment at Berkeley Institute, I worked without a contract and was consistently paid, on time, once a month on the same date. After working under Paul’s management for several years prior, I was not particularly worried. My colleague on the other hand, was a bit taken aback when she discovered that I didn’t have a contract. For a moment I thought that perhaps I should request one but came to the decision that in actuality it would be a somewhat rude request. I feared my demands might imply to Paul that I did not trust him despite our working history and his granting me permission to conduct fieldwork.

2.7 Multiple subjectivities: Duties at IHE Prep

As I have begun to discuss in the previous section, educators are always drawing from their life experiences, race, class, gender, and citizenship when interacting with their students in the classroom and beyond. The multiplicity of subjectivities for all involved in this study is a key component in understanding how teachers and parents as investor subjects transform adolescents into sites of appreciable assets. As I discussed throughout this chapter and in the introduction, my main educator interlocutors all drew from their multiple subjectivities. Ms. Ha is a mother, entrepreneur, director, educator, investor, and investment manager. Janice is an educator and a close friend to both her students and myself. In 2018, Janice texted me to report on the former students she continues to “hang out” with in the United States, upon her return to

67 On top of my fieldwork and job, I held a research fellowship position at the Academy of Korean Studies that required language lessons five days a week and conducting literature reviews of works published in Korea. Nevertheless, working at IHE Prep was an opportunity afforded to me as someone who personally worked with and knew Paul for several years.
New York City. Paul was a father, entrepreneur, CEO, teacher, and friend to both his students and myself. His students affectionately called him, “Mom” (엄마) as a reflection of their love, sense of affection, fear, and trust. Even my adolescent interlocutors juggled multiple social terrains. While some had only a Korean name, many of them also had an English name, which they almost always used interchangeably depending on who was addressing them. For instance, Francis, who I will talk about in more detail in Chapter 5, also had the Korean name Hyun Min. Ms. Ha and other Korean staff members who were clearly far more comfortable conversing in their native language always used Hyun Min when making reference to or directly addressing him. If Paul was conversing in Korean, he also used Hyun Min. If the discussion was in English, Francis was used. Generally speaking, even Francis’ friends referred to him using the name that reflected the language being spoken. Naming strategies can be understood as a kind of code-switching that sets boundaries, as well as the tactics adolescents use to broaden their social horizons, moving in and out of certain linguistic, social, and political-economic fields.

Since some students had lived abroad, making them “global citizens,” their experiences and backgrounds varied quite a bit from those who had lived their entire lives in South Korea. In retrospect, students’ experiences at IEP Academy were in many ways not that different from my interlocutors at IHE Prep. Both schools mired the students down in the drudgery of “cram school” life, with all the pressures of memorizing vocabulary, incessant monitoring, and test taking. However, these two populations of adolescents are quite different. Where students at IEP Academy struggled with fluency, my students at IHE Prep — international school attendees — without a hitch spat West Coast gangster rap lyrics and Rihanna’s infamous phrase “Bitch Better Have My Money” to break up the daily grind and monotony. IHE Prep students shopped online for overpriced baseball caps adorned with phrases such as “ILLIONAIRE” — a phrase they completely understood and found delicious. Even though the advanced language skills and behavioural differences could be accounted for by the fact that my students at IHE Prep were in high school — not middle school — their habitus was still undeniably quite different (Bourdieu

68 This particular baseball cap comes from South Korean rapper, producer, and record label owner Dok2’s clothing line. “Illionaire” is the name of his record label. However, “Illionaire” is a play on “Millionaire” or “Billionaire,” but with a twist. “Ill” is slang for cool, tight, sweet, according to Urban Dictionary.com (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=ill). “Illionaire” also means “An incredible state of being whereas one is so “ill” that “ill”ness is literally burstin’ from every orifice of your body (also Ill’ionaire and Ill’ionaire) (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Illionaire).
1984). My students for the most part, smoothly transitioned in between English and Korean. Like their public school counterparts, they did not wear required school uniforms or have to conform to school rules regarding haircuts. It almost seemed as if on most days they did not care about their appearance much, barring the light makeup I saw my female students wearing. In reality, I knew that many of them had personal trainers and were subjected to the same medical regimes designed to monitor and maximize physical growth as their more affluent public school counterparts. But in the end, my students knew more about American pop culture and could talk about it at length in ways that set them apart from many of their peers.

To give a richer portrait of my adolescent interlocutors’ academic lives, I will briefly outline what some of my duties as their teacher entailed. The simplest description of my duties was English literature teacher in charge of managing my students’ grade point averages at their regular international schools. But the nuances were so much more than that. As I was instructed by Ms. Ha, my job was to “grab the perspective” (p’aak’ada) of their international school instructor to help my students produce the “types” of essays and responses that would earn them an A. This is where I first met Jae Hyun (no English name) and Do Young (no English name). In 2014, both males were in their sophomore year and had the same English literature teacher. Logistically, this meant that I reviewed the novels that had been part of my own public high school experience in New York. Beowulf, Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Orwell’s 1984 were some of the works we read together. It was while I worked with Jae Hyun and Do Young twice a week for two-hour sessions that I was able to gain consent from their parents to include them in my research project. While I never interacted with Jae Hyun’s family, Do Young’s mom and I would talk on the phone, text, and sometimes eat lunch together.

At the beginning, I met with Jae Hyun and Do Young individually, but I merged their sessions together to save time. In addition to these classes, I picked up a Critical Reading course for middle school students. Coincidentally, this is when I met Do Young’s younger brother and taught him for a brief stint. I was also an Essay Writing Instructor, helping students draft club proposals for their regular day-time school and revise individual essays. In the Essay Writing course that I taught, I met two more interlocutors over my 15 months at IHE Prep. I met first

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69 Keeping true to native Korean linguistic practices, throughout this dissertation I will refer to the parents of adolescents as the child’s name, plus mother or father.
Jinny, a junior and then senior high school student, who not only became an interlocutor but also introduced me to her circle of friends, and then Francis, a sophomore and then junior high school student.

I taught a four-week course for newly graduated high school seniors who would start their undergraduate studies in the United States the following fall as well. The goal was to give them “a taste” of a 100-level college course and life in America. I basically assigned much of my own scholarly reading, asking them to digest the material and write short essays. Additionally, I took them through the University of Toronto Libraries website to acclimate them to scholarly research modes. I also taught Theories of Knowledge (TOK), a core course for students attending schools adhering to the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. I was often an “emergency” tutor, giving impromptu lessons, sometimes over Skype and as late as 1 a.m., to help students with individual assignments and international school test preparation. Lastly, I was a college consultant. I did not include the students I counselled in this study as they fell somewhat outside my target demographic.

My duties as college consultant are worth mentioning if only to give readers a broader sense of the students at IHE Prep and the various strategies employed in South Korea to prepare adolescents for American universities. I advised several students at various points in their application process, but I worked with two from start to finish. The first one attended an international school in Southeast Asia (after also attending one in Russia) because the corporate conglomerate his father worked for relocated the family several times throughout his childhood. This student had lived neither in the United States nor Korea but returned to Seoul during the summer for private tutoring and to visit family in his father’s hometown. His parents’ decision to split the family up when his father was finally relocated to Korea was a result of both children having become acclimated to life abroad and the worry they would not adjust to life in Korea. The second one was a Korean national — a “parachute kid” — who lived by herself in the American South (see Zhou 1998). Her parents paid monthly fees to the family who provided her room and board. I helped both prepare their personal statements and navigate college application websites.

My schedule varied wildly from month-to-month, based on demand and the amount of time students had for private lessons. I worked for an hourly rate in some cases and on retainer in others. The classroom was a rich site of participant-observation. Moreover, Paul generously
gave me permission to observe my colleagues’ classrooms when I was not teaching. I was able to conduct participant-observation, sitting silently in the back where I watched my own students engage in a different environment. Thus, while much of my data was collected in the classroom with my student-interlocutors, a large bulk was also a result of my “bystander but insider” status.

To have extra observation time, I sometimes went to work early or stayed late. I made sure any time in between my classes was spent “productively” collecting information. For instance, I joined the Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Club at IHE Prep, a club created and led by Ms. Ha and her daughter Amber in light of Paul’s illness. Several IHE Prep students, parents, and I made bracelets that were later sold to raise money for cancer research. All the students who participated added this activity to their résumé. My interactions with adolescents also extended beyond the walls of IHE Prep proper. Sometimes we hung out and played “gambling” games in the parking lot.

These “gambling” games usually consisted of rock, paper, scissors where the winner was entitled to physically assault the loser. Or in some cases, students, Mark, and myself would have cigarette-butt throwing contests where the prize was something similar. As a woman (and often the only one in these groups), I usually refrained from engaging in the physical punishment part but witnessed countless episodes of students and teachers relentlessly and tauntingly teasing each other through these mob-like interactions. These games were playful recesses in an otherwise jam-packed, stressful day. While they gave students and teachers time to bond, these games could also be interpreted as another opportunity for peers to differentiate themselves from one another as superior. These scenes were another example in which I was able to observe how adolescents and adults encouraged one another to assert their dominance in a hyper-competitive environment, but all in the name of innocent fun.

To escape the school atmosphere of IHE Prep, we grabbed coffee at a nearby café. In some cases, I went to my students’ houses to meet and interview their parents. In others, my students’ mothers treated me to lunch. My student Jinny (has both a Korean or English name but requested the use of “Jinny” as a pseudonym) suggested I visit her atelier where she worked to put together a portfolio for her college applications with guidance from art instructors. When I visited, we would sit and chat about her life while she painted. My experiences at IHE Prep teaching students like Jae Hyun, Do Young, Jinny, and Francis (who I will talk about in Chapter

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5 in more detail) have been invaluable. But it was the look Jae Hyun, Do Young, Jinny, and Francis gave me into a large portion of their personal lives that filled in the blanks that I would have had trouble filling myself from IHE Prep alone. In addition to face-to-face interactions, I also regularly texted with most of my adolescent interlocutors and followed them on social media.  

With my co-workers, the bulk of our engagements took place at work in the teacher’s lounge or lobby, which became a makeshift playground for all. For the most part, these relationships developed more easily with Korean-Americans with whom I shared an affinity. There were a few exceptions, however. The HR Manager Casey (goes by her English name, which is remarkably similar to her Korean name) was one of two anomalies in my co-worker-friend pool. As the daughter of a diplomat, she moved frequently and attended American-style international schools all over the world, including Africa and Northern Europe. She also spent considerable amounts of time in Southern California with friends and family. Another Korean national I got along well with was my co-worker Mark, who I briefly introduced in the introduction. He was also an international school graduate and just finishing his bachelor’s degree at a prestigious liberal arts college in the United States. Given his liberal arts training, Mark and I shared a theoretical vocabulary, and since he had a good grasp of my research, he would at times eagerly give me suggestions for various analytical angles I could incorporate into my study. Theoretical vocabulary aside, Mark otherwise had an appetite for cigarettes, tattoos, and enjoyed teasingly discussing taboo topics. It was not hard for us to become friends as well as colleagues.

Paul didn’t hold himself aloof from the instructors and joined in too. In fact, if Paul’s cancer wasn’t getting the best of him after a long day of work, he would enthusiastically pile us into his 7-series BMW on an outing to treat us to food and beverages, blasting K-Pop and laughing at the salacious lyrics. In the cases where friendships eventually developed, my co-workers and I would go to wine bars and commiserated into the early hours of morning. We spent time at one another’s houses, eating fried chicken while binging on YouTube videos. We traded industry gossip while smoking cigarettes in nearby alleys and parking lot corners. We swapped and tested cosmetics. We gave each other medical recommendations: doctors, treatments. We

70 My students also revealed secret Facebook pages dedicated to lambasting the teachers they hated the most at their international schools, which also gave me the inkling to broaden my ethnographic horizons.
ordered delivery and ate together with our students at IHE Prep. We drunkenly cried together when Paul’s cancer worsened. We shared our memories of him and consoled each other when he eventually passed on.

2.8 International schools

Originally, I did not intend to conduct participant-observation at international schools. My intent was to examine the after-school private academy industry, delving primarily into intergenerational, reciprocal contracts between parents, teachers, and adolescents. Before securing permission to conduct research at IHE Prep, as mentioned, I spent my first month in Seoul struggling to find private academies that were willing to open their doors. Panic-stricken, I amended my strategy and started to send emails to international school principals and headmasters, fearing no school would grant me permission to observe their students and I would be unable to carry out this project. Thankfully, before I had to really start worrying, Paul and IHE Prep came through.

As an instructor in a private academy, I was very aware of the amount of care and capital being invested into adolescents. Paul emphasized that a teacher’s “ability to care” is the single most important component of classroom dynamics. However, through school club proposals I realized the care and compassion promoted at international schools seemed to have a different flavour of care aimed at creating global regimes. It was seeing this that truly catalysed my desire to reach out to international schools again and make contact. These student-led clubs that piqued my interest are the main ethnographic object in Chapter 5, “Venture Philanthropy: Care as the Derivative Gamble,” where I further explore how adolescents are socialized to become “venture philanthropists” as a means of reproducing their family’s “1%” status.

Unlike the personal ties to private academies such as IHE Prep and Berkeley Institute that paved the way to my status as a researcher, my relationship with international schools developed through cold-calling. Having to start somewhere, I applied for and was granted permission to attend Open House meetings for prospective parents where I witnessed the exchange of questions and answers between parents and instructors. I often lingered afterwards to have individual chats with administrators and teachers. Sometimes I was invited to conduct participant-observation in classrooms through individually scheduled meetings or by shadowing upper-level administrators throughout their day. I also met with teachers, guidance counsellors,
and upper-level administrators individually for interviews. Speaking with parents who oversaw Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) enriched my understanding of the exclusive communities they attempted to create and marshal. In some cases, international school staff extended invitations to school concerts and end-of-year ceremonies. In total, I regularly visited a total of seven international schools in the Seoul metropolitan area over the entire course of my fieldwork and conducted more than thirty interviews. These meetings generally took place in the mornings or early afternoon before I had to teach in the evenings at IHE Prep.

As I was not a parent of an international school attendee — or a parent at all — there were limits on the interactions that I had. However, due to my status as an employee at IHE Prep and someone who regularly observed their competition, I became an object of curiosity. International school teachers and administrators were generally eager to obtain “insider” information on private cram schools that they nearly all loathed for sapping the precious time and energy of their students. It was during these interactions that some international school teachers and administrators admitted their own sense of insecurity. Why did students need to seek additional services? Regarding their interest in information about their competitors, I respectfully stated that all information would remain anonymized and confidential including their own.

2.9 Adolescents as sites of investment

Gatekeeping, worrying about tarnished reputations, and ensuring that I would not “waste” students’ time or disturb those whose futures hinged on their overall development were all points of tension that I continuously negotiated throughout my fieldwork. This was the general attitude of all the international school teachers and administrators, as well as parents and many other private school teachers. As mentioned before, there was a general perception amongst South Koreans of all classes, whether in the study or not, that completing my fieldwork would be “impossible,” due to the fact that these adolescents — upper-class ones at that — were heavily guarded by their parents and teachers who were intensely concerned about their overall development.

Yet, as discussed in Chapter 1, it has been for some time now that adolescents have been the sites of investments in South Korea — a place that has long had “education fever” (kyoyukyŏl) (Seth 2002). However, focusing on how orientations towards futurity take shape amongst the
“1%” under global economic volatility poses a number of new elements worthy of ethnographic analysis. As Cole and Durham (2007:5) argue, there is a need to further investigate how adolescents shape the ways that “broad-scale processes of economic globalization and state restructuring play out.” While race, class, and gender frequently frame studies analysing social reproduction, age has overwhelmingly been ignored (Cole and Durham 2007:5). They note that currently, investigations should place attention on how members of younger generations change both the spatial and temporal dimensions of life-stages, ideations of personal development, as well as definitions of dependence and independence (Cole and Durham 2007:5). That said, to date much work has been done identifying the ways in which adolescents contribute to existing practices, modalities of exchange, and patterns of global consumption (Allison 2008; Anagnost 2008; 2013; Bucholtz 2002; Cole and Durham 2008; Fass 2008; Flanagan 2008; Ruddick 1990).

These ethnographic examinations are insightful and important in evidencing how new global pressures shape individual subjectivity. However, previous scholarship is overwhelmingly influenced by Foucauldian (1991) studies of governmentality (Lemke 2002) and focus on subjects who are no longer subjected to intensive regimes of care in familial relations. This theoretical orientation highlights how under neoliberalism adolescents see “their position in personal terms, even as they are located in a complex web of structural positions” (Abelmann et al. 2013: 122). It is in this theoretical vein that I proceed with my research to conceptualize adolescents’ attempts to achieve “academic 1%” status in attempts to reciprocate their parents’ anxious love and financial investments. Thus, I will consider how the emergence of “self-focused narration” and “self-styling” (Abelmann et al. 2013:101) might also be adolescents’ attempts to care for their parents who make substantial emotional and financial investments in the future.

Parents hope and dream that if nurtured right their children will develop into adolescents that will become the next Einstein.71 However, their dreams are dashed when their child’s limitations become evident in adolescence. Moreover, the harsh realities of South Korea’s status as an information-based export economy that is easily affected by political-economic upheavals

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71 In fact, one of my colleagues at IEP Academy stated that kindergarten is by far the hardest level to teach. Managing parents’ sky-high expectations and hopes that their child might “be the next Einstein” was cited as the main reason.
in other parts of the world also become of greater concern by the time a student reaches adolescence. According to the 2017 OECD (2018), the youth unemployment rate (ages 15-24) was recorded at 10.3%. This topic is cause for considerable anxiety amongst South Korean parents, including my wealthy interlocutors who continuously feared for their children’s future. Media reports also produce and circulate discourses that liken current times to the immediate days following the 1997 IMF Crisis, citing the similarity in youth unemployment statistics (which includes those between the ages of 25-34 in the Statistics Korea formulation).

Thus, though the adolescents in my study are highly privileged, they also inherit a landscape carved out by two financial crises occurring within the span of about one decade. Born in 1997-1999, my interlocutors and students’ lives have been haunted by the ghosts of the 1997 IMF Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Spectres of failure dog their every step and reinforce the gravity of the investment that their parents’ love and money have made in them. Earlier in the chapter I mentioned the scenes I witnessed at Berkeley Institute on a daily basis when students lamented that they were “bad investments.” This was a defining moment for me and one of the first forays into the theoretical framing of this dissertation. However, these ethnographic insights were also shaped by my primary interest in the mothers who speculated on real estate and the stock market as “investor subjects.” In Chapter 1, I discussed how in the past “citizen-speculators” (Allon 2010) were the basis of market making in South Korea, when policies were designed to throttle capital flow. These practices tie in with the history of “sedimented financialization” and were originally a part of my previous research interests (Song 2014).

Initially, I concentrated on private education and its relationship to real estate markets. However, after spending extensive periods of time as a private instructor and then beginning to conduct research at international schools, it opened my eyes to the connection between speculative investing practices as applied to human capital. Parents, fearing for their children’s future, obsessed over the perils of the future job market, global market volatility, and what kinds of jobs might exist in the future. Fears of obsolescence were a primary motivator for seeking “alternative” forms of education designed to produce new labourers in a dynamically changing

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72 Refer to OECD’s Youth Unemployment Data: https://data.oecd.org/unemp/youth-unemployment-rate.htm.
political climate. Fears of obsolescence animated intergenerational, reciprocal pacts of care where parents, teachers, and students became attuned to one another’s anxieties in a radically indeterminate world.

To examine how precarity manifests “at the top,” I primarily draw from Sherry Ortner’s (2006:80-106) examination of the monumental pressures felt by upper-middle class American youth and their “fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 1989; Ortner 2006:80-106). Ortner (2006:80-106) notes that in efforts to reproduce class and status, parents finance a number of “rescuing mechanisms” to help their children74 (Ortner 1992:7-8). This “almost unlimited and unending” backing that is intended to be supportive is actually a source of terror, guilt, and anxiety (Ortner 1992:98) that plagues privileged American youths. These youth fear that they will not achieve the same status of financial independence as their parents75 (Ortner 1992:98). Tantamount to their “fear of falling” is the stark and sobering realization that their parents are their only social safety net delaying downward mobility. As Ortner (1992:98) remarks, these ethnographic findings are initially counter-intuitive. Why do privileged subjects, equipped with elite degrees, trust funds, expensive apartments, and supported by their parents’ love, feel so precarious?76 Ortner (1992:98) argues that their anxieties begin to make more sense when contextualized within a historical setting marked by a shrinking American middle class (Newman 1999).

Sherry Ortner’s study is outside the bounds of recent trends in scholarship that overwhelmingly focus on vulnerable subjects, many of whom live in abject poverty and are forced to migrate as a condition of their disenfranchisement (Agamben 1997; Allison 2012; Biehl 2005; Butler 2006; Berlant 2007; Cho 2012; Han C. 2011; Hetherington 2009; Merill 2011; Povinelli 2011; Roitman 2006; Song 2006; Standing 2011; Wolford 2005). In these studies, an intense spotlight has been aimed at the ways in which subjects are valued and exploited for their worth within market domains supported by neoliberal logics. Contrastingly, I aim to identify the intersections of precariousness and privilege in order to assess how South Korean subjects “at the top” navigate the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis context and how they cope with their “fear of

74 Rescuing mechanisms include, for example, psychotherapy, abortions, legal services, and educational support.
75 As Ortner (2006:98) argues, these anxieties are also warranted given that her interlocutors’ parents, as members of the “baby boom” generation, are the beneficiaries of historically unprecedented rates of economic growth.
76 Molé’s (2011) work on “mobbing” in Italy and the corrosion of social bonds as a source of anxiety provides a stark contrast to the relations that Ortner (2006) describes (also see Sennett 1998).
falling” ( Ehrenreich 1989; Ortner 2006). Doing so will illuminate how members of the upper-
class respond to perceived threats to a promising futurity for their children (Harding and Stewart
2003; Masco 2008; Massumi 2005).

Although the political-economic context of Ortner’s study is vastly different from the ones
shaping the quotidian lives of my interlocutors, there are some striking parallels. In efforts to
further parse through the intersection of privilege and precariousness, I will build on Ortner’s
(2006) study by including both adults and adolescents in my data set. My intention here is to
understand the historical specificity of how anxieties connected to producing futurity are linked
to South Korea’s rapid economic development. To date, other ethnographic investigations
focusing on the anxieties of elites in the East Asian context are limited to John Osburg’s (2013)
study of a nouveau riche class in Chengdu, China. Osburg (2013) argues that his interlocutors,
rather than casually enjoying their wealth, are riddled with a sense of unease in a changing
global economy. Elites are also anxious about how they, as subjects occupying positions of
power, should contribute to the construction of a public moral good while worrying about
fulfilling the responsibilities they have to others including their employees’ families. While I
intend to focus on how upper-class intergenerational relationships are premised on anxious
feelings of responsibility towards others, my research differs from Osburg’s (2013) study in
demographics and location. My dissertation project will historicize the intergenerational feelings
of precarity in South Korea’s “post-crisis” context.77

Within this complexly layered set of circumstances, upper-class adolescents attend “cram
schools” ( hagwön) in the evenings and during vacations. In this setting, with the assistance of
their private education teachers, middle and high school students prepare for “examination hell”
(sihom chiok), in English (Cho J. 2012; Jeon 2012), and ready their college admissions packages
to achieve the coveted “academic 1%” status. Indeed, parents send their children to private
academies to increase their chances of meritocratic success, which is measured by high-
standardized test scores and pristine academic records (see Van Zanten 2010). But rather than
focusing on how adolescents become complicit agents upholding meritocratic principles, the
theoretical undercurrent throughout my dissertation focuses on how students’ educational

77 Another point of difference is that my interests here are not directed at interrogating how newfound wealth
ushers in multiple anxieties. This is especially the case since I will be studying an established upper-class who may
have acquired this status in the 1980s.
commitments express the care they have for their parents who fund their academic endeavours. In exploring this theory, I refer to Foucault’s (1984) notion of care, which states that self-care is also caring for others.

The existent care between parents, teachers, and students, however, is one bounded by “1%” ideology. I think it necessary to emphasize here that none of the adolescents included in this study come from a generations-deep elite lineage through social ties to corporate conglomerates or politicians. Instead, they are the children of highly successful entrepreneurs, high-ranking corporate workers, hedge-fund managers, and real estate developers. To that end, the particular population in this study can be considered those whose commercial interests are passed down and further cultivated to have a global outlook (Yang 2011).

Specifically, the globally oriented, commercial outlook that has passed down refers to the desire to produce subjects who will be prepared for anything (Walker and Cooper 2011). These aspirations give rise to a fundamental axiom of human capital development (Feher 2009). Tracking the educational aspirations of South Korea’s “1%” lends itself to asking specific questions regarding my interlocutors’ imaginaries of the future and the decisions they calculatingly make to ensure their future economic participation in new and uncertain markets. To that end, the arguments in this dissertation should be understood as the ideologies, desires, aspirations, practices, and anxieties of the “1%” and its aspirants, rather than a more general commentary on “global capitalism.” For instance, sacrificing leisure for labour is in direct response to feelings of precarity and the fear that not-yet-labouring subjects might already be obsolete. How from their subordinate positions do adolescents, as sites of investment, contribute to political economies of familial hope amongst the “1%” (Miyazaki 2006; Novas 2006)?

Moreover, living within their parents’ structures of aspirations, how are adolescents encouraged to invest their hopes and fastidious dedication to labour in settings not part of South Korea’s public school system? What are some of the consequences of raising a generation that has been encouraged to actualize academic aspirations outside of state-financed institutions that are declared by parents as defunct (Kim 2003; 2012; Lim 2012; Seo 2012)? In contexts where students have increasingly fraught relationships with state-supported institutions, what new alliances emerge (Arai 2013:178)? Are adolescents constructing new criteria for class formation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 293)? Does their preference for the private education system come at the expense of state-funded public institutions? Are adolescents carving out new spaces
that foster the emergence of what Jane Kenway and Johannah Fahey (2014: 78) identify as the “global elite class” by participating in both domestic and international circles? As Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) extensively documents, students, both American and foreign, attend U.S. elite institutions as a step towards holding positions of power. Privileged settings, including international school and private academy classrooms also become sites of financialized futurity where adolescents as biofinancialized investments attempt to reciprocate their parents’ love (Papadopolous 2017).

My fieldwork was made possible by support from this constellation of social actors. The anxieties specific to the affluent population I studied posed a number of challenges that often left me wondering whether I would in fact complete my research. The questions I asked have as much to do with the types of gatekeeping that are ethnographically important in my dissertation as they are to understanding why I encountered a number of roadblocks — especially at the beginning. Yet, the pre-existing social networks I had that were constituted through educational ranking — years of “proving” myself as an employee — and friendship were what ultimately allowed me to complete my research. Again, these types of socialities I was able to partake in have as much to do with the factors of race, class, and gender as they do with the more interpersonal dimensions that became so crucial.

Due to my living arrangements with Janice, it meant that IHE Prep was only one subway stop away. Due to my past working relationship with Paul, I took my position as an instructor at IHE Prep without signing a contract. This move would be inconceivable under other circumstances, but given how my working relationship with Paul panned out in years previous, we trusted each other. This is the path I took to becoming an instructor, private tutor, and consultant at IHE Prep, all with barely a glitch. It is how an “impossible” project turned into one that was, indeed, quite possible.

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78 As Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) notes, a core feature of elite privilege is irrevocable membership in tight social networks formed by those sharing alma mater status. In some cases, South Korean students share alma mater status with their private education teachers, perhaps further solidifying affective bonds of belonging. By focusing on these issues, I also build on Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2009) work by investigating how South Korean adolescents, as attendees at U.S. boarding schools, continue to build bonds with their private academy teachers who share similar educational status.
Chapter 3
Escaping Obsolescence: The Shift from Subject to Skill-based Education in a South Korean International School

3 Introduction: Imaginaries of obsolescence

“I want us to be Google,” said Dwight, the assistant head of Williams International School catering primarily to South Korean nationals in the Incheon Free Economic Zone (IFEZ). As his iPhone pinged and buzzed from what seemed like an endless stream of text messages, Dwight shared an example of a dramatic, recent technological change. His one-year-old son has a toy rotary phone, “an object that he will never see in his real life.” Drawing from the example of the rotary phone, Dwight discussed the challenges and conflicts of teaching students to prepare for the future based on how we understand the world in the present. As he stood in front of a series of hand-drawn graphs depicting new academic plans, he insisted, “all jobs will be obsolete by the time students hit the job market.”

Dwight explained that given these technological shifts, it is no longer sufficient to offer students a “subject-based” education. These changes make it imperative to find new teaching alternatives to help prepare pupils for future careers yet to be imagined in political-economies yet to be created. Rather than have students and teachers specialize in one discipline, Dwight advocates for the shift to “skill-based” education. In efforts to move away from pedagogies that are discipline-bound, Dwight encourages his teaching staff to reconfigure their knowledge and apply it to new contexts. “How do you teach economics through outdoor education?” Dwight asked me. He answered his own question and explained that teachers deliberate and debate how to execute lesson plans from beyond their disciplinary comfort zones. Dwight admits that, though he is the one asking instructors to veer away from imparting discipline-concentrated knowledge to students, he is torn over the decision. He states that older teaching practices have undeniable value and laments their loss, wondering at the same time to what extent these new untested approaches will benefit students who face a constantly changing economy.

Dwight’s preoccupation with the future reflects the concerns students and their parents have in confronting their fear of obsolescence. Given that luxury magazines regularly feature Williams International School and the local media scrutinizes it and other educational institutes because they cater exclusively to South Korea’s wealthiest families or “modern day royalty,” I was
flabbergasted that privileged students feared obsolescence. Established in 2010, Williams International School is a relative newcomer. However, with a hefty yearly tuition fee of 38 million won\(^1\) and state-of-the-art facilities that include a Cisco TelePresence room, a video-conference space where students can interact with their peers in the U.S., it is already considered a place of extreme privilege. The last thing I expected to hear was a high-ranking administrator wax lyrical about preparing students for a dynamically changing job market that will render our present conceptualizations, predictions and understandings irrelevant. Nevertheless, these imaginaries of obsolescence shape orientations towards futurity, where subjects harness uncertainty in attempts to reproduce and possibly augment their status.

The instructors catering to the affluent Williams International clientele who invest large sums of money to reproduce their classed status must try to anticipate “futures that test the limits of our imagination” (Cooper 2010: 172). Unlike subjects living amidst the ghosts of Fordism’s past (Berlant 2007; Muehlebach 2012), my interlocutors reside in a cluster of unrealized urban conduits and live with the ghosts of the future. The city of Songdo is an example of how anticipatory projects become obsolete before coming to fruition. Foreseeing the disappearance of recognizable worlds and known paradigms, students are trained to be prepared for every eventuality and produce status under conditions of extreme uncertainty.

In an effort to interrogate how the unprecedented establishment and failure of this free economic zone in South Korea intimately shape pedagogical undertakings, I ask three questions: What happens to projects of human capital appreciation when they are directly premised in imaginaries of obsolescence? How are orientations towards futurity shaped when subjects anticipate turbulence, as the confluence of several “irresolvable ‘flows’ catalyzed by market, political, and environmental catastrophes, erupting all over the globe” (Cooper 2010)? How are these orientations towards futurity affected by witnessing the immediate failures of Songdo, meant to be a thriving global aerotropolis in South Korea’s first free economic zone?\(^79\)

As a city built on projections of global economic growth that failed to materialize, it became clear that being sensitive to booms and busts is a skill necessary for futurity. Taking these

\(^{79}\) Urban planning was centred on the close proximity of Incheon International Airport. Drafts of the infrastructure and economy bank on the global flow of traffic, enabled by the nearby transportation hub.
perspectives into consideration, I will demonstrate how my interlocutors draw their own conclusions of how turbulent global capital flows shape and affect their lives. As Melinda Cooper (2010: 180) argues, turbulence is “an event emerging from an irresolvable relation between two or more ‘flows’ that are themselves relations.” However futuristic these utopian capitalist projects appear to be, witnessing their unrealized potential has expediated pedagogical shifts to adjust and move from “subject” to “skill” based education. I argue that these yet-to-be-realized projects are inextricably linked to imaginaries of obsolescence and are the driving force behind the creation of new conduits of capital, rendering pre-existing modalities of value-production irrelevant. Acquiring a multitude of skills, however, gives the illusion that the imaginaries of obsolescence can be countered if not anticipated. This is precisely because the more skills one possesses, the better equipped one may be in any given situation. Preparedness, in and of itself, exposes one’s precarity in that it removes the blinders and reveals one’s stark reality. These pedagogical shifts responding to future realities can be interpreted as examples of how logics of finance are interpolated into classroom lessons. By prodding students to develop, refine, and enhance their psychological, emotional, interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving skills — to name a few — Williams International instructors attempt to give students assets beyond a formal education so that they might have the skills to cope with future ambiguity. As I will discuss, nurturing students’ skills and sensibilities is geared towards positioning them to overcome unforeseen crises in the future.

Not only are they armed to transcend the effects of volatile flows, they are prepared to become human capital and plunge directly into the flows as a means of reproducing status and capitalist value. As Cooper states (2010: 184), “In one sense then, the modern philosophy of possible worlds is justified in asserting that worlds are creatable by virtue of being imagined or believed in.” The city of Songdo is an operative model for observing, analysing, and theorizing on global capitalism, a point that I will elaborate upon more fully in the following paragraphs. Residing in an underpopulated, experimental free economic zone, serves as both a warning and inspiration for instructors and pupils to critique the deleterious effects of rogue capital. It also further catalyzes pedagogical initiatives to transform students into human capital so that they may insert themselves into the turbulent flows of finance. These dynamics in which adolescents are prompted to reproduce their status as upper-class subjects will be discussed more fully throughout this chapter specifically and in this dissertation more broadly.
As Feher (2009:28) highlights, under neoliberal conditions, individuals are no longer able to accurately predict their own market value due to the difficulty of discerning the relationship between both financial and psychic forms of self-appreciation in an ever fluctuating and volatile market80 (2009: 28). Thus, all activities, wishes, and desires of subjects are transmuted into avenues for transforming oneself into human capital. To that end, Feher’s (2009) theorizations are existential queries probing at what is required of subjects to be valued in an unpredictable, expansive market economy. However, while Feher’s (2009) arguments are based on claims that neoliberal capitalism and market forces impose new and unknown demands on subjects to maintain and appreciate their value as human capital, his arguments do not address issues of turbulence directly. This chapter thus analyses how subjects’ transformation of themselves into human capital is premised on attempts to insert themselves into turbulent flows and suture the gaping wounds left by economic ruptures. My aim is to showcase the broader ideologies existent at international schools by examining how student life is shaped vis-à-vis educators who develop the curriculum. To fully understand how adolescents are inculcated into regimes of value production through the relationships cultivated with their teachers, it is necessary to analyse the many ways in which students come to understand themselves as global subjects who must be prepared for anything and cultivate an ethos of resilience.

In order to witness first-hand both pedagogical and student transformations, I had to submit paperwork and receive research ethics clearance from Williams International’s Head of School. Note that this was the only international school that granted me access to the school and permitted me to observe the students and teachers on an ongoing basis. As noted in Chapter 2, I underwent a similar process with other institutions, but while those other institutions initially approved my proposal to conduct participant observation, they later changed their minds in the name of protecting their community. Barring a few individual meetings and tours, my access to other international schools was quite limited in comparison. At Williams International however, under the supervision of teachers, I was allowed to converse with the students I met while

80 Drawing from Foucault’s work, Feher (2009) argues that the paradigmatic shift between liberalism and neoliberalism lies in the erosion of the separation of “intimate man” whose potential cannot be fulfilled by solely operating as a labourer in a distinctly identifiable market and “the entrepreneur.” In turn, self-improvement through achievements in education and attainments in vital health are central to augmenting one’s value as capital (2009: 33).
shadowing staff as they went about their daily routines.\textsuperscript{81} To ensure minimal disruption to the learning environment, my interactions with students were mediated by staff who acted as gatekeepers in this highly exclusive space. While I understood that the school was simply being cautious, these measures significantly minimized my ability to “freely” conduct fieldwork. However, even though my movements were restricted and strictly monitored, this did in fact still afford information and support what I already suspected: students were treated as precious commodities in the making. Although my interactions at the school were carefully orchestrated, I was still given a clear understanding of how these exclusive spaces engage in boundary-making practices to maintain the valuation of their institution.

Although Williams International was the only school to approve my proposal, my initial decision to request permission to conduct research here was motivated by the fact that it is a leading institution located in Korea’s first free economic zone. Thus, Williams International sits at the crossroads where pedagogical orientations intersect with explicit governmental efforts to embark on large-scale global urbanization projects that attempt to bridge new international commercial networks. By deploying a reconstructive method (Burawoy et. al 1991), I seek to deploy ethnographic data from this case to challenge the existing sociological and anthropological literature on upper-class reproduction.

3.1 Williams International: Speculating on Global Capitalism

“A place to grow, be innovative, and resilient.” –Williams International website

As Richard Bates (2012: 267) argues, producing “global citizenship” within international schools “is primarily linked to global economic participation, either through participation in business or an instrumental interventionalism that mediates the uneven effect of such global actions.” Pedagogical approaches pertaining to the making of desired global citizens are often effects of political-economic transitions. Take for example the undesirable outcomes the citizens of Hong Kong and even the world anticipated after the island reverted to China in 1997. Parents feared what new governmental rules would bring and invested in international school education

\textsuperscript{81} This chapter, however, solely focuses on the institute I name “Williams International.” At Williams International, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators with whom I also sustained relationships throughout fieldwork
with the intention of going abroad. Others moved from mainland China to Hong Kong to strategically position their families in anticipation of emergent economic opportunities, also choosing international schools as the preferred educational trajectory (Bray and Yamato 2002; Yamato and Bray 2003). Even on the Chinese mainland there has been a rapid proliferation of international schools in Shanghai (Yamato and Bray 2006), and by weaving the port city into capitalist flows, it has been a contributing factor to China’s success and further suggests the country’s ascendancy as a global economic power. Though some viewed the changeover as a threat while others saw it as an opportunity, any type of change is linked to speculative orientations towards the future, which are then used to plot the educational choices parents make for their children. While the reasons may vary, international schools have a unifying effect as sites of speculation where subjects ruminate on global capitalism’s uncertain future.

Like other international schools within Korea and beyond, Williams International’s mission to develop educational approaches that will secure one’s upper-classed positioning is a consequence of a dynamically changing global economy. Within South Korea, the shift from subject to skill-based education in an international school should be historicized to bring to the fore the ways in which global education came to be desired and established.

At Williams International, the shift from subject to skill-based education takes place in a highly competitive labour market that poses constant threats to subjects’ maintenance of upper-classed status. Williams International, even more so than other international schools, is not obliged to follow mandates or nationally imposed curriculums. In 2015, the school became officially authorized to administer the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum throughout all grade levels — as per their contractual agreement with the Ministry of Education. Prior to that, the school had IB PYP accreditation for the elementary wing. In lieu of an official curriculum at the other levels, Williams International developed “IB oriented” lessons and assignments. Free of textbooks, Williams International embarked on intrepid pedagogical initiatives. Moreover, Travis, an upper-level administrator whom I will talk about more fully in a moment, boasted that there is no bell marking the end or beginning of classes. Indeed, spending even a short amount of time at Williams International, it was apparent that students internally synced their biorhythms to the daily temporal structures. In between classes, hallways would flood with calm
students, walking and talking with friends, moving in packs to their next destination. In fact, classes spontaneously let out as on one occasion I was conducting a walking-and-talking interview. As we continued through the hallways, Patricia, the school librarian from the Pacific Northwest who decided to move to Korea with her adopted ethnically Korean children, and I carried on our conversation without a hitch. She barely paid any attention to the waves of students, as if she trusted them to act in a disciplined and self-contained manner. Students were socialized to function in a setting where they could still remain productive and disciplined without external controls such as structured time.

With structures of discipline erased, Williams International students are socialized to manage their own time through their bodies and intuitive sensibilities. As Bourdieu (1996: 270) argues in his examination of elite schools, “the field of power is organized according to a chiasmatic structure.” Based on what Bourdieu (1996: 270) refers to as “chiasmatic structures,” I conceptualize international schools as a crossroads where institutional infrastructure designed to produce distinction and the synergistic relationship with various forms of capital meet. What is important here is that individuals who invest in these sites are not as concerned with the pure strategy of accumulation or gaining a “monopoly on a particular form of capital” (Bourdieu 1996: 263). Rather, processes of re-drawing the parameters of upper-classed belonging are catalyzed by creating new determinants in the “relative value and magnitude of the different forms of power that can be wielded in the different fields or, if you will, power over the different forms of power or the capital granting power over capital” (Bourdieu 1996: 263). The chiasmatic structures (Bourdieu 1996: 270) here have more to do with the intensity and scale of investing in human capital than the actual practices themselves.  

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82 This is drastically different from my own memories of attending a public school on Long Island where we had exactly three minutes to make it to our next class. Those three minutes were usually utter chaos as we rushed, ran, frantically opened lockers only to slam them again, boisterously teased or bullied one another in the hallways while being scolded by our teachers.

83 According to Bourdieu (1996), distribution of the primary principle of hierarchization (economic capital) is “intersected” by distribution of a secondary principle of hierarchization (cultural capital) and culminates in an inverse hierarchy, that is, “from the artistic field to the economic field.” By investing in cultural capital, the state’s political-economic commitments to experimenting with new institutional forms becomes evident.
Bourdieu’s (1996) theorizations are germane within the South Korean private education sector where cultivating a “global” subjectivity through English language acquisition are ubiquitous pursuits. In this context, it becomes analytically important to focus on how the aspirant “1%” pursue human capital in a highly capital-intensive way. Within this milieu, foreign education institutes and international schools carve out new spaces of privileged social belonging, where faculty and students administer their own curriculums as per standards implemented in places like the U.S., U.K., and Canada. These schools elect to remain independent of the Ministry of Education’s regulations despite the introduction of the 7th Curriculum in 1997 that outlines the promotion of five significant behaviours that reflect a well-rounded citizen: 1. A person who seeks individuality as the basis for the growth of the whole personality 2. A person who exhibits a capacity for fundamental creativity 3. A person who pioneers a career path within the wide spectrum of culture 4. A person who creates new value on the basis of understanding the national culture 5. A person who contributes to the development of the community on the basis of democratic civil consciousness. Ultimately, the goal of these initiatives is to “To prepare students for the 21st century, the era of globalization and knowledge-based society”84 (Ministry of Education website).

Though approached from different directions, public and private institutions both believe the cultivation and accumulation of skills that encourage creativity, individuality and empathy is the most effective way to equip students for the future. I conceptualize this shift from subject to skill-based education as a conversion strategy where “the work of managing liquidity is the most important task to which capital sets the imagination in an age of financialization” (Haiven 2011: 107). Scholarly examinations on liquidity often focus on the multiple ways in which capital takes on new forms. As Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee (2012: 289) argue however, “Liquidity is more than a memorable metaphor for the fluidity of capital. It is financial shorthand for assessing the market’s capacity to circulate capital — this circulatory pump being a distinguishing feature of capitalism and also its lifeblood.” Within financial domains proper, such as Wall Street, measures are taken to refashion and repurpose money, resources and debt in order to produce value.

Perhaps the most well-known anthropological investigation on liquidity, however, is Karen Ho’s (2009) study of Wall Street investment bankers. Liquidity, in the context of her work, refers to the highly revered quality of fashioning oneself as a hyper-flexible labourer to the point of craving self-exploitation. Embracing the cutthroat, high-octane culture of Wall Street, investment bankers accept the brutal swiftness of corporate downsizing. Operating according to immediacy, only the best and brightest see potential and act on it, making capital move in ways that the rigid corporate culture cannot. A maverick spirit guides Wall Street investment bankers’ desires to engage in highly self-exploitative, reckless enterprises, directly leading to their own “liquidity.”

While I use Karen Ho’s (2009) work as a basis, my conceptualization of “obsolescence” and “liquidity” are fundamentally different. In Ho’s study, the concept of “liquidation” is based on Wall Street investment bankers who operate on a model of intense presentism (Guyer 2007) looking to satiate their appetite in the here-and-now, which produces as profoundly different orientation towards futurity than in my study. Though Ho’s (2009) concepts on hyper-flexibility and identifying oneself with the market are present in the shift from subject to skill-based education in my work, her concept of liquidity is not. These hyper-competitive conditions that used to be limited to places like Wall Street now push everyday people both in daily life and at Williams International to acknowledge the rising threat of obsolescence and seek liquidity in their lives. Much like the investment bankers in Ho’s (2009) ethnography, my interlocutors are also acutely aware of the threat of downsizing and job elimination, but their fear of obsolescence instantiates a contrary reaction. For the teachers I interviewed, “obsolescence” looms in the future and shapes their plans to help their students achieve a more stable working adulthood in light of impending volatility. The emphasis put on accumulating skills — and appreciating one’s worth as human capital — is to ensure subjects are versatile enough to embrace dynamically disappearing and re-emerging worlds. The liquidity of human capital is crucial to producing new futures — including ones that have yet to be imagined. Moreover, the accumulation of skills is meant to attune students to other forms of social belonging, precisely so that they may ascend volatile markets. For instance, care and compassion are now core values in education curriculums, values many believe subjects should possess — a discussion I elaborate on further in a later chapter. First, though, I will discuss “looking back” in this following subsection that focuses on the End of Year Ceremony where students were repeatedly reminded to look back at times past with a sense of warmth and optimism while savoring the present moment. Even
through the act of reminiscing, students’ temporal orientations were grounded in the present. In other words, to remember the past was to be intensely present.

3.2 End of Year Ceremony: Liquidity Through Obsolescence

Under Travis’ strict supervision, I was invited back to Williams International to interact with some students of his choosing. Wanting to showcase some star pupils, Travis called me into a meeting with Fred and Joon, two male high school students who were the co-presidents of the student council. The meeting took place in Travis’ office, and he started off discussion with a review of the logistics, performances, speeches, and awards that would be given at the upcoming End of Year Ceremony. Both students seemed attentive and calm, listening to Travis and giving input when it was necessary to demonstrate their preparedness. As they went over the Google docs that everyone had contributed, Travis interrupted the meeting to also inform me that Joon and Fred were responsible for helping organize the high school prom and Halloween events. When I suggested to Fred and Joon that this “seemed like a lot of work,” they both gave a light-hearted laugh, stating that they had a lot of “support” and that it was “a good experience.”

This meeting was an inroad to an invitation to the End of the Year Ceremony. About three weeks later, I arrived at Williams International during the afternoon portion of the school day. Prior to my arrival, Travis had notified the school security guards that I would be visiting, thus smoothing the way for me. Sitting in the incredibly handsome auditorium, I waited, observing and listening as students played games. I noted most were speaking Korean but noticed two who conversed in Mandarin. Travis appeared onstage, casually dressed in khakis and a short-sleeved button-down shirt paired with Converse sneakers. Aside from priding himself on his role at Williams International, he also advertised his hobbies as part of his publicly professional profile. As a Southern California native, who first worked at Williams School on the West Coast, Travis was also an avid surfer. It is no accident that Travis’ life as a surfer was a point of pride to be

85 From there, I asked a little bit about their personal lives: Did they live in Songdo? Fred did not. He commuted daily from Gangnam, a total of two hours a day. Joon’s parents on the other hand had purchased an apartment in Songdo. He lived there with his younger brother and mother for the sole purpose of attending Williams International. His father remained in Seoul.
highlighted in his professional profile. Since ideally the ultimate goal is a “well-rounded” student, one who is an intellectual, artistically and/or musically inclined, athletic, and a social extrovert, Travis was in many ways the perfect role model for a pedagogical model that explicitly modelled itself after Google. Again, building on the Silicon Valley ideologies of blurring the boundaries between work and play, the idea is that risk-takers are not just mentally but physically fit enough to consciously embrace challenges in their professional and personal lives. Photographs of him surfing in Southern California could be found in a quick Google search that also brought up his LinkedIn profile and other information such as his CV. This online reference to his personal life as a surfer almost seemed to be as important as his professional profile. As it turns out, this is particularly true in the case of Williams International administrators who were committed to continuously developing their outdoor education. For instance, in order to develop problem-solving skills outside the classroom, students were taken on camping trips, which made educators like Travis — someone who is into the type of extreme sports that require intense focus to avoid serious injury or even death — a valuable asset.

Without a doubt, Travis embodied the key characteristics that the school strove to inspired in its students. This afternoon, however, Travis was not the risk-taker or the teacher but the ebullient host. “Alright my friends,” Travis shouted out, grabbing his students’ attention. The lights dimmed. He requested that students shut down or mute phones and put them away. “Try to be present,” he said. Travis’ energy levels increased as students clapped. “The Penultimate Day!” he enthusiastically declared. “Who had fun this morning?” As Travis, Fred, and Joon discussed in that meeting, the morning of the End of Year Ceremony was filled with games and social events for students to enjoy. “What will you remember? What’s going to stand out? School trips? Musical performances? Or staying up all night for the Math exam?” Students seemed happy that the school year was drawing to an end. Spirits ran high as some cheered and clapped some more. The fixation with intense presentism, even in the exercise of looking back became apparent as the End of the Year Ceremony progressed.

The ceremony began with a video, complete with a musical soundtrack, titled, “Celebrating and Remembering.” A compilation of photos showing students engaged in various activities throughout the year quickly ended as Min Woo, a student council officer, took the stage. He reminisced about a school sleepover, thanked teachers for their support, and encouraged everyone to “play with your friends and see nature.” The audience erupted in more cheers. Next,
a pupil named Ae Cha, the Services Clubs Officer, stepped up to give out awards. She began her segment by stating that “there are no leaders without a community to support — emotional and financial support.” She showed pictures of students painting the nails of elderly South Koreans and interacting with children in the Philippines and Nepal where Williams International students travelled. More awards were handed out to star pupils, inciting cheers as well as laughter when teachers greeted recipients with hugs. Additional photos were shown of students visiting orphanages to teach English lessons. “Patrick’s vision” was celebrated for making these visits possible and for the Christmas party that saw orphans receive the gifts they had specifically requested. Patrick was then given an award onstage, for his commendable leadership.

Here, I would like to point out some similarities and differences between Williams International’s pedagogical approaches and another American elite boarding school in Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009) study. In order to bridge global populations, gain capital and knowledge, and create new, exclusive borders, boundaries and spaces, academic institutes streamline their programs to align with financial policies. In Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009) ethnography of an elite boarding school in the United States, he revealed how students are socialized to embrace their privileged status. Part and parcel of this identity formation are the justifications students are fed so as to indoctrinate them into believing that they have the right to have power over others. This feeling of entitlement and permission to “become elite” animates how privileged students envision their future as lawyers, politicians and leaders of those outside of their exclusive circle. The commonality between Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009) fieldsite and Williams International is that students are taught that they have the talent to aspire to leadership positions. Yet, the pedagogical approaches discussed throughout Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009) ethnography are in stark contrast to the ones I encountered throughout my research. While I do not want to imply that similar processes are entirely absent from my own fieldsite, I do feel it is necessary to note the difference between how these two institutes socialize students to produce futurity: where Williams International promotes leadership with a conscience, Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009) school produces self-involved elitism.86 However, before the

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86 The observations that Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) most notably and repeatedly records from his discussions with students are that the principles and even the landscape of the elite New England boarding school emulate those
success or failure of these pedagogical approaches can be measured, discourses surrounding these elite educational institutes warrant more investigation in regards to not only producing “leadership” material alumnus but more specifically “global leadership” in the geo-politically positioned South Korea.

The elite status produced through education in South Korea — a country that is now a G-20 member and continuously seeks to establish its geopolitical command over areas such as Southeast Asia — includes humanitarian efforts, which were celebrated at the End of Year Ceremony. Travis took this moment to return to the stage again to praise the nineteen members of the school’s Habitat for Humanity program. Together, they raised over US$5,000 and travelled to Cebu on a building trip. Like many other international schools, Williams International was an active member in Habitat for Humanity and would take its students abroad to places like the Philippines and Cambodia to build houses. By commending students for their labours and highlighting those efforts in the End of Year Ceremony, it encouraged students to fondly reflect on their charitable actions. In conversations with my students at IHE Prep, nearly all of them admitted that these humanitarian trips to poverty-stricken areas were challenging but eye-opening experiences that made them aware just how many advantages they had. Rather than finishing the year feeling as if they had been forced to sacrifice their valuable time, Williams International attendees felt a sense of accomplishment where endings were bittersweet.

Students were not only leaving behind a memorable school year with their friends, but their community outreach programs were also full of departures and good-byes. This became apparent in the following portion of the ceremony when a student named Ye Jin took the microphone to talk about her interactions with senior citizens as she painted their nails. She recalled memories of sharing time with these individuals and happily recounted enjoying games with them. Ye Jin then talked about the sadness that she and her peers felt when they passed away, but she appreciated the good times even while grieving the loss. Enrolled in yet a

of Ivy League institutes such as Harvard. Intensive seminars discussing literary works, in addition to pushing students to engage in athletics, music, or art, are designed to prepare students for a discipline-focused American college education. The culture of “smart” prevails, and students use this as a mark of distinction that elevates them above those who do not attend their school. Indeed, the fetishization of smart is a social phenomenon that is also present within South Korean international schools.
different school services program, a student named Hei Ryung contributed her own story as she shared memories of singing songs to the terminally ill.

The End of Year Ceremony could be understood as a pedagogical exercise in extolling one’s achievements with humility and sometimes humour, and learning to let go of both the good times and the hard times while appreciating and really feeling the emotions they inspired. It is a celebration of overcoming challenges and obstacles along the road to accumulating skills and completing studies and projects. To that end, Williams International’s no-bell policy contributed to students moving effortlessly and without regimentation by not placing artificial time constraints on acquiring the skills that allowed for their endeavours to be successful. Liquidity in the context of this chapter also refers to the frictionless movement of skills specifically and human capital more generally, even in times of uncertainty. Essentially, liquidity has to do with “flows.” This is perhaps most succinctly formulated by Anna Tsing’s (2000: 327) work where she states, “Imagine a creek cutting through a hillside. As the water rushes down, it carves rock and moves gravel; it deposits silt on slow turns; it switches courses and breaks earth dams after a sudden storm. As the creek flows, it makes and remakes its channels.” While flowing water might not change in form, it may rush through its environment at different speeds and through new channels, fundamentally altering the landscape along the way.\textsuperscript{87} Liquidity, then, is also valued for the way structures of time are both erased and re-created at once through acts of remembering. Memorializing the senior citizens who passed on in this ceremony also inculcates students with the skills to placidly move through time and accept life’s vicissitudes.

With emotions already running high, Fred took centre-stage to sing one of The Beatles most poignant songs “Yesterday.” He was incredibly talented and was adored by his female peers who screamed, “We love you, Fred!” at the end of his performance. The showcasing of musical talent continued, but not without an interjection from Travis as he popped back up onstage to quickly remind students to “be respectful of their performances.” There was a K-pop rap performance, a student who sang an acoustic version of Sam Smith’s “Lay Me Down,” and another Beatles cover. This time, “Let it Be.”

\textsuperscript{87} I thank Katy Hardy for these insights and comments, which emerged during the 2018 American Anthropological Association Meeting on our panel examining “Gendered Liquidity.”
Afterwards, a group of high school juniors presented a video that chronicled their trip to California and a short historical summary of the institution’s founder Mrs. Williams who was, allegedly, unhappy with the public school system. Mrs. Williams was portrayed as an educational pioneer, advocating for home-schooling prior to establishing a brick-and-mortar institution. During the video, the students explained that Williams School in the United States got its beginning after a very prominent conservative American philanthropist donated land during the Great Depression. Families who believed in home-schooling also donated funds to help get the school built and running. Two years after the initial donation, Williams School was able to open its doors. At first, Williams School was a self-sufficient boarding school where students were responsible for growing their own food and raising livestock. They were even responsible for the butchering. According to the narration, the entire model was “village-like.”

The media presentation continued reporting that over the course of a century, Williams School’s core values remained the same. Today, students continue in the footsteps of their predecessors and reproduce the core values of the school through their actions. The next series of photographs drove home this point, picturing Williams International and Williams School’s students together in Los Angeles as they distributed sandwiches to the homeless. Here students mentioned how people are both similar and different. Other photos from a trip into the wilderness featured students engaged in an “outdoor challenge.” “Outdoor education” is something that “can’t be learned in class,” the students reported, and while “transcendentalism” is something that could be learned in a traditional setting, putting it in an outdoor setting gives it an unexpected element that leaves a deeper impression of the lesson. It was only through these outdoor experiences that students learned how to explore nature, which they admitted was “tiring,” but ultimately rewarding.

In a performance that would be the highlight, Williams International’s star musician then appeared onstage. Travis had mentioned her to me in a private conversation, explaining that the staff and faculty made special teaching arrangements for her. Not only was she a composer and performer, she was a contestant on one of South Korea’s most popular reality television shows, the nation’s equivalent to “American Idol.” Given her demanding schedule, including filming and a copyright battle, this pupil had an individualized program that accommodated her extracurricular activities. Her performance was an enormous hit with the other students.
As the ceremony rolled on, there were more student presentations with one titled, “Are Koreans Really Free on the Internet?” A poetry book was unveiled. More photos of school trips including one to Universal Studios in California were shown. The dance team and their instructors spoke about how they improved through practice, emphasizing that “time to enjoy is never a burden.”

The student presentations were broken up with Mr. Van Etten’s brief lecture about college and the future. But just as students seemed to lose interest and fade out, they quickly perked up again when a pupil named Carol paid tribute to Travis for his three years at Williams International. He had decided it was time to return to the United States. Carol recalled with some glee the time Travis caught a student sleeping on a school couch. Waking up his pupil with jovial good humour, Travis looked at the pupil and said, “I’m wide awake and enthusiastic!” Students seemed to respond well to his affability and gentle disciplinary approach. Carol ended by presenting a gift: a Korean stamp with Travis’ name. With that, students bid farewell not only to Travis but several other teachers who were leaving Williams International.

In concluding the ceremony, the spotlight turned back on Joon. He gave a speech, stating that when asked why he wanted to attend Williams International, his responded by saying, “I want to be a leader who changes things.” Joon went on to reminisce about his climb to the top as an elected executive of the student council. In 9th grade, he ran for class president. He lost. When he ran again in 10th grade, he lost again. Joon said that he almost made the “wrong choice. The wrong choice in life but wanted to become stronger.” He wanted everyone to see that “Joon Park is someone who overcomes things.” The next year, he ran again and won. Joon admitted he came close to giving up but in persevering, he grew as a person.

Water is as much a metaphor for liquidity as being class president is a symbol of Joon’s resilience. Both liquidity and resilience add value to human capital because only desirable, flexible, fit human capital is capable of attaining “1%” status in an unpredictable and unstable market. In Ho’s (2009) study, Wall Street investment bankers are desirable, flexible, fit human capital capable of attaining “1%,” but they are also the very ones creating crisis after crisis by injecting their culture of work into global economies in their drive for big bonuses. Investment bankers’ “no future” orientation and unrelenting pursuit of large pay-outs (Ho 2009: 252) in a culture of smartness, flexibility and risk-taking are what move — and halt — capital. Accepting
their sudden unemployed status as part of just run-of-the-mill operations often means that they are “less capable of understanding the suffering of others” (Ho 2009: 294).

In both the context of my dissertation and Ho’s (2009) examination of Wall Street bankers, privilege is constructed around notions of precarity. Subjects in both studies are socialized to be well aware of social inequality, but more as a lesson in what to avoid as opposed to encouraging fundamental changes to those structures. Being attuned to precarity and global inequality drive students and investment bankers to shore up their privilege so that their status remains unchallenged. The forms of “liquidity” that are inextricably borne from this desire to remain relevant in dynamically changing times, whether as a student in high school or an adult in labour markets, is a fundamentally social one. In previous examinations of “liquidity” scholars concluded that financialization renders “the eclipse of the social” (LiPuma and Lee 2012: 291-2), but I argue that it does in fact do the exact opposite. Videos, presentations, shared stories all showcasing students’ acts of compassion and service in the End of Year Ceremony demonstrate that liquidity also refers to the ability to navigate different social spheres, mingling with individuals who are vastly different.

Given the status of individuals in both studies, arguing that highly privileged subjects feel precarious might seem counterintuitive. However, it is clear that actions in the present are animated by subjects’ cognizance of not only their own volatile status in a highly capricious and competitive global market but also the ephemerality of their everyday lives. As Dwight’s comments at the opening of the chapter evidences, both case studies present subjects motivated by nonlinear, ambivalent orientations towards futurity and ideas of a “perfect” market that can continuously produce value. Similarly, in a public interview, Edward, a top-level administrator stated, “Your parents might have started out working for Samsung their whole life, or IBM in the United States, but that doesn’t happen anymore. You’re going to change professions more than five times in your lifetime.” Edward goes on to state that “The role of schools is to provide knowledge that could be responsive to the changing work environment and offer tools to help discover students’ true passions.” At Williams International, skill-base education — as a financialized praxis harnessing uncertainty, precarity and intensive investments in a volatile future — revolves around the idea of a “perfect” adult. Specific means and ends oriented to
create entrepreneurs and venture philanthropists are fundamentally premised on interacting with — and even understanding — others.\(^8\)

### 3.3 Preparedness: Skills-Based Education

At Williams International, students are trained to be attuned to their surroundings and the worlds they inhabit with a preparedness not unlike the preparedness of traders in a study by Karin Knorr Cetina and Alex Preda (2007).\(^9\) Planning for obsolescence, as Williams International’s staff does, and seeking new possibilities and skills that will remain relevant in the long run are all actions that may or may not see results on a different temporal plane. It is a game of seeking returns on long-term investments.

For instance, on Williams International’s website, the school states, “One way students prepare themselves to comprehend future ambiguity is to get into the habit early of evaluating and comparing multiple sources and types of information before coming to any conclusions.”

Preparing students for unknown futures requires a vastly different pedagogical approach than those employed under predictive models of economic growth (see Cooper 2010, Guyer 2007). Grappling with these new circumstances, teachers instruct students to employ “scenario planning” as the prevailing methodology for creating capitalist value during periods of turbulence. As Cooper (2010: 172-3) argues, scenario planning methodologies are “‘not prediction on forecasts,’ but are alternative images without ascribed likelihoods of how the future might unfold.” More specifically, these newly orchestrated conduits of capital become the platform upon which subjects attempt to assert their positionality at the apex of social

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\(^8\) This is particularly important considering that “markets are also knowledge systems” that “are not simply facilitating tools, but means of articulating, exhibiting and ordering the properties of these markets” (Knorr Cetina and Preda 2007: 117).

\(^9\) To that end, there is a fundamental difference in the scope of research presented by Karen Ho (2009) to that research presented by Knorr Cetina and Preda (2007). While the traders in Karen Ho’s (2009) ethnographic investigation are focused on a “no future” market-making, Cetina and Preda (2007:132) state that “watching the market involves modes of affectivity that we want to call \textit{intensity} and \textit{preparedness}.” Intensity, as they argue, is rooted in the “physical connectedness traders feel with the market” while preparedness is “the readiness to respond reflex-like to trading challenges.”
hierarchies.\textsuperscript{90} Harnessing turbulence then is a strategy for subjects, as human capital, to insert themselves into incommensurable capital flows.

Scanning Williams International’s website, it is clear that “skill” has a meaning as specific as it does broad. For instance, the “power in asking the right questions” is a skill that students must hone, so that one well-formed question becomes a departure point to further intellectual exploration. “Language skills” must be developed so that pupils may deftly navigate both Korean and English. In a broader sense, “communication skills” foster interpersonal relations. “Social awareness skills,” “problem solving skills” and “critical thinking skills” allow students to analyse experiences, ideas and feelings. “Skill-based reading foundations” are part of the academic curriculum, as are developing “teaching and presentation skills.”

The most striking aspect of this mandate is how closely it resonates with logics of finance and its temporal footings towards the future. Instilling students with a myriad of “skills” within a political-economic climate premised on volatility is “a futures methodology [where] scenario planning is designed to foster decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Its focus is not risk as such, but rather the radical uncertainty of unknowable contingencies — events for which it is impossible to assign a probability distribution on the basis of past frequencies” (Cooper 2010: 173). If inevitable crises leave the future uncertain, expansive, always unravelling but then opening up “new spaces of conquest,” (Cooper 2010: 170), acquired “skills” must also be expansive, flexible, and honed from an endless stream of new activities.

As advertised on Williams International’s website, in order to brace oneself for inevitable volatility, “the development of positive attitudes” is highly regarded as a necessary “skill.” It falls into the same category and has the same unmeasurable quality as “teamwork along with competitive skill building.” “Community building skills,” where “students learn to try things out, to form hypotheses, to collect evidence and to communicate their conclusions,” are useful because “these skills are the foundation for the creative and critical thinking and problem-solving they will use throughout their formal education and the rest of their lives.” With an emphasis on holistic education, “well-roundedness skills” are highly revered because “exploring

\textsuperscript{90} Although Cooper’s (2010) topic of analysis focuses on the formation of weather derivatives and the financialization of environmental disasters, the logics and orientations are remarkably similar.
new activities and passions helps build exemplary character” and puts pupils in a state of “wonder” by drawing from “the infinite realm of their imagination.” Extracurricular activities are a wellspring of atypical skills that can prepare students for adversity in its many forms. The music program is where students develop their “motor skills.” Moreover, studying music imparts “critical thinking, creative problem solving, effective communication, teamwork and confidence needed in the workforce.” “Artistic skills” include “technical skills needed to create increasingly complex and original works of art.” Bestowing “ethical skills” ensures that students “are well prepared to interact in the world of today and have the schema to become decision makers and leaders in a highly complex and quickly shifting future landscape.” “Outdoor skill competence” includes “rock climbing, paddling, and specialized backpacking.” Notably, outdoor educators are expected to “help integrate their academic curriculum into outdoor education courses.”

The outdoor education program became a topic of conversation with Edward, a senior-level administrator primarily based on the West Coast campus in the original Williams School. Upon completing my fieldwork in South Korea, I visited Edward in his office, which has a full view of the famous Hollywood sign, and we talked more about the curriculum. Edward relayed that the outdoor program is “so powerful” that by the end students cry. In his words, experiencing “discomfort, uncertainty — lots of uncertainty together — reshuffles the social deck and calls on different skills, calls on grit, and provides lots of opportunities for leadership.” Most importantly and the biggest challenge, there is “not a playbook” to be had to problem solve in the wilderness. The students as human capital must be fit, flexible, infinitely mutable whilst also immutably present.

Preventing the devaluation of a subject’s human capital is certainly coded into the pedagogical orientations of Williams International. However, instructors push these boundaries further by inculcating principles of resilience that can shape-shift into whatever forms of human capital necessary to withstand but more importantly transcend volatility. As Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper (2011: 154) point out, “What is resilience, after all, if not the acceptance of disequilibrium itself as a principle of organization? The placing of crisis response on a permanent footing leads to another consequence — the blurring of the boundaries between crisis response, post-catastrophe reconstruction and urban planning.” According to Walker and Cooper (2011), resilience is an orientation to futurity that is premised on “open-ended
responsiveness, integrating emergency preparedness into the infrastructures of everyday life and the psychology of citizens.” If a state of emergency or crisis becomes imminent and immanent, then so do opportunities to profit from unforeseen circumstances.

In order to contextualize why instructors at Williams International place a premium on priming students to adapt to a political-economy in flux, the next section interrogates the relationship between promissory utopian capitalist projects and obsolescence. Throughout my discussion, I demonstrate that the shift to skill-based education that incorporates the logics of finance is geared towards sharpening students’ aptitude for surviving unstable markets. By combining skill-based education and finance, class-based socialities are positioned to produce elite status during uncertain times.

3.4 IFEZ: Growth Through Obsolescence

As a zone dedicated to attracting foreign capital, Songdo’s original city blueprints included an international school as one of its core institutes. Like IFEZ, Williams International is a highly speculative, unprecedented experiment where subjects’ desires, imaginaries and anticipations are woven tightly into otherwise disparate global flows (Cross 2014). As a core institute of IFEZ, Williams International is an experimental prototype designed to not only educate foreign children but serve as a benchmark for other South Korean schools. Korean government officials scouted a number of possible candidates to become the core IFEZ educational institute, eventually choosing Williams School in the U.S. Though Williams School had no plans for overseas expansion, the school board was persuaded to establish a branch in South Korea and now considers itself to be “one school, two campuses.”

The Ministry of Education (MOE) designated Williams International as a “foreign educational institute” defined as “educational institutions established in Korea by national or local governments or non-profit organizations with the approval of the MOE and which operates kindergarten, elementary, middle and higher educational institutions under foreign laws and regulations of a foreign country.” Williams International originally anticipated their halls to be filled with the children of parents who had relocated to Korea from abroad.

“Foreign educational institutions,” such as Williams International School, are “established in Korea by national and local governments or non-profit organizations with the approval of the Minister of Education, and which operates kindergarten, elementary, middle, or higher
educational institutions under foreign laws and regulations of a foreign country.” Afforded so much latitude, the teaching staff can easily transfer between Williams International in South Korea and Williams School in the West Coast of America, consulting with faculty, administration, and local government officials to implement new educational models and even engage in institutional exchanges based on knowledge mobilities (Collins 2016, Collins and Ho 2014, 2018, Collins et al. 2014, 2017). While the financing of international schools varies from institution to institution, Williams International is economically supported by a hybrid of local municipal funding, foreign investment capital, and legal infrastructure buttressing the formation of free-economic zones and the schools within them.\(^1\)

One fundamental advantage that is reserved for Williams International School alone, located as it is in South Korea’s flagship free-economic zone, and differentiates it from other “foreign schools” is that does not require attendees to have either a) foreign passport holding parents, or b) a sum total of 1,095 days spent abroad, which is a general requirement across the board. In other words, Williams International School pupils can be Korean passport holders with little to no overseas experience, greatly increasing the size of the prospective population eligible to become community members in this privileged setting\(^1\) (Ministry of Education, International School Information). These rather lax requirements also mean that the vast majority of Williams International School attendees are “locals” that have not met the requirements of having spent a rough total of three years abroad.

Thus, the school was legally permitted to admit domestic residents as long as their numbers do not exceed 30% of the school’s population. Despite legal limits, the vast majority of students were not foreigners, as initially projected when Songdo was constructed, and those who were foreign attendees were comprised mainly of faculty members’ children.\(^2\) Though the maximum enrolment capacity is only 2,080 students, the school had neither reached capacity nor did it

\(^1\) Last, but not least, as the Ministry of Education website warns, any institute advertising themselves by using the term “foreign institute” and that is absent from the government list is in fact an unlicensed school. This is in light of the fact that a number of “international schools” have cropped up but technically qualify as “cram schools” (hagwŏn).

\(^2\) The numbers collected during the second semester of 2016 show that enrolment increased to 1,137 of which 525 students were domestic.
have a graduating class\textsuperscript{93} during the period of my field research. In 2014, Williams International had 1,089 students of which 806 pupils were classified as domestic. These numbers evidence the amount of faith parents placed in Williams International, speculating on the staff’s ability to deliver a world-class education with very little proof to back up this assumption.

Covering seventeen acres, the half a million square foot school was constructed with investments from various governing bodies prior to having an operating staff. The Incheon Metropolitan City Government alone invested US$135 million into the school. Williams International was exempted from paying a lease for five years, a practice that falls in line with the reduced real estate prices accorded to all foreign companies in order to attract foreign and human capital.

Fiscal incentives, like those granted to Williams International, meant to further global economic growth are the main elements present in this utopian vision of capitalism. As the IFEZ pamphlet states, “The investment environment in Korea is improving and will in the near future be second to none…Optimum business and living conditions for foreign executives and staff will be guaranteed in FEZs. Companies from abroad should have no concerns about investing in Korean FEZs, since FEZs were created in response to foreign suggestions about administrative regulations, children’s education, housing, medical institutions, and the language barrier.” To garner as many recommendations from sources outside Korea as possible, education officials were recruited from the United States to consult, manage, promote and implement a “Westernized” institution—a prototype. This move evidences South Korean governmental and commercial desires to nurture the formation of a certain subjecthood that in theory will continuously propel and transform the global economy under conditions of duress and disruption. To that end, Williams International is a crucial element in South Korea’s master plan to cultivate human capital that will circulate through high-speed global flows.

Although officially invited by the South Korean government, Williams International is in fact in a partnership with New Songdo International City (NSIC). The advertisements for Songdo exude unbridled confidence and optimism. It is that very optimism that continues to course through orientations to futurity despite pending obsolescence. In fact, Songdo’s very existence is

\textsuperscript{93} In 2016, the first class graduated from Williams International.
premised on the fear of obsolescence. The landscape itself has precipitated the disappearance of certain birds and living organisms that do not fit into the formulaic rubric of capitalist expansion. To elaborate, IFEZ promotional material glibly states, “The Korean market will double in size by 2010 to US$1 trillion.” Here, Korea’s geographic location is considered key to this optimistic prediction. Noting that “Northeast Asia has a population of 1.5 billion, four times the population of Europe, Northeast Asian GDP is expected to account for 30% of global GDP by 2020 to emerge as one of the three major trade blocks that fuel global economic growth” (IFEZ website).

The construction of Songdo should be understood as part and parcel of a longer history of urban planning. Starting in the 1980s, government-led initiatives sought to support the growth of satellite cities that were growing in a cause-and-effect relationship with Seoul’s urban sprawl (Bae & Sellers 2007). Over a span of five years, the Korean government planned to erect 2 million housing units based on a post-war British model. These 1980 measures were stepped up in the 1990s. Cho (1997) saw the spatialization of firms fulfilling subcontracted work in Seoul as a means of forming incredibly dense networks in order to funnel global finances into the country. The foreign investment that poured into the South Korean capital was endorsed by the state’s fiscal policy and seen by some scholars as the country’s link to global finance. The spatial organization of Seoul through its organization of firms and supportive technology ultimately gave rise to social-cultural environments conducive to routing capital. Bonds forged through “informal networks” premised on relationships of trust and reciprocity would not be possible were it not for these technological innovations.

In 1999, to promote the growth of areas outside the Seoul area, the Korea International Exhibition Centre (KINTEX) was initiated in an effort to increase land value in the suburbs, which is in stark contrast to how today’s government leaves urban planning initiatives to the corporations. To weave satellite cities into global networks of trade and finance, measures were taken to establish a hotel industry and support the growth of information technology and publishing industries. This project produced mixed results among residents, many of whom were concerned about environmental degradation. According to Yooil Bae and Jeffrey M. Sellers (2007), the rapid development of South Korea produced a number of highly educated individuals who then called on their social capital to gather and counter the proposed economic growth movement. Bae and Sellers (2007) argue that the collapse of political agendas within a
short timeframe helped mobilization efforts to mount an effective anti-urbanization campaign that challenged the state’s policies.

The central government’s attentiveness to certain regions, most notably Seoul, has led to problems of uneven development across the country with capital accumulation — not wealth redistribution or environmental issues — being given priority in government agendas. Echoing the observations of many other scholars, Bae-Gyoon Park (2008: 53) notes that the central government is focused on the elevation of Seoul’s geopolitical positioning as one belonging to the “systems of world cities.” The idea is to grant more autonomy to specific areas so regional leaders can take the reins of economic development.94

As the nation attempts to take a leading role on the global stage, individuals expanding national borders by producing frictionless human capital becomes a necessity. This is fundamental to how cities — and satellite cities but more specifically individual cities like Songdo — implement modes of production where tasks become increasingly specialized and fragmented. It is in finding solutions to situations such as these that will ameliorate potential friction in the modes of production within South Korea that skill-based education will truly shine. On the one hand, obsolescence is a deliberately manufactured set of events, established in attempts to reconcile and expedite global capitalist flows. On the other hand, obsolescence also occurs as an unforeseen chain of “accidents” such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (see Cooper 2010).

Expansion of communication, mass transit, and circulation of images, discourses and skills support the development of cities. Prior to development initiatives, Songdo was nothing more than a mudflat located just fifteen minutes away by car from Incheon International Airport. The decision to reclaim 1,500 acres of tidal flats for a futuristic experiment that is now Songdo initiated the digging up of 500 tons of sand from the Yellow Sea, which was then dumped to form a landmass, destroying the tidal flats that were home to migratory birds that are now on the

94 As a result, South Korea is undergoing rapid decentralization according to Park (2008) in a discussion on state spatiality. In the past, civic organizations pushed back against decentralization more forcefully than they do today. However, since 2001, citizens began to form coalitions to speed up processes of decentralization. According to Park (2008), post-Fordism is a process where regional territories simultaneously become both more globalized and localized. As a consequence of this scalar restructuring of the state, multiple vulnerable spots become apparent, leading to government led initiatives being repeatedly contested and challenged.
verge of extinction. Now the empty buildings and streets of Songdo are just unutilized infrastructure that never fulfilled its role as the rapid conduit of capital in IFEZ. It is in this skeletal framework that Williams International finds itself, where students’ social skills are considered key in weaving together new global-local capital channels.

When I went to see Williams International first-hand, Travis, gave me a tour on my initial visit. Stepping outside of his office, we approached a staircase that functioned as an architectural centrepiece. The classrooms lined the sides. On the main floor were expensive-looking chairs and an indoor garden. From there, Travis took me upstairs to a classroom where he had to set up his high school pupils with a student satisfaction survey. On the way, Travis explained that instead of dividing biology, chemistry, and physics as separate subjects, Williams International offered a course incorporating all of them together. They were simply divided according to grade. During class time, Travis stood in front of the students as they pulled out their laptops to fill out the survey. He assured pupils that their feedback regarding teachers’ performance would be anonymous. Travis stated that he would walk through the classroom but not read what they were writing, instead making sure they were on the right page. He made sure to remind them of Williams International’s core values: respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and compassion. Travis encouraged students to be honest whilst also emphasizing the need for students to be “compassionate,” reminding them that “another human being” would be reading the survey on the other side of the screen. As students typed away, Travis drew attention to the features of the science labs as we circled the room together checking on the students’ activities. The room was painted a vibrant blue. There were gas valves, long tall tables, sinks, and a shower presumably for an emergency situation involving an accident with chemicals.

Afterwards, Travis turned the floor over to me so that I could converse with students about their experiences at Williams International and Songdo. I asked the class what they thought about “living in a high-tech city.” Their responses were less than enthusiastic. Some scoffed, some were sceptical, others concentrated on the niceties of living in a city that wasn’t as crowded as Seoul. As Kevin, one sophomore male, stated, even though the city portrays an image as being driven by cutting-edge technology, walking around allows one to soon realize that this is not the

95 Ornithologists now document the near extinction of the Black-faced Spoonbill, Chinese Egret, Great Knot, Relict Gull, and Saunder’s Gull (Birds Korea) and question to what extent Songdo is in fact a “sustainable” city.
case. “It’s all marketing. Songdo isn’t actually that high tech. There’s just apartment buildings,” he passionately argued. Fervently, he went on to state that Songdo is not a scene out of a science-fiction novel — it is just a clean and empty city. Kevin was critical of the city’s efforts to promote itself as being technologically advanced and didn’t particularly enjoy living there. When he finished, his classmates erupted in applause.

Others echoed similar sentiments. When I asked them what they thought of Songdo, Julia replied, “Empty. But a lot fuller than three years ago. When I first came three years ago, there was nothing here, but it seems to be filling out now.” Asking them what they thought of Songdo’s future, Kevin chimed in again to say, “It’s up in the air. Some things will probably be good, others bad.” As Travis and I exited the classroom, he commented, “The kids are really aware of the fact that they are part of a social experiment,” then segued into his praise of the students’ brightness and inquisitiveness. Despite Kevin’s observations of the city largely being a failure, his comment that things were “up in the air” was highly speculative. Julia’s observations on the other hand were more optimistic, as she focused on the fact that the city’s population seemed to be growing. Both instances suggest that while students are aware of the city’s shortcomings, their expectations for the future remain open.

3.5 Human Capital During Turbulent Times

Endings and extinctions need not warrant panic, or the mourning of worlds gone. Instead, the unpredictable changes and the challenges they usher in should be harnessed and yoked to the potentialities and promissory elements of capitalism. When facing the unknown and unpredictable changes, resilience is considered a requisite. As Walker and Cooper (2010:154) also state, “What is resilience, after all, if not the acceptance of disequilibrium itself as a principle of organization? The placing of crisis response on a permanent footing leads to another consequence — the blurring of the boundaries between crisis response, post-catastrophe reconstruction and urban planning.” In this section, I will demonstrate how resilience comes to be a pedagogically valuable lesson for those seeking to “globalize” curriculums and keep abreast of changing tides. Williams International, as a futuristic model of schooling, trains local public and foreign language high school educators. For example, participants from schools implementing UNESCO’s “Global Citizenship Education” (UNESCO Global Citizenship Education 2014) take campus tours of the school’s facilities followed by a presentation administered by Williams International faculty. Attending one of these tours myself, I walked
through the hallways with other participants while students went about the business of attending classes. The guide took this opportunity to explain to us that this isn’t an “ordinary” school, using the students independently scurrying about the halls in between classes to remark that there are no bells signalling the end of a class, rendering students “free.”

Entering the library, our guide told us to look up. Jutting from the ceiling is the underbelly of a boat with a minimalist interpretation of a bow, stern, and keel. He explained that this design is meant to inspire students to think of how vast the world is and how much there is still to know. Moving on, he showed off the new furniture — two crescent moon shaped couches with a large space in the middle — to advance his point that this isn’t just “any” library but one that invites students to relax in comfortable seating areas, unlike the hard chairs and study carrels in normal schools, and read without feeling censored or the distraction of physical discomfort.

Indeed, the ability to be unhindered in mind and body became a point of conversation in a separate meeting with Lillian, the school’s librarian. She told me that one of her goals is to curate a multicultural, global library. When I asked her to explain what she intended, Lillian eagerly took me on a tour of the designer space complete with expensive looking furniture and Scandinavian style architecture. Clearly very enthusiastic and taking a lot of pride in her collection, Lillian showed me the number of books they have by diverse authors. Her goals are to have students access fiction penned by writers from all over the world, all walks of life. Doing so, she explained, exposes students to different perspectives and ways of thinking. Again, the ideology of “freedom” that is evident in the architecture and furniture is also reflected in Lillian’s selection of authors. The library too is another example of how Williams International eradicated the boundaries that would otherwise form students’ temporal structuring of the day much like the elimination of textbooks and bells that the faculty and administrators bragged were so advantageous. With the added dimension of encouraging students to move through geopolitical spaces through their intellect, this encourages pupils to operate in an environment premised on various iterations of obsolescence by artificially erasing temporal and spatial boundaries. The only constant is the feeling of never knowing what might come next — a broader sensorial, embodied feeling that is hoped they will take with them into their adult careers.

I was surrounded by a sea of whispers and murmurs commenting on how nice the facilities are, the sounds of tapping clicks as the visiting instructors photographed the premises. By the end of
the tour, we were offered refreshments of cookies, coffee and tea. For the second part of the program, we entered one of the two auditoriums to watch a two-hour long presentation given by Dr. Kim, who works as the External Affairs Officer at Williams International. Due to her status as a PhD degree holder and extensive career in education advising politicians, it is her role to instruct teachers from local Incheon City schools on how to administer lessons according to UNESCO’s guidelines.

Equipped with PowerPoint slides, Dr. Kim spoke intelligently and enthusiastically about the value, necessity, and pedagogy around raising “global citizens” who have “global competence” and learn to “globally cooperate” with UNESCO-affiliated institutes in the region. The scope of “skills” that students are urged to adopt and utilize extend into affective, emotional, psychic realms where they are prompted not only to ruminate on the possibility of their own obsolescence but also adopt adaptable attitudes and dispositions. As Dr. Kim explained, these pedagogical measures are deemed paramount given that “20th century assumptions” are “rapidly becoming obsolete.” She asserted that teaching students to be flexible and “globally” minded is an imperative. This is especially the case given that the “global market” is comprised of “lean start-ups,” animated by the “ubiquity [of] low cost mobile phones” enabling the creation of a new platform where the roles of consumers and producers collapse into the “prosumer.” Dr. Kim highlighted the fact that “super mobile networks” connect “people, things, content, services” rather than the other way around. Here she was specifically referring to “globalization,” which she sees as a result of “[the] digital revolution, climate instability, and mass migration,” contributing to a “flattened economy” where national borders separate people while “accelerated” capitalist networks connect them. Dr. Kim emphasized that the Internet and mass migration has interwoven our otherwise seemingly disparate networks in ways where a terrorist attack in Paris has us immediately worrying for our own friends and family living there. No longer can we shrug it off, saying that “it’s their problem, not ours.”

Another problem “that is ours and not theirs” is climate change, which was also discussed in great detail during the two-hour presentation. Dr. Kim argued that first-world countries like the U.S. contribute more emissions per capita than other nations, but rank low in bearing the responsibility, highlighting the inverse relationship to be true for poorer populations in places like the Philippines. Ultimately it is the poorer countries that suffer most greatly from polluted natural resources. As she points out, stopping climate change is not a task that can be
accomplished by one or two people, but by large groups — in particular wealthy nations. This particular topic rooted in notions of philanthropy and charity will be further elaborated upon later in this dissertation (Chapter 5). Yet, it remains germane to the topic of obsolescence in that environmental catastrophe as something that disproportionately affects poorer populations is ultimately a threat to all humans. As another iteration of obsolescence however, Dr. Kim emphasizes the need for educators and students to act in response to the disappearance of habitable environments.

As Dr. Kim wrapped up the presentation, she highlighted the fact that a growing number of employers seek “competent, reliable workers with attractive cost, regardless of location,” and those principles were at the heart of Songdo’s inception. With the purpose of producing competent, reliable workers — in Dr. Kim’s words — Williams International aims to produce students who envision themselves as interchangeable with commodified objects, animating desires to become valued global citizens. While Dr. Kim chooses the word “worker,” her own theorizations are more in line with the concept of “labourer” whose valuation always returns to the production of surplus value. Her presentation seemingly conceives of students as employees rather than employers, but at the same time refers to Feher’s (2009: 24) “free worker” concept where subjects are “invited to consider themselves as owners of their labor power and thus as subjects endowed with a freedom that is equivalent to that of their employer.” Indeed, when juxtaposed against Williams International’s desire to create ground-breaking entrepreneurs, Dr. Kim’s presentation, in some sense, is indeed laden with contradictions.  

These contradictions and ambiguities regarding what kinds of subjects Williams International students should become are nevertheless the very foundation upon which these new educational models are promulgated. The ultimate goal is to fashion oneself after “Google” or to become the next Steve Jobs, the man accredited for turning science fiction into reality with the advent of the touchscreen iPhone. The ultimate goal however, is to become a subject who has the capacity to continuously adjust to developing circumstances so as to always be employed in an ever-changing economy, specifically in sectors such as tech that invites workers to embrace their own ingenuity and with their eyes locked firmly on the future at all costs. In essence, this worker, like Feher’s (2009) “free worker,” must have a disposition that lends itself to cultivating an entrepreneurial spirit.

96 I thank Chris Krupa for this set of theoretical insights.
irrespective of the official position said worker holds. It is precisely this conflation of worker/entrepreneur that can be understood to be another iteration of liquidity that Dr. Kim sees as crucially important since the vast majority of the world’s population is subordinated to developments in tech. In a world full of “prosumers” and where the hierarchized boundaries of creator and consumer is blurred, how will Williams International students differentiate themselves as the former? Similarly, how will members of the next generation set themselves apart from victims and become leaders in the wake of natural disasters and terrorist attacks threatening or at least affecting everyone? This grey area between leader and worker, embedded in the broader theme of obsolescence, is where students should apply their countless skills and dig to find new opportunities that they can exploit. In order to avert the possibility of being discarded by the vicissitudes of capitalism, pedagogies of global leadership seek to create new niches of privilege that Williams International students may occupy — especially in light of numerous catastrophes such as climate change and global terrorism.

The fact that Williams International students are privileged does not shield them from the reality of uncertain, shifting, political-economic terrains, which legitimizes the approaches these schools take to safeguard their position. Accepting that turbulence is the norm and recognizing that capitalism is inherently prone to crisis, it is assumed that the next generation will endure boom and bust cycles with more frequency than what was previously considered standard.

Imagining oneself as human capital that may be rendered obsolete prompts subjects to ruminate on spectres of failure. While there are pedagogical practices oriented towards combating failure and producing futurity, they are highly speculative.97

Liquidity in the form of potential human capital falls very much in line with how subjects construct systems of finance. Not in the staid sense of savings and accumulating stagnant

97 To some, these practices resemble the ideology of financialization. As Max Haiven (2011: 101) states: In this sense, money is a performative materialization of capital’s power; it offers its bearer the power to command cooperation in the future. In doing so, it colonizes the future, replacing the limitless potential of social cooperation with the limitless accumulation of capital. Here, capital’s objective is the endless expansion of the hegemony of its value paradigm through the “flattening” of social relations and removal of barriers to the interchangeability of social values through money: an “indifference” toward diverse forms of social value, a ubiquitous “liquidity” of social relations as expressed through money.
capital, but rather always looking for ways to emancipate it from any constraints. “Subject-based” education in that regard is viewed as outdated and unsuitable for a dynamically changing economy. Subjects, such as English literature or Social Studies are not considered knowledge that can be easily monetized.

Desires to fashion students as hyper-flexible, hyper-fit human capital, in response to feelings of estrangement from rogue capital, is the social environment in which subjects now must figure out how to maintain their positionality “at the top.” These are the conditions necessitating lessons on global leadership and promoting students’ sense of autonomy.

3.6 Conclusion

In sum, instructors at Williams International see resilience, positive thinking, and interpersonal skills amongst the many aforementioned ones as keys to moving towards a futurity rooted in “emergent socialities rather than ideational forms” (Guyer 2007:411). At the same time, subjects anticipating obsolescence are active agents in expediting emergent socialities’ arrival in various capacities. Their participation in the reproduction and transformation of the South Korean private education market delegitimizes and destabilizes the public domain. By disavowing the efficacy of capitalism to self-correct its crises prone tendencies, subjects denounce models of linear, progressive growth. In exchange for their rejection of older methods, subjects within the purview of this dissertation attempt to construct new, expansive, infinitely open-ended archetypes for the production and accumulation of capital. Simultaneously, instructors and students explore new ways to produce a future with infinite opportunities and possibilities for profit and elite status reproduction from capitalism’s chaos. Though orientations towards futurity are based on frameworks built on uncertainty, obsolescence is also in many instances a series of deliberately artificial events.

Thus, resilience is fundamental to pedagogical initiatives that focus on the unceasing appreciation of the self so as to reproduce class during uncertain times. Parental decisions to invest in a new school aiming to become a world-class institute that transforms Korean education further evidences parents’ faith in a future made possible by education. Through private school enrolment, parents seek to pave the way for their children whilst maintaining their classed objectives, which can be understood as a commitment to preserving the corporeal. Parents hope to prevent their children’s depreciation in a highly stressful Korean educational
regime, never mind a dynamically changing political-economic milieu. At the same time, comprehensive, holistic approaches to education render adolescents complicit in capital accumulation and reproduction as they learn to transcend turbulence. To that end, “skill-based” education is animated to fully accept — not resist — capitalism. Or put differently, quite literally the bodies of students are fodder for capitalism and will continue to be overworked. By transmuting oneself into human capital to ameliorate volatility, human subjects collude to sustain capitalism’s maladies in the frontlines of infinite growth.
Chapter 4
Work Hard, Play Harder

4 Introduction: Play in post-industrial times

"Play will be to the 21st century what work was to the industrial age — our dominant way of Knowing, Doing & Creating Value." — Pat Kane (author of The Play Ethic: A Manifesto for a Different Way of Living)

My first encounter with Pat Kane’s quote was during an email exchange with Michael, the director of Williams International’s Creator’s Zone. At the time of our initial meeting, the Creator’s Zone was empty, devoid of the merriment that I would come to observe during a subsequent meeting. Like many of the rooms at Williams International, there is a giant wall of windows that allows warm sunlight to flood the Creator’s Zone. The warmth of the physical environment matches the friendly, compassionate personality of Michael — an important figure at Williams International. Not only is he the director of this program, but he is also a member of the team originally brought in to help conceptualize and shape the school’s curriculum and vision by Baker International, a real estate company based in the United States. Notably, the campus was built prior to contracting an institution, which was done once Williams School in the United States consented in 2010. Originally from upstate New York, Michael comes to the institute with a master of arts in Curriculum and Technology, in addition to several years of teaching experience in Central America. Content with his contributions and proud of his classroom, Michael charmingly shows me around telling me, “People come in and ask, is this a shop class? Is it an art class? Is it a design class?”

The space itself is ambiguous and that is where its potency lies. Looking around I let his series of questions sink in. In the corner of the Creator’s Zone, there is a laser cutter, and against one wall are bins of Lego parts. There are two sawders, a pegboard filled with tools, moveable shelves with students’ projects stored on the racks, long custom-built stainless steel tables and stools where students can work with ease in groups. Just outside the front door there are three Makerbot 3D printers. Scattered throughout the room there are coloured pencils and other accoutrements for writing, drawing and drafting. Michael informed me that the newly renovated features include mobile industrial storage units, heavy-duty shelving to hold 100 in-progress
student projects, four sinks, two student work benches with hand tools, an Epilog Laser Cutter, air filtration solutions (one for the laser cutter, additional VOC/HEPA for the room, as well as air purifying plants), dedicated safe cutting areas, extensive consumable materials area, a projection/sound system, and a bank of twelve laptops. There are in-floor data/power links, as well as extensive robotics, physical computing, and mannequins for fashion design throughout the room.

Even in my most critical moments, I can’t help but feel a bit romantic about the opportunities available to these students. I think this should be a universal standard, making well-resourced classrooms accessible to all students as they curiously engage with their environment. At the same time, there is an insidiousness to how such pedagogical orientations collude with political-economic ones in South Korea as part of a broader global economy. Play as an activity situated within political economies wrought from information and tech industries becomes a speculative orientation towards futurity. I focus my main research questions on three areas: What is the relationship between the capacity of play’s potentiality and the architecting of capitalist utopias? How is play harnessed to transform adolescent subjects into entrepreneurial visionaries? How does play get marshalled so that subjects perform unalienated labour, under conditions of market volatility? What are the processes in motion here, where play becomes tied in with problem-solving and completing assignments? What are the implications for students who are assimilated into pedagogical regimes aspiring to subordinate and subsume forms of labour in an uncertain world?

As I will argue, the ways in which labour and play coalesce in the classroom allow adolescents to remain highly productive during a phase that is identified as one of the most stressful times of their teen years, if not their entire lives. Play becomes a prototype for dealing with the terrors of capitalism. Whether the threats to their security stem from social upheaval due to climate change, political unrest, or bleak job markets, play is a regime of labour that prepares students to subordinate themselves to capital. In the context of my dissertation, this is a crucial dimension to human capital production. The extemporaneous “nature” of play is regarded as a fecund source of new material that will not only revolutionize teaching techniques but also provide solutions to emergently unpredictable events. I examine how the instructors at Williams International willingly harness the magic of play with the hope that this will place students in a position of power when confronted with social, environmental and political problems.
Thus, in this chapter, I interrogate how pedagogical innovations are part and parcel of economic ideologies and policy initiatives. I particularly examine how these trends are embedded in educators, policy makers and politicians’ everyday theorizations of what drives capitalism’s future. I continue to build on the previous chapter, “Escaping Obsolescence: The Shift from Subject to Skill-based Education,” by showing how play is marshalled as a source of innovation and ingenuity during turbulent times. These pedagogical innovations can be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the 1997 IMF Crisis, when government initiatives focused on building a creative economy (ch’angjogyŏngje) (Song 2009). Parents and government officials alike scrambled to find new educational channels that would position South Koreans to become competitive labourers in an uncertain global economy. Like the ubiquitous pursuit of English education, the emphasis on raising “creative global citizens” takes place on a national scale. Unlike English education, pedagogical innovations and harnessing play in extremely well-resourced international schools can only be afforded by South Korea’s most privileged. In the interest of expanding existing discussions on pedagogical innovations, educational reform, crises and practices, I focus on how the promises of play entwines with the promises of capitalism to become deeply embedded in innovating new regimes of value production. Specifically, I will show how the “play ethic” (Kane 2004) is embraced as the potential progenitor for building new markets during turbulent times.

Thus, in maintaining the analytical trajectory of my dissertation, I draw from economic theorizations homing in on the links between financialization and innovation as the bedrock upon which projects of human capital is built. Innovation requires subjects to put existing infrastructure and practices through a process of what economist Joseph Schumpeter (2003) calls, “creative destruction.” With the purpose of showing how “evolutionary” processes animate capital production, Schumpeter (2003) like Marx (1976) identifies innovation as an imperative. Capitalism, as a fundamentally unsustainable, crisis-prone economic system, perpetuates itself through the entrepreneurial spirit that requires subjects to constantly rework the production of value. While Schumpeter (2003) focuses on entrepreneurs working to create new markets and domains, my analysis centres on the making of subjects who will imbibe these ideals as adolescents. The grist of “creative destruction” is then woven into play, which socializes students to be comfortable with the creation of new life-worlds while confronting
inevitable failures in the process. To that end, I aim to reveal how pedagogical and socializing innovations are part and parcel of the formation of new enterprises in the future.

4.1 From the protestant to the play ethic

The Creator’s Zone was one of the first of its kind in Korea and a point of envy for other international schools. Over the years, Michael led workshops training their competitors to construct their own. I was told that the Creator’s Zone at Williams International served as a prototype for other institutions, including their sister campus in the United States. In fact, during an Open House at another international school, I noticed that they too boasted their own Creator’s Zone.

Eager to show me the Creator’s Zone in its full glory, Michael cordially invited me back when class was in session to conduct participant observation. On a bright unseasonably warm winter morning, I was greeted by a bustling classroom where fifth grade students were clustered around the room. In stark contrast to our somewhat sterile meeting a couple weeks prior, there was a healthy buzz as students circulated throughout the classroom, seemingly of their own volition. I was somewhat amazed that I did not observe any unruly or disruptive behaviour, despite the autonomy that Michael granted (Foucault 1988). Some students were hunched over the custom-built stainless steel worktables, while others in the corner methodically practiced their K-pop moves while singing. Another group scurried back and forth, amassing building materials, pieces of metal, screws and blocks that look like Lego bits. Students were clearly engaged not only in their environment but also engaging with one another. A second teacher sat at one of the long work tables, acting as a resource for students who asked questions or requested guidance.

Meanwhile, Michael proudly showed me his students’ creations. Solar and wind powered kinetic sculptures, coded objects (lamps, utensils, furniture), 3D printed clothing for mannequins, hydraulic-powered machines, sensor-driven recycle bins, Bluetooth controlled home blinds, and solar-powered egg-hatching alerts for the school farm. A female student noticed the interactions between Michael and myself and approached us. Assertively, she took over Michael’s role as the guide and began to give me her personal tour of the classroom, showcasing the items she’d made. Michael officially handed her the reigns, encouraging her to take me to the hall where more items were on display. Happily obliging, this young student completed Michael’s tour.
The rest of the students did not blink an eye at my presence. Simultaneously captivated by their social interactions and tasks, the Creator’s Zone inserted play as a core feature needed to complete a project. Huizinga (1938: 8) argues that “[t]he contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leaves seriousness far beneath.” The sublimation of labour to play shaped classroom dynamics giving interactions an ephemerality and efflorescence that made the environment pleasant.

I decided to ask Michael about his decision to include Pat Kane’s quote about “the play ethic” in his email signature, prompting a passionate monologue. Hearkening back to the initial set of questions he mentioned that ask whether the Creator’s Zone was an art, shop, or design class, Michael explained that his classroom blurs the lines between several conceptualizations of space. In his words, “it is an anti-disciplinary space” premised on student-centred lessons and the transfer of information. Since the goal is for students to innovate new objects, Michael insisted that the Creator’s Zone is fundamentally different from an “inter-disciplinary” space.

The objective is to cultivate students who will possess the ability to quickly adapt to new and novel situations, integrating many different aspects of learning through a level of curiosity that is completely different from the standard classroom model where the teacher is in charge. Noticeably, the Creator’s Zone is devoid of the rigidity and regularity of the everyday temporal rhythms and squelching of desires that are the crux of Weber’s (1930) Protestant Work Ethic. Instead, play, as a physical, psychic, social, emotional and tactile experience, unleashes a sociality and relationship to labour that is experimentally unbounded. Michael continued, explaining that his approach is necessary in a changing milieu that no longer demands students to “publish or perish.” As he emphatically noted, members of the next generation will deal with “demo or die.” I found and still find Michael’s conviction and choice of words chilling. What he was describing was the all-encompassing task of constantly giving demonstrations: the performativity, mastering oral communication skills, the synthesis of information, mandatory charisma, being in one’s element in front of a potentially diverse and unpredictable audience, and so on.
After my visit to the Creator’s Zone I googled Pat Kane to find out more about his philosophy of living and proposal for building new economies. Featured on the homepage is the following text: “Exploring the power + potential of play in web/tech organizations + pop culture”98 (The Play Ethic website). As the author of The Play Ethic, Kane argues that even in the days leading up to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, Weber’s (1930) Protestant Work Ethic was becoming “irrelevant.” In contrast to play, previous work ethics premised on regular rhythms, discipline, and asceticism are models generating illiquidity. Kane argues, “We need to find new motivating narratives in our lives, beyond status anxiety and lifestyle excess. Play, as a planet-friendly, convivial way to bring thrills and pleasures into our lives with others, is a prime element of those new ‘wellbeing’ narratives.”

Not only has Pat Kane published a book to satisfy the eager audience willing to learn about the benefits of the “Play Ethic,” he has also been featured in a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. The very quote in Michael’s email signature is not only prominently displayed on Pat Kane’s website but was also featured in MoMA’s Century of the Child Exhibition that ran from July to November 2012 in New York City (MoMA website). In addition to being a source of inspiration for new designs, this ambitious exhibition chronicled the meaning of childhood as a politically contested site. Toys, furniture, political posters associated with the experiences of childhood were presented under the banner of Pat Kane’s quote that cites play as a source of social pleasure that cleaves the ideologies of a work ethic. Just based on the fact that MoMA used Kane’s “Play Ethic” in their exhibition, it is clear that his views have garnered much interest and as such have generated demand for his services as a guest lecturer.99 Speaking to a population that grapples with a sense of uncertainty, but maintains a romanticism towards capitalism’s promissories, Kane presented “Radical Animal: Constructing the Creative Self” at King’s College Arts and Humanities Festival titled “Play.”

98 See the Play Ethic website: https://www.theplayethic.com

99 In entrepreneurial fashion, Kane also identifies his areas of expertise to include “Everything from literary reviews to scientific seminars, futurist curating to keynote speaking; both re-storying organisations in crisis, and facilitating celebrations of excellence” (The Play Ethic website: https://www.theplayethic.com).
In Kane’s presentation at the abovementioned festival, Kane opens with a slide titled “The Creative/Innovative Imperative.” When one juxtaposes this title with the “Protestant Ethic” (Weber 1930), it would seem they could not be more different. In reality, there are some noteworthy overlaps between orientations towards futurity in both the “Play Ethic” and “Protestant Ethic” (Weber 1930). In his discussion of Luther’s post-Reformation concept “the calling” (*Beruf*), Weber argues that subjects no longer feel assured that they are “the elect” ordained to spend the afterlife in God’s kingdom. As such they feel the compulsion to act as if they are one of the chosen. As Weber (1930: 44-45) notes, “His calling is something which man has to accept as a divine ordinance, to which he must adapt himself. This aspect outweighed the other idea which was also present, that work in the calling was a, or rather *the*, task set by God.”

The sublimation of these desires and anxieties are materialized in an ethic of rational labour, prudence, and asceticism.100 This deeply profound affective disposition of uncertainty animates the spirit of capitalism in ways where subjects commit to “systematic” and “methodical” approaches to economic praxis that command labour (Weber 1930: 107).

Where Weber’s Protestant Ethic and Kane’s Play Ethic share a certain philosophy regarding labour, they diverge when it comes to philosophies surrounding enjoyment. As Weber (1930: 112) notes, “[i]mpulsive enjoyment of life, which leads away both from work in a calling and from religion, was as such the enemy of rational asceticism, whether in the form of seigneurial sports, or the enjoyment of the dance-hall or the public house of the common man.”101 In fact, Weber’s (1930: 114) argument for “the uniformity of life” translated seamlessly into theorizations on regulated modes of production, coupled with the “the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh.” Breaking free from the Weberian formulation binding the individual to ascetism, prudence, routinization, discomfort and rationality, Kane links play to creation and innovation, requiring individuals to expand their visions and experimental practices. In the end, uncertainty

100 As Weber (1930: 48) states, “The salvation of the soul and that alone was the centre of their life and work. Their ethical ideals and the practical results of their doctrines were all based on that alone, and were the consequences of purely religious motives. We shall thus have to admit that the cultural consequences of the Reformation were to a great extent, perhaps in the particular aspects with which we are dealing predominantly, unforeseen and even unwished for results of the labours of the reformers.”

101 Weber (1930: 112-113) admits that this was not the conditions for complete indoctrination, since other areas like the Sciences flourished as a result of influences from the Renaissance.
exists in both models. In Weber’s “Protestant Ethic,” uncertainty motivates subjects to act as if they are the chosen. In Kane’s “Play Ethic,” uncertainty should be juggled, wrestled with, and shaped into a creative enterprise.

Uncertainty is the axis around which labour rotates and remains a key element throughout the course of my dissertation. Even being a member of South Korea’s most privileged class affords little comfort when it comes to questions of maintaining that status from adolescence to adulthood. As I repeatedly emphasize, anxieties surrounding class reproduction play heavily into investment in education and the resulting principles used in creating the Creator’s Zone. In the Creator’s Zone, we see an abrupt break from Weber’s writings and experience “the spirit of capitalism” that imbues everyday life. In Michael’s classroom, students are trained precisely to coordinate their bodies, their movements, their creativity and ingenuity to processes of innovation.

4.2 Creative economy: Education in crisis?

A repeated lamentation heard throughout South Korea that simultaneously critiques education and political-economic matters is that the nation has yet to produce a leading innovator comparable to Bill Gates or Steve Jobs. The fact that no Korean national has yet been awarded the Nobel Prize is held up as further evidence of “Korean education’s failure.” In direct contradiction, foreign media outlets such as Forbes and Bloomberg praise South Korea for being one of the world’s most “innovative economies.” These polar opposite interpretations also apply to the state of the South Korean economy. The foreign media sees success where the South Korean government sees deficiencies that spur them on to implement policies that will continue to propel the nation’s “creative economy.” In this section, I analyse how “creativity” and “creative economies” are imagined, conjured and constructed. I do so by tracking specifically how play is fostered in an international school setting to encourage creative powers that can later be utilized to innovate markets.

The South Korean government’s efforts to cultivate a “creative economy” (ch’angjogyŏngje) drives policy formation and remains central to debates about education. As So Jin Park (2012: 115-130) argues, one of the changes in educational orientations since the 1997 IMF Crisis is the focus of mothers on excavating their children’s talents (tukki). Even though government policies ensure significant funding and program initiatives designed to cultivate a “creative economy,”
the emphasis parents put on individual development and “excellence” is part and parcel of their ambivalence towards the efficacy of the Korean education system. This confluence of governmental initiatives and parental anxieties regarding the viability of future economies are ripe nodes to extol the benefits of play as a pedagogical innovation. As Jae Hoon Lim (2012) argues, South Korea’s “School Collapse” debates emerged from perceived government’s stranglehold on educational policies that severely limited citizens’ decision-making capacities. Neoliberal transformation however, marked a turning point for parents and government officials alike. This was partially due to the fact that South Koreans had by this point succeeded in opening up public spaces for discourse due to the democratization of the country’s political culture. Lim (2012) divides South Korean civilians integral to pushing educational reform into four “camps”: traditionalists, democratic reformists, neoliberals, and de-schooling advocates.

To quickly summarize, “traditionalists” cited “home and moral anomie” as the culprit of the “school collapse.” With the perceived erosion of parent/child and teacher/student relationships, concerns centred around children lacking self-discipline due to a lack of positive role models. “Democratic reformists” on the other hand heavily criticized authoritarian and bureaucratic structures as stymieing efforts to push the boundaries of education. To “democratic reformists,” teachers and students were intentionally excluded from any meaningful debates and changes. For this precise reason democratic reformists found international schools, as institutes exempt from following a nationally-imposed curriculum, so appealing. While the preceding two groups were milder in their reactions, “neoliberals” were particularly inflamed after facing the fallout from the 1997 IMF Crisis. They lambasted current educational models for being completely inept at adapting to a dynamically changing political-economic landscape. Viewing the global economy as a space of “unlimited competition,” “neoliberals” feared that the next generation was in fact “endangered” by obsolete pedagogical methods (Lim 2012: 36). Neoliberals advocated for more government allowances in privatized education designed to help gifted students excel. As Lim (2012: 37) points out, “Neoliberals, therefore, eagerly accepted the ‘marketization’ of education as a way to provide higher-quality and more individualized educational goods for students.” Lastly, “de-schooling advocates” found the existing educational system suitable for Fordist models of production and consumption, but they found it mismatched for a post-industrial economy. “Uniformity” in schooling was considered a negative trait, limiting children’s “creativity” and individualism (Lim 2012: 39).
Though dissatisfied for different reasons, they unanimously agree that “Korean education” must change. According to Lim (2012), another common thread running through the beliefs held by these various groups is their high opinion of education systems in other countries. “American education” is a beacon of hope and promise especially to the “neoliberals” (Lim 2012: 42).

Valued by my interlocutors and their educators, many of whom left their homes in the United States, England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, “American education” remains the idealized prototype fostering creativity and exploration, conducive to producing entrepreneurs such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg. In fact, Ms. Ha, the Director of IHE Prep, told me that American public schools are superior to Korean institutions precisely because they offer “Gifted and Talented Education” (GATE), a program she took advantage of for her daughter. Devoid of these opportunities within the Korean public education system, her children would have to sit with peers whose academic aptitude was lower. Short of instigating a complete educational overhaul, by investing instead in private education these affluent families bought educational advantages for their children’s future.

We see how pedagogies of play as palliatives to future uncertainty gain traction. The “Protestant Ethic,” an obsolete paradigm should be replaced with an updated “Play Ethic,” where subjects harness their own potentiality and creativity. Moreover, increasing competition — for students and teachers — is seen as the key ingredient for preparing students for an uncertain world. That said, not all Korean parents wholeheartedly welcome play as a core pedagogical trajectory. Michael admits that on many occasions this is a point of friction as parents continue to prioritize exam performance. This, however, does not change the generalized critique of “Korean education” as one that lags behind, nor does it tarnish romanticized visions of “Western” education where students are “free” to explore their creativity.

4.3 Innovation & pedagogies: The 4th Industrial Revolution
(*Sach’a sanŏp’yŏngmyŏng*)

“*The Republic of Korea Rides on the Big Road of the 4th Industrial Revolution.*”

—Ministry of Science and ICT (Miraech’angjogwahakpu) Website
The Creative Economy Strategy seeks to invigorate entrepreneurial activity in Korea, increasing rates of business creation and the presence of fast-growing young and small firms.” (OECD 2014: 24)

Undoubtedly, the “Play Ethic” and Williams International’s Creator’s Zone are pedagogical initiatives specific to securing the aspirant “1%” status during turbulent times. Williams International touts itself as an innovative visionary educational institute complete with resources such as the Creator’s Zone, notably the first of its kind in South Korea. As mentioned already, Williams International advises and consults with other institutions who wish to set up their own Creator’s Zone. Perhaps more important than reputation and cutting-edge resources, though, is Williams International’s willingness to consult local education policy makers, relying on their expertise and letting them play a vital role in administrative decisions. However, to best understand the impact of the political-economic transformation on pedagogy, these ideologies and innovations should be examined in a national setting. Thus, this section places Williams International’s Creator’s Zone into a broader matrix of pedagogical and political-economic initiatives in South Korea.

Emphasizing the need for innovation in the classroom and broader economic goals, Creator’s Zone inception in 2010 preceded the transformations in South Korean educational policy. To that end, the Creator’s Zone is part of an anticipatory economy of obsolescence, rendering imagination axiomatic to innovation. As I began to argue in the previous chapter exploring obsolescence, innovation is at times embraced as the main pathway to entrepreneurship, but at other times, the goal is not so clear cut. Instead, innovation is valued as the liquidity of the self, an ideology of fashioning oneself as a “free worker” (Feher 2009: 24) upon which innovation pivots. As I will discuss, creativity is considered the foundation of innovation. To continue building on my arguments in this chapter, I will explicitly explore how couching play in regimes of labour frames classroom policies and embeds it in logics similar to that of “everyday financialization” where the general population becomes highly attuned to the caprices of the market (Martin 2002). Financialization then becomes more than the increasing accessibility of finance capital to everyday citizens. It is now a future-oriented ethos that extracts labour from subjects by interpolating them to investment schemes where market literacy becomes an everyday necessity. Yet, as many scholars of finance are primarily occupied with subjects’ relationship to new investment tools, discussions regarding how play can fundamentally
innovate economic modalities of exchange fall to the wayside. I aim to bring attention to play by linking it with financialization more broadly and to creativity and innovation more specifically in order to show how creativity is a key element in the production of new value and orchestrating new systems of valuation.

Although largely overlooked, there is a need to examine play as a facet of financialization. As Bill Maurer (2005: 190) argues, “The very concept of innovation itself tracks rather closely the field of finance, which has consciously built itself on and propelled itself by innovation.” Innovation is the cornerstone to creating new value by tinkering and toying with pre-existing modes of production. It is the key element in the construction of algorithms, derivatives and extracting future value from natural resources such as water (Muehlebach forthcoming). Imaginaries of obsolescence crossed with the potentiality of new value production are the paradoxical formulations upon which systems of finance are built. These efforts to revolutionize the market are bound to reform the learning process, turning social fields into playgrounds that pupils will take apart and rebuild. Rather than understanding the Creator’s Zone as existing in a vacuum, I argue that the logics and ideologies pulsing through the practices cultivated in that creative space are reflections of broader political-economic trends. Moreover, where once regimes of labour might have considered play ephemerally “useless” and non-goal oriented, it is now harnessed for its potential and is highly revered as a source of innovation. In fact, with the promise of potential obsolescence looming, the experimental activities of play as a financialized praxis are future oriented and speculative.

As mentioned earlier, during South Korea’s “developmental drive” covering the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, the goal was to cultivate a manufacturing population, suitable for building an industrial economy. Social stratification, as an effect of educational difference, was considered to be a threat to the economic development of the nation. A completely different set of orientations towards futurity than what South Korea faces at the present moment. In 2013, during her inaugural address, President Park Geun-Hye stated:

A creative economy is defined by the convergence of science and technology with industry, the fusion of culture with industry, and the blossoming of creativity in the very borders that were once permeated by barriers. It is about going beyond the rudimentary expansion of existing markets and creating new markets and new jobs by building on the bedrock of convergence. At
the very heart of a creative economy lie science technology and the IT industry, areas that I have earmarked as key priorities.

What is unclear in her speech is the precise definition of creativity, how it comes to fruition, and how it may be captured for an endpoint. What is clear is that creativity is considered a generative elixir in producing new markets and jobs. In other words, as President Park Geun-Hye explicitly stated in her inaugural speech in 2013, “the blossoming of creativity in the very borders that were once permeated by barriers,” is a crucial component to emancipating latent forces that will transform markets.

Although ambiguity surrounds the success of these ends, they have one thing in common: a gaze towards future horizons where the “new” is highly fetishized. In financial domains proper, we may envision new investment instruments based on inventive schemes. These logics and ideologies permeate the tech industry, and while the idea for a new gadget may be based on precedents in “yesterday’s logic,” it ultimately hinges on characteristics identified as “new.” Ultimately, these are the aspirations and goals of the “1%,” to continuously reproduce themselves as upper-classed subjects though at the expense of workers who will ultimately continue to sell their labour power and who are not positioned to claim ownership over new patents. Arguably, the “99%” must also conform to the demands placed on them as labourers, which gives them less agency to undertake projects of endless self-fashioning in the same way that leads to valuation.

From politicians to public intellectual figures to organizations such as OECD (2014), the ideology of the “1%” pervades everyday logic and policy making as critiques of South Korean education call for pedagogies to be steered in directions conducive to nurturing innovation and pioneering new markets. In May 2017, Korea Times, a popular newspaper published the article titled “Korea lags behind in Fourth Industrial Revolution,” lamenting the fact that South Korea is ranked 29th in the Global Talent Competitiveness Index (GTCI). Included in the report are excerpts from the GTCI report, quoting management consultant and educator Peter Drucker who stated, “the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence — it is to act with

102 See http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2017/05/367_228761.html
yesterday’s logic,” with the addendum that countries “develop a new model of education.” He added that “fostering a sense of personal vocation and flexibility or learning agility” are regarded as highly desirable skills. The Korea Times also reported the part of the GTCI report that stated, “Much of our institutional structure, from educational and social security systems to employment laws, was designed for the industrial age. Organization, business, and work models have changed, and policies must adapt accordingly.”

The South Korean education system was immediately blamed for the GTCI Report results, which sparked concerns that it was not performing as “a well functioning and dynamic system” that promotes “the development of future growth sectors” (Dahlstrand and Cetindamar 2000: 203). In the same year however, the Bloomberg Innovation Index (2014) named South Korea as the most innovative country in the world. While this designation was celebrated by the South Korean media, the anxieties that the Korea Times article stirred up continued to fester. Though the domestic economy is reputed for its advancements in technology and creative contributions, politicians, policy makers and educators hotly debate whether South Korea is in fact prepared and positioned to maintain its status as a G-20 nation. Anchoring these discourses are efforts to advance the “4th Industrial Revolution” (Sach'a sanŏp'yŏngmyŏng). While the “4th Industrial Revolution” has become a popular catchphrase recently, it was introduced a few weeks after I completed my fieldwork and had already left Korea. In January 2016, at the World Economic Forum (Davos Meeting), in Geneva, Switzerland, the term was publicly coined by German engineer and economist Klaus Schwab. The internet, 3D printing, robotics, nanotechnology, blockchain, AI and biotechnology are considered the key pillars instantiating the “4th Industrial Revolution” that will profoundly disrupt every industry. Shortly after the World Economic Forum, politicians including newly elected President Moon Jae-In started to used Schwab’s term in everyday discourse. Educators latched on, seeing in this new catchphrase a roadmap to building a new economic future for Korea. This gave rise to new debates that questioned what kinds of subjects were needed to substantiate and support this coming regime.

It is unsurprising that the concept of the “4th Industrial Revolution” took immediate hold of South Korean political agendas and imaginaries. In many ways, it is a pithy summation of initiatives and ideas that the South Korean government has already been promoting. In fact, three years before this term was ever given voice, President Park Geun-Hye set up the Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning (MSIP) in February 2013. As stated in the OECD Reviews
of Innovation Policy: Industry and Technology Policies in Korea (2014: 41), the MSIP is a “super-ministry responsible for driving the creative economy forward through science and ICT.” The MSIP absorbed the former Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST), in addition to the Ministry of Knowledge Economy (MKE). The main objective of MSIP is to spearhead the ongoing construction of South Korea’s creative economy. As documented by the OECD Reviews of Innovation Policy: Industry and Technology Policies in Korea:

The Creative Economy Plan establishes a vision for “realizing a new era of happiness for the Korean people through a creative economy,” setting three goals, six strategies, and 24 tasks. The three goals are:

Create new jobs and markets through creativity and innovation.

Strengthen Korea’s global leadership through a creative economy.

Create a society where creativity is respected and manifested.

(2014: 35)

This 200-plus-page publication suggests numerous improvements Korea can make to enhance their “innovation policy” (2014: 18). From the outset, it is declared that Korea must have a high tolerance for failure (2014: 18). In South Korea, nationalist economic initiatives are again integrated into education, innovating and co-producing with students becoming once again the necessary “manpower” in a competitive market103 (Sung et. al 2012). However, in the post 2008 Global Financial Crisis context, economic motivations focus on subjects’ intellect, knowledge, skills and intrepid, innovative spirit. As Tomas Hellström (2004: 635), a scholar at the Copenhagen Business School, states that “[i]t seems that projecting and affecting are integral parts of an innovation/action nexus, where both concepts say something about innovation and

103 Sung et al. (2010:291) examines curriculums in global high schools in Korea. Global high schools were established in the late 1990s when upper-middle class parents and the business sector demanded it (Sung et al. 2010: 292). While the scope of their study is different from the one in this dissertation, there are some striking parallels. Notably, efforts to prepare students for an uncertain and shifting world. One major point of departure is the lack of education surrounding human rights issues and other topics that focus on constructing a classed morality (Sung et al. 2010: 293).
‘the new,’ in the sense that what is innovation in innovation is the effectuation or enactment of the particular something that is, or once was, not already achieved but that for some reason needs to be.” The architecture of the “4th industrial Revolution,” like Michael, indeed calls subjects to leap into the void of the unknown, experimenting with existing technologies to revitalize pre-existing sectors and make room for new ones to arise.

4.4 The design cycle: “Creative destruction” and the dialectics of failure

Middle Year Program (MYP) the Design Cycle

Figure 1: International Baccalaureate (IB) Curriculum
Pictured above is a diagram that the International Baccalaureate (IB) Curriculum administers in accredited schools around the world. The Foundation is headquartered in Geneva but has ministerial bodies assigned to different global regions. One international school in South Korea has posted MYP’s Design Cycle on their website (ibo.org):

The MYP uses the Design Cycle as a way to structure:

- inquiry and analysis of design problems
- development and creation of feasible solutions
- testing and evaluation of students’ models, prototypes, products or systems.

The Design Cycle is also a paradigm to help students understand the process of design from start to finish to constant improvement / evaluation / reflection.

During my discussion with Michael, he proudly showed me a copy of this diagram, stating that he uses it in his own lessons to help students develop a sense of curiosity, autonomy, find synergistic connections and take comfort in failure. He urged me to take a copy and include it as part of my data set. He also let me know that a fundamental principle of the “Creator’s Zone” is to have students ruminate on issues such as climate change while designing their projects. Effectively, Michael asks his students to think of themselves as human subjects, vulnerable to environmental factors- effectively flattening any differences premised in classed positionality-all while working through the Design Cycle.

The circular graphic allows students to meander back and forth between the various stages: inquiring and analysing, developing ideas, creating the solution, and evaluation. As I will argue in this section, The Design Cycle is a model that students can follow to become visionary entrepreneurs that have the wherewithal to innovate new markets. With no fixed beginning or end, students can play with this wheel of fortune, uncovering emergent synergies, toying with them to create new objects and modifying pre-existing ones. Most significantly, the Design Cycle acclimatizes students to being resilient, ultimately learning to accept failure, adjust to it, then find solutions in its wake. The multidirectional arrows where students are invited to self-determine the course of their project in whatever manner they see fit speaks to a desired entropy, but one that is ultimately contained within the circle.
While the Design Cycle is part of the International Baccalaureate Curriculum (IB), at the time of my fieldwork, Williams International had not yet earned official accreditation. Nevertheless, there were certain elements, including this one, that they readily incorporated as part of their “holistic” educational approach. As an internationally accredited program in South Korea’s first and failed free-economic zone, Williams International is a unique pilot project for more reasons than just its locality. Here, play, as embedded in the Design Cycle, is not mobilized and encouraged for its own sake. Rather, Michael consciously links his classroom initiatives to the world more broadly. Having students create new objects to foster creativity and self-directed learning in the Creator’s Zone is a privilege afforded to few. Yet, the juxtaposition between creation, destruction and failure here share an unusual relationship with Songdo’s changing and uncertain circumstances. For instance, Michael puts Songdo’s identity as a green, eco-friendly, technologically savvy city\(^{104}\) into practice, assigning projects that require students to consider their environment by designing solar-panelled egg-hatching alerts. Attuning his students to precarity through pressing issues such as climate change, the Design Cycle is pedagogically oriented towards seeking solutions through play.

During this same discussion, I asked Michael about his opinions on Songdo’s future, given how underpopulated it was. He remained optimistic that this would soon change with the establishment of the Green Climate Fund. Segueing from this into a discussion about how students understand their position not only within the city but the world at large, Michael explained that he teaches his students to be aware of how their local circumstances are tied to their experiences of becoming a responsible citizen in a broader global community.

Though Michael’s use of Design Cycle might seem out-of-place in “Korean education,” it is in fact a part of the IB curriculum that is implemented around the world. A simple Google search will showcase students who use the Design Cycle in a lesson that has student reconceptualizing major landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty, Christ the Redeemer, or the Burj Khalifa. Students are expected to “connect” to the Design Cycle by analysing existing structures and

\(^{104}\) In chapter 3, I discuss the City of Songdo in more detail. It is a city within Incheon Free Economic Zone (IFEZ)- South Korea’s first experimental free economic zone made from reclaimed land, a ten-year project backed by a multinational steel company and international real estate development company. It has been deemed largely an economic failure with devastating ecological impacts.
deciding what new materials to use when reconstructing one of these landmarks. In refining their projects, which may take the form of a toothpick model of one of these iconic structures, students are asked to analyse their model and innovate it by adjusting a building’s scales and reworking them with new materials. Thus, Design Cycle is a broader pedagogical program that socializes privileged students around the globe to harness their creativity and innovation to find solutions for the greater good.

In terms of determining and shaping economic modalities of exchange, innovation is paramount in building and expanding on new structures of finance. This is precisely how new value is created — a point that is central to both Marx (1976) and Schumpeter’s (2003) theorizations of capitalism. The possibility of producing something “new” through innovation is extolled as the path to creating markets, industries and sectors, albeit at the expense (quite literally) of old models. In one of Schumpeter’s (2003) most celebrated contributions, “creative destruction,” he vehemently argues that “perfect competition” as theorized by most economists is incorrect. According to Schumpeter (2003: 83) capitalism inherently thrives on “industrial mutation…that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.” Schumpeter (2003:83) goes on to insist that “this process of creative destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in.”

Much like play and its unpredictable, ethereal qualities, “financial innovation” according to Yale economist Robert Shiller (2012: 13), one of the staunchest advocates of financialization, requires human (not AI) cooperation. Subjects must be “aiming at a moving target,” and “leaders must understand that financial innovation is a messy and somewhat disruptive process.” In other words, in much the same way that pedagogies of play can be full of failures and inchoate social interactions that are not always pleasurable or profitable for those involved, so too can financial innovation. As pointed out by Harvard Graduate School of Education website in an entry titled, “Education for an Unknowable Future,” innovations in education require a certainty in one thing only: the uncertain (Shafer 2017). Grappling with uncertainty however at

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105 Firms, that otherwise should have adapted to new circumstances, go out of business because they are unable to “weather a particular storm” (Schumpeter 2003: 90).
a place like Williams International, or other privileged educational institutes, comes with classed parameters where students are positioned to assume elite status through processes of differentiation. In other words, the ideologies, aspirations, and practices here are oriented towards the production of the “1%.”

Socialized to not drop into a “victim” positionality, play is a means for adolescents to become the movers and shakers of a new world. As Leyshon and Thrift (2004: 99-101) rightly point out, the crux of innovation is to discover new income streams requiring often unorthodox approaches. Innovation as a form of “creative destruction” is the bedrock of public financing innovation strategically designed to “shape and create markets” (Mazzucato and Semieniuk 2017: 42). The uncertainty that is explicitly assumed as a constant variable in economic processes is also considered to be the absolute necessity in driving innovation. Thus, individual attitudes, judgements, and value systems are integrally woven into the ways in which we grapple with uncertainty (O’Sullivan 2006: 22). In innovation one sees the promise of incommensurable worlds flowing (O’Sullivan 2006: 22). There is something undeniably potent in seeing young students’ efforts to survive in an uncertain world by innovating and reconceptualizing pre-existing structures. Creating solar-panelled egg-hatching alerts shores up the age-old profession of agriculture in face of uncertainty and catastrophe in the current and coming age. While these inventions and innovations may seem like fancy, but ultimately run-of-the-mill science projects, the underlying agenda ushers in the very logics of financialization under late capitalism.

The Design Cycle in essence borrows the practices sustaining finance by using those practices to rework learning processes through regimes of play. However, echoing Schumpeter’s (2003) theorizations on “creative destruction,” the role of innovation in creating new value is assumed to be a product of failure itself. Despite Schumpeter’s (2003) theorizations, the Design Cycle should not be examined as a contained approach meant to attune students to failure and the joy of experimentation. As Michael mentions, the school’s goal to implement “experiential learning” means that educators are encouraged to push students into realms of the unknown where failure is embraced as part of the “Design Cycle” in an “inquiry-based curriculum.” Emphasizing the acquisition of skills rather than knowledge bounded by identified disciplines (Chapter 3), play then becomes a disciplinary goal of the educational regime.
4.5 Play as unalienated labour?

Michael encourages students to innovate new products that are sustainable and green that are at the same time solutions for other individuals who are also susceptible to volatile forces. As Bateson (1987:185-6) argues, “[t]hreat is another phenomenon which resembles play in that actions denote, but are different from, other actions. The clenched fist of threat is different from the punch, but it refers to a possible future (but at present non-existent) punch.” Michael’s pedagogical approaches attempt to redefine the threat of volatile markets into forms of play — a mechanism that if successful, acts as a prophylactic against the ensuing panic. Berardi (2009: 101) describes the panic as “the feeling we have when, faced with the infinity of nature, we feel overwhelmed, unable to receive in our consciousness the infinity of nature, stimulus that the world produces in us.” Here, play then becomes a means to erase the dystopic futures that Michael asks his students to ameliorate. Wedded to projects of human capital appreciation, where subjects are prompted to speculate on their own value in an unknown future, is to literally “see” activities that can eventually generate capital at a later date (Feher 2009).

Returning to one of the original questions grounded in this chapter, I ask what is the relationship of play to labour? As Marx (1976) famously argued, the exploitation of waged labourers destroys subjects’ capacity to be inherently creative beings. Prior to industrialization, Marx (1976) stated that human subjects created objects from conception to completion — a process that was meticulously dissected in the name of efficiency and cutting the costs of production under capitalism. No longer an artist of the world, building shelter, making clothing, and other objects necessary not only for their practical uses but also their aesthetic properties, the alienated worker was robbed of their connection to production. Workers’ labour became displaced from the self. The relationship between subjects and their labour became a hostile one. Alienation from one’s labour, however, leaves workers with time to understand the conditions of their exploitation.

Arlie Hochschild (1983) in her seminal work on emotion argues that the psychological, emotional, and affective gulf ignites a set of responses and orientations to the world that start subjects on a path to questioning the conditions of their labour. Taking Marx’s (1976) argument further and fusing it with Stanislavski’s conceptualizations on “deep acting,” Hochschild (1983) portrays the fusion of emotions evoked by labour resulting in the formation of selfhood. A
selfhood that belies the process of alienation, as subjects effectively lose the space to critique the conditions of their exploitation.\textsuperscript{106}

While neither Hochschild (1983) nor Marx (1976) discusses the role of play explicitly, their theorizations have a number of points worth drawing upon and further discussing. Students are encouraged to unleash, harness and focus on playful acts in ways that are conducive to learning, sustaining social relations, and innovating new solutions to unforeseen problems. Conscious actions to academically excel are fused with “irrational,” spontaneous ones (Huizinga 1949:4), contributing to academic domains creating new spaces of learning. To that end, aspirant 1% pupils are socialized to value play and prioritize it as a means of embracing the unknown and identifying with what otherwise might be considered solely as schoolwork. Indeed, the ways in which play becomes subsumed by pedagogical approaches at Williams International prompts students to orient themselves to the world and animate their labour in a very imaginative way.

To that end, Bateson’s (1987:189-198) theorizations outlining “the play frame” become obsolete. According to Bateson, “the play frame” allows subjects to determine the differences between play and not play. However, as discussed throughout this chapter, play and labour are no longer binaries just barely intertwined, but rather two elements that have melded into one. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett (1971:45) argue that “Play is an action generating action: a unified experience flowing from one moment to the next in contra-distinction to our otherwise disjointed ‘everyday’ experiences.” More specifically, they argue that subjects achieve “play consciousness” when participating in sporting events by wearing uniforms and engaging in pre- and post-game rituals to establish spatio-temporal limits. However, asking students to imagine new worlds of possibility and build them based upon their own imaginings takes “play consciousness” a step beyond just engaging in a “unified” playful experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971:45). It effectively asks students to find joy in their ability to

\textsuperscript{106} Berardi (2009: 45-6) in his discussion parsing through the differences between alienation and estrangement notes: “Only the estrangement from labor makes liberatory dynamics possible, shifting the flow of desire from (industrial) repetition towards (cognitive) difference. The concepts of estrangement implies an intentionality that is determined by an estranged behavior.” (emphasis in original)
create new objects and environments by shaping new aesthetics, technological innovations, and modalities of living.

The Creator’s Zone is a space that artfully manufactures a sense of conviviality and cultivates a warmth that invigorates a classroom setting. It is in this setting that Michael encourages his students to blur the boundaries between “work” and “play” by putting them into material practice. When unalienated labour cascades into play, it has the potential to obliterate the distinction between these two domains that were once considered irreconcilable under liberalism (see Thompson 1976). For instance, Huizinga (1938: 7-8) argues that the significance of play is that it is foremost voluntary, an activity that is only pleasurable so long as subjects have the freedom to choose. Notably, play is “based on the manipulation of certain images, on a certain ‘imagination’ of reality” (Huizinga 1938: 4). Thus, it becomes necessary to do an examination of what is lurking behind imaginary forces and their significance.

On the other side of conviviality and joy lies labour and its extremes. Although this chapter focuses primarily on the pedagogical approaches of Williams International and the high valuation of play, it is necessary to recognize that this is a Janus-faced coin. To analyse the role of play in the making of upper-classed “global citizens” during these anxious times, the ideologies, pedagogies, and practices observed at Williams International should also be understood within the broader scope of private education that I examine. Revisiting my initial interview with Ms. Ha, she reveals the underbelly of students’ lives, which casts a dark shadow on much of my ethnographic examinations of play. When Ms. Ha ruminated on what accumulation strategies might be most appropriate for students in their adult lives, she acknowledged that adolescents, “accuse us parents that we are making ‘slaves’ (nohoe) out of them. These dynamics between parents and students remarkably resonates with Frédéric Lordon’s (2010: 47) theories that neoliberal capitalism centre on the master-slave desire that coalesces around freedom from employment and “the fantasy of liquidity.” Liquidity referring to a hyper-flexible subject that is amenable to changes in the midst of market volatility.

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107 One exception is during rites and ceremonies where play is often tethered to fulfilling social duties (Huizinga 1938: 8).
Thus far in this dissertation, I have discussed the ability to transform oneself into a liquid asset in the face of looming obsolescence. The *habitus* of the “1%” here, to achieve unalienated labour, hinges on how parents and educators imagine the potency of what lies “within” an adolescent. These end goals of students achieving Silicon Valley entrepreneurial status — so desirable that Williams International has been conceived based on Google as a model — parallels Frédéric Lordon’s (2010:47) argument regarding the desire for total liquidity where labourers are infinitely hyperflexible. This is often flies in the face of adolescents who are resistant, claiming to be “slaves” in their production as “1%” subjects. Yet, they are ultimately assimilated into becoming complicit subjects through regimes of care — a topic that I will expand upon on Chapter 5. For the purposes specific to this chapter, I draw from Lordon’s (2010) formulation, which focuses on employer-employee relationships, delving into subjects’ willing subordination of their desires and labour to socialities of exploitation but they remain germane to my examination. His theorizations that these dynamics arise from the twinning of fear and love are pertinent in examinations of adolescents’ unwaged labour shaped by intergenerational pacts of reciprocity (Lordon 2010: 62, Peebles 2010). In the case of “master-slave” pacts between parents, teachers, and adolescents, their combined effort in human capital production is to cultivate the ascendant “1%.”

Fredéric Lordon’s (2014) work also provides insight into how desires are “co-linearised” and marshalled in the creation of unalienated labour to produce value. By becoming comfortable with discomfort and rolling work into playful acts, it becomes nearly impossible to distance oneself from regimes of exploitative labour. Play is valued for its expansiveness and the extent to which it can be an innovative driving force — precisely because it draws on various elements including feeling good emotionally, psychologically, and physically. As Lordon (2014: 79-80) notes, “[t]o subordinate the *entire* life and being of employees to the business, namely, to remake the dispositions, desires, and attitudes of enlistees so that they serve its ends, in short, to refashion their singularity so that all their personal inclinations tend ‘spontaneously’ in its direction, such is the delirious vision of a total possession of individuals, in an almost shamanistic sense.” Moreover, this subordination takes place under the totalitarianism of competitive markets, where “everything should be capable of adjusting itself instantaneously” (Lordon 2014: 44-45). The master-slave relationship coalesces in the face of unemployment and “the fantasy of liquidity” (Lordon 2014: 47). I would add that being able to turn this “fantasy”
into a reality is a key identifying marker of the “1%” and its aspirants. The affective structures here twine together fear and love (Lordon 2014: 62). Love for innovation and one’s ingenuity. Love for new enterprises. And love for one’s parents who unequivocally invest in their children’s potentiality. The fear of obsolescence plus the love of entrepreneurial endeavours are two elements in a formula that should ostensibly give solutions to problems that terrorize current modalities of life. Thus, the call for “holistic education” at Williams International is in many ways a call for a perfect integration of the pleasure of learning to play as a core pillar of the “1%” ideology.

4.6 The unalienated body

During one of my visits to the Williams International campus, Claire, the Director of High School Curriculum, encouraged me to make an impromptu visit to Mable’s Kinetic Classroom — a space designed to improve students’ thinking and cognitive flexibility through optimizing a body in motion. Taking Claire’s advice, I dropped by Mable’s classroom, who proved to be cheerful and gracious. I stood quietly to the side in the room. I realized there was a constant buzz. Some kids were playing board games, such as Monopoly, Sorry, and Uno, a biweekly award for finishing their projects. This particular facet of classroom life, in contrast to the vignette that opens this chapter, utilizes play as a reward. This social matrix adheres to Bateson’s (1987:190) “play frame” in that it is considered “as play” precisely because it is detached from other everyday activities.\textsuperscript{108}

Though Gregory Bateson (1987:188) puts forth the “play frame,” he also argues that the boundaries between play and nonplay can be quite easily blurred. More complex forms of play may lead subjects to question whether a certain set of actions is considered play or not.\textsuperscript{109} As Mable and I stand removed from her students, we discuss the merits of kinetic learning and

\textsuperscript{108} In contrast, dreaming is an activity where the subject is unconscious and unable to actively shape the order of events. To remain cognizant that one is engaging in activities that are “play” also usually means that subjects must be constantly reminded of what they are doing.

\textsuperscript{109} According to Bateson (1987: 188), these questionable forms of play are usually rituals, such as hazing. When play is deliberately fused with labor processes however, the effects are not ritualistic but rather blur the boundaries between activities that previously may have been considered temporally bounded (Thompson 1967) duties and obligations.
fostering a “freer” learning environment. She points out the various pieces of equipment, deliberately placed throughout the classroom: yoga balls, fidget bands, core balance disks, standing desks and couches. Mable consciously included these items to help students remain active in otherwise sedentary circumstances at a desk or in front of a computer all day. Mable tells me that sometimes her students do jumping-jacks, push-ups, or word scrambles. Though the last activity is also sedentary, she encourages her students to have an active relationship with text as students need to work with cut-outs and rearrange text instead of just looking at it.

Similar to my reactions when visiting the Creator’s Zone, I am struck by the innocuousness of it all but wonder how beneficial these pedagogical approaches will be to the South Korean political-economy — one bereft of natural resources and where there is a default premium on human capital. While this is a more generalized diagnosis of a problem that many South Koreans will openly discuss, the commitment to unalienated labour is unique to the aspirant “1%” that I outline in my dissertation. Referencing the vignette at the beginning of Chapter 2 once again, remember that Williams International models itself after Google. Not only is this company a place where the median income is $160,000 U.S. per year. It is also a place where employees enjoy extra benefits such as free transport, food, cooking classes, workout classes, and massages. Encouraged to have a “work-life” balance, innovators in the tech industry in fact thrive off their own unalienated labour, which is contingent on others’ alienated labour.

It is for these reasons that I find myself uneasy at the thought that the valorisation of play insidiously warps the concept of labour by fusing intellectual explorations to the cult of productivity. All while casually dressed in street apparel. That said, there were other aspects of Mable’s Kinetic Classroom where general labour was more clearly drawn out. The forms of play present in her classroom were closely monitored. Partially because this experiment was a key component of Mable’s master’s thesis, but also because play is preconceived as an antithetical element for what is pejoratively referred to as “Korean education.”

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Using the perceived failures of “Korean education” as a launching point, educational professionals attempt to reinject aspects of play and leisure into the daily routines of learning in a controlled environment. Play is aligned with the principal purpose of keeping students moderately active, engaged, and alert as they labour and toil through their long days. While Berardi (2009:38) argues that the fusion of labour to all dimensions of existence evacuates life of all its pleasures, the pedagogies put into effect in Mable’s classroom suggest otherwise. According to Berardi (2009: 78), the incorporation of play creates a dynamic where “desire is focused, the object of an investment that is not only economical but also psychological.” But to analyse the premium that instructors place on the value of play, it is also necessary to consider how pedagogical practices are artfully shaped to induce feelings of pleasure in a climate where students are grossly overworked and depleted of energy.

In Korea, many students commute to their specialized schools for one hour in the morning and again in the evening. They spend their days at a desk or in front of a computer during class. Afterwards, they go to a private academy where again, they spend hours sitting in a chair. Mable explained that she invented the Kinetic Classroom specifically because it was not normal for Korean students to go outside and play after school like children do in America. As we watched her classroom together, I observed students becoming invested in their permitted forms of recreational activities. They seem happy and engaged, quietly completing their work or playing card games at a standing desk. Mable narrated these activities, stating that play enables them to concentrate and reinvigorate their tired minds and bodies. It is fundamentally woven into students’ labour as the aspirant “1%.”

The sanctity of one’s corporeal existence in this pedagogical approach is considered crucially important in an environment where students become downtrodden and weary from the extreme conditions of their labour. Without maintaining one’s body, one’s intellectual aptitude cannot be met and further cultivated. Play here is a form of insurance, protecting the body from fully breaking down. Play protects and nurtures adolescents as value-in-potentia. In turn, a playful disposition becomes the habitus of the “1%.” The reproduction of labour power is then coded into the very environment and activities of the classroom. The feelings of estrangement and alienation that Marx (1976) so famously theorized, where subjects experience a sense of loss upon which they may critique circumstances surrounding their exploitation, are erased altogether. There is an expectation that others, most likely outside of Korea, will undertake the
alienated labour of piecing together the parts of a cell phone or laptop while hunched over in a factory assembly line. In contrast, for my interlocutors, to sustain one’s body is to sustain one’s intellectual capacity, potential and appreciable value.

4.7 Conclusion

This desire (need maybe?) to innovate existing institutions and the associated practices is present in both pedagogical and financial hegemonies. While this chapter focuses on two pioneering classrooms at Williams International, it is worth noting that these educational approaches are being put into practice at other elite institutions. In fact, Harvard Graduate School of Education launched a project called “Project Zero.” In advocating for play, they have published “Pedagogy of Play: Cultivating school cultures that value and support learning through play,” which is central to their initiatives (Baker et al. 2016). Available on their website are working research statements such as “Playful Participatory Research: An emerging methodology for developing a pedagogy of play” (Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education website). In a paper authored by Mardell et al. (2016:3), the following is explicitly stated, “Play involves envisioning the future and imagining possibilities.” Again, we see an endorsement of play as an activity that can spawn innovation. These beliefs should not be dismissed in a context where my interlocutors see the current climate marked by global economic volatility, environmental collapse, and the obsolescence of their own human labour as the aspirant “1%.” Perhaps though, what is most salient is that the valorisation of play is also promoted by an educational institution that is globally recognized as “being the best”: Harvard University. Moreover the fact that, as a principle, play has gained traction in spheres of education around the globe showcases more broadly that such institutional reforms are occurring beyond South Korea.

Amendments to education are not the only changes being simultaneously implemented around the world. Many countries — not just South Korea — are dealing with ever-changing fluctuations in currency, stocks, real estate prices, labour market trends, and commodities that populations have come to be utterly dependent on, such as oil. South Korea — now one of the world’s largest economies — exists within a political-economic network that is deeply intertwined in import-export and stock market relationships. As the 1997 IMF Crisis revealed, South Korea was already embedded within these networks to the extent that the sudden collapse
of the Thai bhat wreaked havoc on individuals’ lives as corporate conglomerates (*chaebol*) were dismantled and labour unions lost significant power. To put it bluntly, these events evidence the extent to which any economy is vulnerable. Since this dissertation primarily focuses on South Korea, the processes of re-imaging the economy examined here are specific to the region and the history of a country with “education fever.” Thus, the growth of the private international school sector should be understood as a uniquely historicized account of market formation in a nation that only fifty years ago was still receiving development aid.

Yet, my digression here is to point out that many of the same problems that South Korea has — shared by its upper-class members — are the same ones (or at least interdependent to) that many countries face today. Indeed, one of my goals is to show how new strategies of classed reproduction are motivated by “the fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 1989) that are specific to South Korea’s recent political-economic history. Referencing the South Korean Ministry of Education’s 7th Curriculum, introduced in 1997, where “well-roundedness,” “creativity,” the “creation of new value” are extolled and words such as “pioneer” are used, fully discloses the state’s intention. These catchwords are still being used over twenty years later and have filtered down from the state to the everyday person. In the case of my South Korean interlocutors, they pertain to their own anxieties over class reproduction. At the same time, they are the same anxieties experienced by the international school teachers and administrative personnel I interviewed, and they come from all over the world.

The processes that I outline in this chapter specifically and this dissertation in general also track the aspirations of constructing the next generation’s global elite class. My interrogations simultaneously speak to the broader, more pressing issues of contemporary global capitalism as much as they do to the affluent South Korean adolescents who are socialized and positioned to partake in the high-stakes practices of private education. These pedagogical approaches, which are just as highly revered at Harvard University as Williams International, highlight the extent to which knowledge mobilities are constructed and circulated by individuals around the globe (Collins and Ho 2014, 2018). Since South Korea’s international school landscape, including after-school private academies such as IHE Prep, is comprised of many foreigners, in addition to families who have spent significant amounts of time abroad, “Western” and/or “global” education curriculums are established by individuals who bring with them their own experiences, ideals, and goals. This has been made possible through the South Korean Ministry
of Education’s stated commitment to establishing models that will prepare students to become “global citizens.”

The emphasis on pleasure through play then becomes a coping mechanism for preserving the psychological sanctity of commodities in the making, amongst the “1%.” The same Harvard School of Graduate Studies of Education website also posted the paper titled “Towards a Pedagogy of Play,” which extols play for being a “pleasurable, spontaneous, non-goal-directed activity that can include anticipation, flow, and surprise (Mardell et al. 2016:3),” views similar to Huizinga’s (1935). The element of surprise staged through play is far more appealing than being unprepared for an economic crisis and drowning in its wake. After all, being unable to sufficiently “rise above” and meet any challenge with a sense of bravado will only lead to disaster and away from becoming a member of the “1%.” As part of an anticipatory economy, play like finance thrives on “the obsession with innovation,” which “can also be seen as something which will potentially lead to another burst of speculation, the same kind of speculation that was largely responsible for the recent financial crisis” (Dallyn 2011: 290). It is important then to ask, what are the negative repercussions of preparing adolescents to become unalienated labour, which is fundamentally deeply alienating? Returning to Lordon (2014: 78-80) again, he argues, “Subordinates are expected not only, according to the common formula, to ‘fully invest themselves,’ but also to be fully invested — invaded — by the enterprise. Even more than the excesses of quantitative appropriation, it is the extreme nature of the hold claimed over individuals that is the hallmark of the neoliberal enterprise’s pursuit of total enlistment.”

While play holds the potential to bring subjects into a both transgressive and transcendental state, elevating the mundanities and terrors of everyday life, it is also firmly rooted in adolescents’ unwaged labour. Owing to their status as dependents within intergenerational pacts, animated by large investments of capital and love, in addition to cultivating a practice of play to serve their entrepreneurial spirit, adolescents become subordinated to regimes of value production under capitalism’s volatility.
Chapter 5
Venture Philanthropy: Regimes of Care as the Derivative Gamble

5  Introduction: Francis, the Venture Philanthropist

In between my normally scheduled classes, I would leisurely stroll around the lobby at IHE Prep. Walking past the glass-walled main office one afternoon, I saw Francis (Korean name Joon Won, which he used interchangeably depending mostly on the speaker) and Paul together. Francis, an attendee at the Global Christian International School, was a student I taught only when he had an emergency or when something unexpected came up. When Paul saw me, he invited me in to partake in their discussion. Picking up the conversation again, Paul continued to tell Francis about an impoverished neighbourhood in northern Seoul named tchokpangch’on, an area populated primarily by senior citizens. Pointing to his desk, Paul used this visual to emphasize that these seniors live in a space roughly equivalent. Paul explained that the tiny rooms are a product of dividing spaces into multiple smaller ones, and this is how the area got its name, which approximately translates to “divided room village.” He encouraged Francis to imagine what their lives must be like — crammed into dilapidated structures, too poor to afford anything better, even much needed drugs. Seeing Francis’ blank stare, I wondered what was running through his mind. He lived in one of South Korea’s most famously expensive apartment complexes. By allowing Francis a moment to absorb this information, Paul then suggested that the young man start a new school club that he would also lead. The objective would be to distribute much needed pharmaceuticals to the elderly poor in this neighbourhood. At the close of his pitch to Francis, Paul instructed me to help draft the club proposal.

Initially, I was taken aback by the topic of conversation. It was not what I expected to hear, considering Paul was battling Stage 4 pancreatic cancer that had metastasized in his liver. By now, he had completed several rounds of chemotherapy. Yet, day after day, he arrived at IHE Prep ready to fulfil his duties as a teacher, consultant, mentor, parental figure, and investor in his students. Even during the moments where he seemed the weakest, Paul was indomitable, including this moment. Paul’s club proposal also caught me off guard: an affluent high school student bypassing the state to supply medical relief to the elderly poor. Through this charitable act, Francis would elevate his status to an entrepreneurial visionary and demonstrate the goodness of his heart. Initially, I found this entire scheme to be outlandish and saw these
measures not as a way to eradicate or alleviate social inequality but rather to highlight and exacerbate it.

In actuality, however, Paul’s idea was not outlandish at all. In fact, the project was designed to showcase the core values of “care” and “compassion” that were consistently re-occurring themes in nearly all international schools. Support for these core values is actually boldly stated in one international school’s mission statement: “Graduates are truth-seeking leaders who are creative, collaborative, compassionate, and committed to impacting the world with servants’ hearts.” Another states, “Students develop the joy of learning, self-confidence, well-being, and curiosity through interactive and practical experiences. Our schools share the core values of respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and compassion. Through active participation in an intentionally diverse and inclusive environment, students make a positive impact within and beyond their own communities. By living and learning in a student-centred, collaborative atmosphere of excellence, integrity and trust, we come to expect the best of ourselves and others.”

Paul’s school club proposal was an exercise that fell in line particularly well with the ideals of the school Francis attended. The purpose of these projects is to morally position adolescents to inject love — care — into a cold, ruthless market economy that most likely will not love them back. This charitable disposition however is borne from within the matrices of care that adolescents are assimilated into. Paul was not the only educator encouraging adolescents to viscerally “experience poverty,” to cultivate a compassionate heart. This proposal to distribute pharmaceutical drugs to the elderly goes well beyond the intent of any school’s mission statement and actually echoes the mission statement of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: “We work with partners to provide effective vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics and to develop innovative approaches to deliver health services to those who need it most. And we invest heavily in developing new vaccines to prevent infectious diseases that impose the greatest burden” (Gates Foundation Website). So while the pedagogies of play central to international schools in South Korea and around the globe encourage creative and divergent thinking in the making of the aspirant “1%,” this chapter aims to show how philanthropy and charity are

111 I thank Damien Sojoyner for this insight.
necessary to creating a well-rounded entrepreneurial subject. Endeavouring to design a balanced curriculum that will produce the perfect subject, the educational philanthropy central to South Korean international schools is remarkably similar to the mission statements of some of the wealthiest philanthropic organizations in the world. However, despite the cloistered learning atmosphere of international schools, South Korean children attending these schools are still shaped by historically situated, local practices that have long-existed in South Korea and affected by outside global economic forces just like everyone else. Shaped though they are by influences both domestic and foreign, from within the broader parameters of this dissertation, I argue that the production of the future “1%” hinges on the values of the American tech industry that reaches beyond the education of the mind and how “smart” an individual can be and demands the cultivation of a generous heart. As I will show throughout this chapter, these multi-layered, multi-dimensional structures of care are knit from the following sets of reciprocal relations: a) parents and children in South Korea b) teachers and students with varying backgrounds and citizenship who work in South Korea c) UNESCO’s Global Citizenship Education Curriculum (UNESCO 2014).

Why are international schools and philanthropists preoccupied with enacting private charitable acts of care? Why style oneself in a manner that remarkably resembles Bill Gates and his foundation? Why does this seem to be a core value of the “1%” — not only in South Korea but globally?112 At the time of my fieldwork in South Korea, there was a prevailing belief that the public domain was cold, harsh and uncaring. President Park Geun-Hye’s negligence and stonewalling of families who lost loved ones in the Sewol Ferry disaster is a prime example of the cold indifference people had come to expect. On April 16, 2014, the Sewol Ferry sank, ending the lives of 304 passengers. The overwhelming majority of victims were high school students on a school trip to Jeju Island.113 The victims’ family’s demands for a thorough government investigation and the improvement of safety standards were largely ignored. While this is just one incident, the apathetic reaction to being ignored exemplified the despondency,

112 Also see Rachel Sherman’s (2017) book “Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence” for a discussion on New York’s “1%” and their charitable activities.

113 For a more in-depth analysis on the relationship between deregulation and the Sewol Ferry tragedy, refer to Yoonkyung Lee’s (2017) piece titled “The Sewol Disaster: Predictable Consequences of Neoliberal Deregulation.”
disconnect and depression that many South Koreans felt in everyday life. The world seemed cruel, cold, and lonely. *Anomie* is the succinct and powerful word that Emily — my interlocutor, former editor at IEP Academy, and Paul’s long-time colleague — used to describe her relationship to the state.

I will frame my argument on the fact that the political climate in South Korea is such that international schools must include educational philanthropy. Whether it is the rejection of common South Koreans’ opinions and concerns by the state or the rejection of state institutions such as education by wealthy South Koreans, in the end the state’s neoliberal policies are alienating one and all. In the latter case, this population’s investment strategies continuously whittle away the state’s power whilst simultaneously positioning themselves to pick up the slack and take on acts of entrepreneurial, venture philanthropy. This term was initially coined by John D. Rockefeller in 1969 but has grown in popularity in recent years. As Bryan and Vavrus (2005: 185) argue:

> A common thread running throughout the contemporary international development literature is the notion that education, by definition, leads to the transcendence of social inequality and the elimination or reduction of human conflict and suffering. While not denying that education has the potential to produce such positive results, we suggest the need to problematize the education as panacea perspective at the heart of the contemporary international development literature. We argue that the enduring faith in education as the primary, if not the sole means to transform the human, social, political and economic relations that impede development and compromise human security may deflect much needed attention from the reality that education can also be instrumental in fostering and furthering ongoing political and ideological conflicts in various regions of the world.

As the investees, adolescents’ perceptions of the investments can fluctuate drastically. My interviewees admitted to at times feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of care from their parents and teachers. The despairing cries of “I am wasting my parents’ money!” that I heard repeatedly from 2008-2014 in response to learning their SAT mock exam scores are a testament to the pressure they were under to meet their parents’ expectations. In an effort to momentarily escape the intense supervision of their studies, students would slip away to a “PC-bang” or an
Internet Café during their lunch breaks at IHE Prep, knowing it was against the rules. However, if they were caught in these places playing video games, their dejected demeanours at being discovered expressed more eloquently than words their need for a reprieve. At other times, they saw this overwhelming care as indispensable to securing the elusive “1%” status and in fact lobbied for additional attention. In this chapter, I seek to answer one question above all other questions: In what ways do these tensions serve the aspirational “1%” in South Korea in constituting new forms of human capital? Or, in other words, how do pressures from parents and educators — as performances of care — become part and parcel of constructing global regimes of care?

Addressing this question requires sifting through multiple layers and navigating the multi-scalar, polyvalent exchanges, performances, and valuations of care. Although investments are directed at adolescents, care however is fundamentally reciprocal in numerous ways. As stated earlier, adolescents are expected to appreciate, as any other asset would, that they are being prepared to achieve the “1%” classed status. As students, they are expected to meet very high expectations. One could even add that they are also expected to ease the adults’ burden of driving them to become human capital by sharing the burden good-naturedly and with charm. Certainly, at the core of their development as worthy human capital is the requirement to cultivate a good, strong heart brimming with compassion and concern for others.

5.1 The gift at the centre of financialization: Venture philanthropy

As shown in the example of Francis and his club proposal, these acts of care can at times be deeply one-directional. Even if Francis was able to circumvent the legalities regulating the distribution of pharmaceuticals, in what way could the elderly poor repay his kindness? In this sense, these charitable acts are what Mary Douglas (1990: xiv) refers to as “gifts that wound.” As Douglas (1990: xiv) argues, “The gift cycle echoes Adam Smith’s invisible hand: gift complements market in so far as it operates where the latter is absent. Like the market it supplies each individual with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchanges. Gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible than the market.” Yet, as I will argue, these charitable acts are hardly for naught.
Instead, they are what Arjun Appadurai (2011) calls a “derivative gamble” or “a gamble on a gamble” that may or may not materialize as a desirable return-on-investment. If nothing else, adolescents will benefit from fashioning themselves as venture philanthropists with the proclivities of visionary entrepreneurs — someone with a good heart and good business sensibilities. One of the core pillars of Appadurai’s (2011) argument is that Knightian uncertainty — not risk — is the most important element driving financial investments. Presenting oneself as a solid investment that will appreciate over time requires subjects to be “citizen-speculators” (Allon 2010), expecting that debts today have the potential to become assets in the future. I argue that the cultivation of a good heart and the capacity to care are central to these types of investments in human relations.

Paul’s plan to make Francis a maverick humanitarian by investing in human relations is also a template for producing future “venture philanthropists.” According to Investopedia’s website, “Venture philanthropy applies most of the same principles of venture capital funding to invest in start-up, growth or risk-taking social ventures. It is not explicitly interested in profit but rather in making investments which promote some sort of social good. Venture philanthropy ventures generally focuses on building capital and scale.”

Growing “some sort of social good” that places a premium on strengthening human relations supersedes investing for the sake of appreciating the value of moneyed capital. Akin to the ways in which parents invest in their children, the aim of venture philanthropists is to invest in humans in order to “build capital and scale.” A prime example of an institute investing in humans is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where Warren Buffet is also a foundation trustee.

Venture philanthropy is also a key tenet of financialization and the foundation for the formation of socialities. As Randy Martin (2002) argues in “The Financialization of Daily Life,” subjects must be financially literate and self-responsible. In the case of my dissertation, financial literacy

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114 As further explained on Investopedia’s website: “Oftentimes major donors will sit on the boards of organizations they support, and they generally have intimate involvement in operational or managerial aspects of the business. They will also provide non-financial support, like offering executive advice, marketing the initiatives using their own platforms and measuring performance. Strategically, most of these practices are drawn from successful venture capital initiatives but judge the efficacy of the organization on standards like overall social impact which depart from usual standards of a successful venture capital investment.” See https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/venture-philanthropy.asp.
extends to learning to “invest” through compassion and care. For parents, the literacy skills are necessary for making educational choices and draw on “information know-how.” These decisions are then adjudicated according to global financial trends, which are ultimately viewed as somewhat unpredictable at best. For adolescents, learning to become a venture philanthropist is a twist on the received forms of care from adults. As Francis’ school club proposal showcases, he is expected to expend his time, energy, ingenuity, and compassion to give back to society in general and not only to the adults he owes a debt. He is also expected to be expansive in performing acts of care and charity for those in need who likely will never have the same privileges as those in his peer group. Investment in certain individuals or populations has no guarantee that the social-economic value will be realized in the future. Yet, venture philanthropy is considered to be an act of guesswork because of the unknown possibilities that may materialize in the future for both the givers and receivers of good will. These are just a few ways that adolescents are socialized to become the ascendant “1%” without explicit recognition of attached monetary conditions. Instead, venture philanthropy qualifies that matters of the heart and the enriching of social relations should be the foremost trait that the “1%” possess. These configurations meet at what Martin (2002: 97) identifies as the crux of financialization, which he posits “is not the triumph of cold calculating reason, but an affair of the heart.” Similar to financialized subjects, the heart is tethered to the market’s ebbs and flows.

To elaborate, as Catherine Zaloom (2009: 263) observes, “Investors’, traders,’ and planners’ daily examinations and deals entwine a vision of the future with the reflexive character of the market: how the future looks depends on the collective inscription of bond prices, an assessment of risk and possibility that feeds into further judgments to buy and sell.” Acts of charity adopt these same practices. As shown in the opening vignette and discussed more generally throughout this dissertation, adolescents are taught to be aware of their own worth as privileged individuals. In so doing, they learn to understand their place in a globalized world, wrought from social inequality. For example, Jae Hyun’s community service included teaching English

115 While the end goal is to “beat the market,” subjects’ relationship to them is based on the “virtue of well-made decisions” and in fact- outperforming financial experts (Martin 2002: 78). In effect, proficiently investing is “a measure of one’s own goodness, honesty, and efficiency” (Martin 2002: 79). As I will demonstrate here, my interlocutors are not investing in the market proper, but rather hedging their bets on one another through acts of care- as an unbounded set of social actions that continue to generate a series of exchanges.
to lower-classed Korean students. Karen, who was a talented artist, would spend time instructing students at another community service centre during art therapy sessions. In Chapter 3, Williams International students fondly reminisced about painting senior citizens’ nails. The organizer of Williams International’s Service-Learning program, Susan, handed me a poster that was designed for students. Listed as “Service-Learning Program Heroes” are Social Workers, Parent Chaperones, Student Volunteers, and Faculty Supervisors. “At the bottom of the poster is a quote from Samantha, the Head Master who prior to coming to Williams International worked in Silicon Valley. “Merging the Core Values and the IB Learner Profile makes for students who are highly capable and thoughtful about how actions and decisions have broader impact on their community and the world.”

In short, the production of compassion and care is woven into broader speculative practices where students must assess an individual or population’s situation and adjudicate how their actions might affect others. The emphasis on reflecting on how non-monetary based exchanges produce profound affects in an uncertain future teaches students to take risks and exercise patience as they await the outcomes. Adolescents’ lives are to be understood at the nexus of historical, political-economic, and social forces within a global market producing inequalities.

Through the projects assigned to them, adolescents are essentially asked to envision a more habitable future for recipients of charity. Distributing pharmaceutical drugs, for instance, requires students to assess supply and demand chains, looking for loopholes and opportunities to fill the gaps. Focusing on improving the lives of those in need is a speculative enterprise, and it is not clear if there will be reciprocal returns on investment in the future. Take, for example, the passage that appears on the same poster for students that Susan showed me: “Creativity, Activity and Service Program (CAS) encourages students to share their time, effort, and talents with the bigger community while equipping students with real life skills that can only be gained through life outside of the classroom. The students work with various agencies in the wider Incheon community, and build reciprocal and long-lasting relationships with the people of the

116 The objectives for elementary school students: “Inquiry-based Program guide students to take responsible action as a result of the learning process. This is achieved through discussion and inquiry of related topics and ideas. The students get to reflect on their service related to their goals.”
community.” It is unclear what kinds of returns are envisioned here and who students should be building “reciprocal and long-lasting relationships with.” However, since pupils are positioned to perform outreach with other community organizers, one might presume that what is being imagined is the building of partnerships with other leaders and the possible return from the enduring ties with these individuals.

Venture philanthropy, as an iteration of financialization, magnetizes adolescents’ attachments to investments and their place within markets. Instead of managing portfolios and obsessively watching stock market oscillations, international school attendees set their sights on those less fortunate in various parts of the world as worthy sites of investment.

As far as my fieldwork revealed, parents’ initial preoccupations did not include concerns about raising a child who would head the future equivalent of the Gates Foundation. In fact, their concerns coalesced around the viability of their child’s future as a white-collared worker who could reproduce the familial “1%” status. This was perhaps most succinctly demonstrated in the introduction chapter’s opening vignette when Ms. Ha listed suitable professions such as becoming a doctor, lawyer, or engineer and not visionary entrepreneur heading a major charity as desired paths. As the interaction between Francis and Paul at the beginning of this chapter shows, venture philanthropy is a product of international school curriculums that are already thick with reciprocity.

Nevertheless, “care” and “compassion” are ubiquitously the core principles for international schools. At the time of my fieldwork, this was consistent across the board, whether a school was officially Christian or not. And it is worth pointing out that many attendees at Christian international schools were not officially a member of any religious denomination. As a secular institution, Williams International’s core values are “honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion.” Whereas the Global Christian School’s mission statement is “Centered on Christ, inspires a passion for learning, pursues academic and creative excellence and is dedicated to the service of others.” Another Christian school’s motto is, “Raising global Christian leaders through Christ-centered education,” coupled with a Biblical verse from Ephesians 5:8-9, which reads, “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, for fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.” The Global School of Korea, a secular institution, made declarations that echoed Williams
International and promoted the following core values: Global citizenship, integrity, adaptability, balance in life, and empowerment.

Whether secular or Christian, the emphasis on “care” and “compassion” are considered to be the binding element in solidifying students’ creativity, innovation, playful attitudes, and intellect. The various schools’ core values listed above echo many of those also included in UNESCO’s Global Citizenship Education curriculum (2014), a benchmark for international schools. As stated on their website, “GCED is a strategic area of UNESCO’s Education Sector program and builds on the work of Peace and Human Rights Education. It aims to instil in learners the values, attitudes and behaviours that support responsible global citizenship: creativity, innovation, and commitment to peace, human rights and sustainable development.” This emphasis on stewardship brings up another tenet of UNESCO’s program, which stresses the importance of nurturing “socio-emotional” dimensions or “values, attitudes and social skills that enable learners to develop affectively, psychosocially, and physically and to enable them to live together with others respectfully and peacefully.”

In Chapter 3, I discussed the UNESCO Global Citizenship Education Curriculum (UNESCO 2014) information seminar that Williams International holds for teachers at other institutions who hope to implement similar programs. During this seminar, Dr. Kim boasted about one of Williams International’s own programs that is designed to produce compassionate subjects. This next example is nothing short of stunning. Dr. Kim informed attendees that Williams International has a one-day event where students walk around the school shoeless, carrying buckets of water on their head. The purpose was to teach students what it might feel like to be a “poor African child.” This event was called, “One Day Without Shoes.” Given that the international schools I visited closely guarded their curriculum, I was only invited to classrooms and events that were cherry-picked, which provided pockets of profound ethnographic insights. However, “One Day Without Shoes” was an event that was openly discussed and not only brought up in the information session with Dr. Kim but also in my discussions with Travis. Both spoke very proudly about having their students exit their everyday corporeal experience to imagine life as “the Other.”

In order for these adolescents to place themselves bodily at the centre of regimes of care aimed at humanitarian endeavours, it required a certain commitment to envision life completely
foreign to their privileged comfort zone. While “traders’ deals embodied their assessments of risk along the curve,” these exercises prepare adolescents’ bodies and minds to sharpen their investing sensibilities (Zaloom 2009). Thus, while these corporeal practices are designed to produce empathy and cultivate a compassionate heart, they fundamentally drive home the point that my interlocutors are positioned at the top of social hierarchies. It is from this awareness of social hierarchies that adolescents are socialized to invest in “impoverished others.”

Similarly, Leyshon and Thrift (2007: 373) argue that “[f]inancialization is not just related to a set of activities that are tied to global capital markets; it is also fundamentally an ontological question of what it means to be human, and can be seen as mode of subjectification and a ‘technology of the self’” (Foucault 1988). Cultivating regimes of care that centred on individual student experiences was common enough throughout the international schools that I visited. However, this was nowhere more clearly expressed than in my conversations with Jerry, a senior administrator at Global School, a Christian international school in the Seoul area.

Jerry is wholesome and kind, a prime candidate to uphold and reproduce these values. Originally from the Midwest, Jerry had moved to South Korea to pursue his educational career and prepare students to embark on their sojourn around the globe. At the time of this interview, his three daughters were attending Global School and his wife was working there as a teacher. Throughout our interactions, he was warm and cordial, enthusiastically discussing why Global School is such an enriching environment for its student body. Continuing our conversation, we stood across from one another at a tall table and discussed the annual open house that I had been invited to attend in my capacity as a researcher earlier that morning. Alongside a group of eager parents who were deciding on the best international school for their children, I took a campus tour and listened to a wide variety of presentations from various administrative personnel, boasting about their credentials, college admissions acceptance rates, and the fact that the vast majority of their faculty held graduate degrees.

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117 As Greta Krippner (2005: 176) argues, “financialization not only offers an apt characterization of the world in which we live, but a productive one, clarifying key issues in current areas of debate in the social sciences.”
Aside from the expected marketing points related to academic enrichment proper, I noticed that Global School’s programs focused on charitable activities and compassion that were highlighted throughout the presentation. For instance, George, the principal, at one point stood before the crowd to proudly state their Global School “makes quite a bit of money” that is then used to purchase medication for North Koreans infected with tuberculosis. He emphasized that the school sent the actual drugs — not money. This initiative is part of a student fundraising program designed to push students to think not only of themselves, but realize they are part of a bigger world. Much like other local international schools, Global School also participates in the Habitat for Humanity program, sending students to impoverished, far-away locations to build houses and mingle with the locals.

In light of what I had heard at the open house, I asked Jerry to tell me more about the significance of performing acts of service as a core tenet of Global School’s philosophy. Jerry launched into a passionate soliloquy. As an example of an act of service, he told me about an upcoming school event that asked the students who had signed up to fast from Friday to Monday. One of his daughters had decided to participate and Jerry was highly supportive of her decision. In Jerry’s opinion, there are limits to performing acts of service that collect and then donate money. He believes students will only fully understand the true purpose in acts of service once they become fully involved and invested physically, psychologically, affectively, and emotionally. Jerry’s framing echoes Bill Maurer’s (2005:178) reading of Michael Taussig’s (1980) work on commodity fetishism, which states that the human being who acts as “the baptizer of the bill” advances the fecundity of money. In other words, the potency of care is invoked by the humans performing it and is therefore deemed more valuable than money itself.

After hearing about the fasting, I stopped Jerry to ask whether the initiatives at Global School were ideologically different from their competitors, given that his place of employment had a religious mandate. Jerry responded, “These days, if we’re hungry we just go to the fridge and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{118} It was not entirely clear as to whether this bragging point was to emphasize that sending drugs rather than money was a heartfelt gesture. Or whether it was to establish the legitimacy of these programs. Arguably it is more difficult to secure the means necessary to send pharmaceuticals across international borders. Also, sending money to North Korea is often done with a sense of doubt and thus avoided in many cases as people wonder where the money actually winds up. Still, this is a theme that repeatedly came up — de-emphasizing the giving of money over time, thoughtfulness, kindness, and action.}\]
open it up or the cafeteria or our favourite place or we can order from our favourite restaurant from birdfly\textsuperscript{119} and have it delivered. We don’t know what it’s like to starve. So she’s going to fast so she can feel what it’s like and what other people go through. That’s something we really emphasize at this school and I’m sure it’s something that you picked up on in anthropology — we are more than intellectual beings. Physical, emotional well-being are all so, so important.” By now Jerry is speaking and gesticulating fervently. “Forgiveness, compassion, kindness, and empathy are Christian ideals. But they are all so important and it would be hard to find someone who would argue that these aren’t important values. Tell me, can you think of anyone who would argue that these aren’t values that should be taught?” Echoing George’s presentation, Jerry also tells me that it is through these values that students are encouraged to engage in acts of “service” so that they can truly contemplate the world beyond themselves. My lapsed Catholic sensibilities took over. I answered, “Well, I hope not” in agreement that the mentioned values should indeed be taught and embraced. He emphatically agreed, “I certainly hope not too, and this is so central to our school and approach to education.” Jerry delivers the clincher: “Care is hard to limit.”

5.2 The Infinite Potential of Care

Jerry’s provocative comments are what primarily drove me to think about the valuation of service as an estimation of care. How did the distribution of pharmaceuticals translate to cultivating a compassionate, charitable, caring disposition? The way our conversation cascaded from my request to clarify the school’s commitment to philanthropy to the claim that “care is hard to limit” prompted me to think of these separate entities as a part of a greater whole. But in doing so, this led to more questions. For instance, how do intergenerational, reciprocal relations between parents and their children, in addition to teachers and students fit into these broader social webs? What is it about the limitlessness, the infinite potential of care that is so appealing to not just Jerry, but many of my interlocutors? This notion also came up in my discussions with Paul and Ms. Ha. From the very beginning in 2008, Paul as my manager and mentor drilled into me the idea that a good teacher is one “who cares.” The last thing Paul wanted were employees who were there to simply collect a pay cheque — he wanted us to become emotionally invested

\textsuperscript{119} At the time of my fieldwork, birdfly was a popular food delivery service in Seoul.
in our students and the advancement of our careers as educator-entrepreneurs. Over the years, Paul consistently urged teachers to develop our own teaching “brand.” These were topics that Paul spoke very explicitly about, revving up his troops to work hard — but also to incorporate play through experimentation, creation, and care.

Notions of care were present around every corner while I conducted my fieldwork. Whether it was through the implementation of charity and service or the private academy teacher’s ability to connect with the students, care was in many ways the most important currency in circulation. But care in its many forms was also a cause of disagreement. I heard adolescents, parents, and private academy instructors call international schools ineffective — especially in light of its hefty price tag. They accused the teachers of being “incompetent,” as those who “don’t understand,” and ultimately, “don’t care” about the intricacies shaping the lives of Korean students trying to attend an American college. In these cases, notions of care were being associated with negative connotations. Didn’t they understand that everyone had a 4.0 average? Didn’t they care that their applications would be lumped into a massive pool of “foreign students” where acceptance rates were much more competitive than American applicants? The complaint that international school teachers “don’t care” was a common one, echoing South Koreans’ deep dissatisfaction with public education. Students regularly bemoaned about their teachers’ “lack of care,” interpreting their teachers’ disinterest as an utter disregard for the uncertain future they faced. Cognizant that students and their families were frustrated with international schools that charged tens of thousands of dollars in tuition annually, Paul and Ms. Ha attempted to alleviate frustrations and defuse the vitriol by offering something more than good grades at IHE Prep.

Parents essentially pay IHE Prep staff to provide a sense of safety, security and confidence in these times of uncertainty. The managing of academic portfolios, exam scores and grade point averages are all shorthand for taking care of adolescents as appreciable investments. Premised on a high valuation of care, after-school private academies work to revive the pre-existing indigenous affects and social mores — the ability to tap into another’s emotional state and act accordingly — so trampled by neoliberalism that citizens are now prone to anomie.

Even the eminently practical Ms. Ha bluntly expressed a preference for Korean-American (kyop’o) instructors although IHE Prep was comprised of a mixture of Korean nationals,
Korean-Americans, and foreigners of non-Korean descent. Her preference was partially based on her evaluation of the international branding of degrees that Korean-American teachers brought to IHE Prep. Though the initial reason she gave for her choice is practical, she followed up with an emotional reason, explaining her belief in the “social fact” that Korean-Americans understood the concept of *chŏng*. As previously noted, “*chŏng*” means “affection” or “attachment”\(^\text{120}\) and is an affective orientation that could readily tap into the psychological-emotional registers of need, care and empathy. Ms. Ha went on to give a concrete example of *chŏng*, which I previously mentioned in the dissertation. In her scenario, a Korean-American teacher will have the sensibility to notice their hungry, sad, maybe depressed, or even unhappy student and be generous enough to buy lunch for said student — an unofficial duty of the caring teacher.

In addition to *chŏng*, another concept that I repeatedly found to be important is *gibun*, which very roughly translates as “mood” (see Lo 2009). A teacher’s — and student’s — ability to cultivate a positive atmosphere tends to guarantee that the individual is well-liked, respected, and socially successful. This holds true even if other duties are not wholly met. In many instances, teachers who would otherwise be overwhelmed with frustration and give up would continue to invest in the students who they found pleasant. Well-liked students were those who could connect to and harness their sensibilities, actions and emotions to “do good.” This ability transforms care and compassion into an intangible asset that bears the promise of liquidity at a future date. In some cases, it was teachers who went above and beyond. In many cases, it was a student’s potential ability to accumulate social capital through venture philanthropy.

These pedagogical orientations resonate with Lauren Berlant’s (2004:5) argument that compassion is “a social and aesthetic technology of belonging.” Adolescents are both the recipients and givers of care; they are simultaneously investees and investors in their own well-being, as well as others.’ Citing Warren Buffet and Peter Lynch, Martin (2002: 78-79) observes that “[t]he greatest investors are often outstanding human beings, insofar as they exemplify the highest achievement in one or more human characteristics like patience, diligence, 

\(^{120}\) See Naver dictionary (Korea’s largest search engine) https://endic.naver.com/search.nhn?sLn=en&isOnlyViewEE=N&query=%3e?.”
perceptiveness, and common sense.” It is in this vein that the capacity to care, to become a compassionate individual, is a fundamental value in human capital production for the “1%.” The capacity to care is in some ways concrete, as evidenced by Paul’s plan for Francis to provide aid to poor, aging seniors, living in cramped, decaying housing. In other ways, it is the ephemerality of intuiting others’ emotional state. This particular action is observable on a number of different registers: Francis imagining what life is like for poor, senior citizens, students “tapping” into their teachers and parents’ feelings (and vice versa), and adolescents fulfilling their duties as solid friends during a stressful period in their lives.

Unlike money, which is disarticulated from a sense of feeling or responsibility, care is “hard to limit,” just as Jerry said. The prioritization of giving back to society something other than money parallels a key principle of venture philanthropy. This is clearly expressed on the European Venture Philanthropy Association’s website: “Finance first strategies, where the financial return is maximised and the societal impact is secondary, are not included in EVPA’s definition of venture philanthropy.”121 The repeated examples where my interlocutors downplayed the role of monetary exchanges in performing acts of care and compassion exemplifies this logic.122 The fact that the very same principles shape the visions of what venture philanthropy should be in a number of different “global” outlets, such as the European Venture Philanthropy, evidences the conditions and scales upon which social networks amongst the elite should be established. These projects are extant to supporting grassroots movements aimed at respecting sovereignty and self-determination. Venture philanthropy as a vehicle for financializing care and compassion operates on the enforcement and maintenance of strict

121 See: https://evpa.eu.com/about-us/what-is-venture-philanthropy

122 As Vivian Zelizer (2012: 151) points out, financialization is fundamental in shaping relational packages. Relational packages are comprised of “a) distinctive interpersonal ties, b) economic transactions, c) media, and d) negotiated meanings,” that are shaped and formed by variables of gender, race, and age. In Pitluck et al.’s (2018) reading of Zelizer’s (2005, 2012) work, they argue that “one implication of these theories is that rather than conceiving of financialization as the expansion of ‘finance’ throughout society, financialization is the expanding redefinition of material cultural practices as ‘financial.’ Reciprocal relations are polyvalent and scopic in structure.” Adolescents who are assimilated into their parents’ “horizons of expectations” (Kosselleck 1985) are in turn transformed into venture philanthropists.
boundaries of belonging where reciprocity exists more through establishing ties with other like-minded visionaries who share a similar social status.

These global regimes of philanthropy are indeed wrought from the relational packages mentioned above. Having the capacity to care, to think beyond oneself in terms of interdependent socialities are modalities of exchange bolstering financialization. Building social relations become a means for individuals who have the time, resources, networks, and entrepreneurial spirit to further distinguish themselves from the “have-nots.” Mastering one’s body in the interest of giving back to a broader community ties compassionate matters of the heart together with striving for the greater good.

The concept of working for the greater good however is a construct that depends on structures of social inequality and the state offering only bare-bones social services. These less than ideal circumstances are simply fodder for the infinite expansive potential of care. The fact of the matter is that care begets care, and this is what appeals most to Jerry. There is something positively infectious about care and its capacity to endlessly multiply.

5.3 Matrices of Care

If you are wondering if Francis’ project in the opening vignette ever came to anything, the answer is that it did not. After Paul’s theatrical performance, prodding Francis to try to imagine what it might feel like to live in such cramped quarters, I began an impromptu lesson. This service was nearly solely reserved for Francis, the “Hagwŏn VIP” as everyone called him. The fact that his monthly bill at IHE Prep would supposedly sometimes be as high as US$7,000 afforded him the luxury of unscheduled lessons and teachers at his beck and call. During my designated break time, we headed to the school’s computer lab where I sat casually chatting while Francis conducted his Internet research, using Naver, South Korea’s largest search engine. Together, we looked at photos of the decrepit shanty town and the elderly poor pushing wheelbarrows stacked with debris. On one level, Francis seemed not to know what to make of Paul’s orders. He seemed to browse through these images in a state of disaffection and dispassion.

When I asked him how he was going to “pull this one off,” given that I was sure any attempt to distribute pharmaceuticals would get tied up in red tape, Francis shrugged. “I’m just doing this
because Paul told me…But my friend did it,” he said. By now, his reaction seemed at best lukewarm, leaning more towards apathetic. Even though I would be compensated for this lesson at an hourly rate, I wondered whether this was a waste of time. Doubting the feasibility of this proposal and irritated by the utter disregard for state redistributive politics, I began to lose my patience. Yet, on some level to refuse this spontaneous lesson would have been considered inappropriate on my part. A sense of indebtedness ran throughout my interactions with Paul and feelings of obligation prevailed, and Francis, as a student of the school and the recipient of his parents’ investments, was coerced into fulfilling this duty. There were set responsibilities here that we both needed to cater to.

At the very moment I began to fade, Francis changed his tone, perking up. As he continued his Internet research, Francis commented that most clubs and community service projects focus on poor people living in foreign countries. The ubiquitous involvement of international school attendees in Habitat for Humanity was a good example. “But there are a lot of people who need help in Korea,” he stated. To this, I agreed. Coming up with an outline for a rough draft, I urged him to please do further research on the feasibility of this project. A few days later, Francis sent me a message via Skype, complete with emojis of crying faces. He would not be able to distribute pharmaceutical drugs for free. I sent him my sympathies for his lost time and efforts, but out of curiosity I asked how his friend was able to carry out this project. He replied that his friend’s parents are “pharmacists,” and then our conversation fizzled.123

While Francis’ proposal never came to fruition, it is still worth assessing why it was conceptualized within the matrices of care. Care is not only promoted through international school curriculums but also by adolescents, their parents, and teachers. In that sense, care truly has an expansive reach. Put most simply, one can crudely trace care’s course: Francis’ parents invest in his future, and in turn, Francis is expected to reciprocate these acts of care. Enter the middleman Paul and the IHE Prep teachers (who nearly all taught him at one point) who are

123 A newer iteration of the club proposal that followed involved Francis collecting leftover, unsold baked goods from major corporate chains such as Paris Baguette to redistribute to the poor. I did not work on this proposal, given my impromptu, casual teaching relationship with Francis, but it came up in conversation when we were at IHE Prep together. While the goods are different, both projects are fundamentally similar in his plans to give out surplus leftovers to those in need, bypassing the state and placing Francis at the centre of redistributive politics.
hired to produce his subjectivity as the future “1%.” Under their caring guidance, he is expected
to excel in his studies and follow the heteronormative trajectory of attaining a spot at a
prestigious American university. To that end, care can also be conceptualized as an intangible
asset that bears the promise of liquidity at a future date. This is irrespective of the fact that there
was no guarantee that Francis’ efforts would be rewarded in a desirable way, namely through
public recognition. For the time being, filial piety as much as venture philanthropic aims were
shaping his duty — a topic I turn to next.

5.4 Care: Investor and Investee Politics

Within the arrangement of intergenerational, reciprocal relations, adolescents are viewed as
debtors. But as the ascendant “1%,” they are also positioned to be the social creditors who will
tackle many of the world’s most pressing problems, as evidenced by Francis’ club proposal.
Wedged in between these regimes of care, adolescents are socialized and expected to
simultaneously fulfil these two roles, both of which requires the cultivation of the heart,
awareness of others’ feelings, a sense of obligation, and the urge to give back to their
communities. Adolescents’ indebtedness to adults requires that they participate in classed
reproduction projects designed to produce the future “1%.” As investees and investors within
these matrices however, adolescents are indeed located in a domain that flies in the face of the
state.

Ostensibly, the webs of obligation cross domains leaving behind a messy trail that muddies
public works with private interventions. Where Francis’ privilege offers him the ability to help
others in need, his compassion should come from the heart and a place of purity rather than the
calculating mind. He should also cultivate the heart of a visionary philanthropist, becoming an
architect of domestic and global regimes of care. Along the way, he should at least attempt to
embody the life of the impoverished Other by imagining his life spent in a dwelling no bigger
than the top of Paul’s desk and in turn do something about it.

In preparing to prove his worth as a “good investee,” Francis spent an inordinate amount of time
at the private academy. Primarily, he received one-on-one tutoring or instruction in small groups
that focused on school assignments, standardized test preparation, and college consulting.
Francis also spent a lot of time lying around IHE Prep. On many occasions, I arrived at work to
find him dozing off on the couch in the teacher’s lounge, and this despite the fact that students were routinely told that this space was appointed for teacher use only.

On one occasion, instead of scolding Francis for napping in the teacher’s room, I let it slide. He was palpably exhausted and understandably so. On top of his studies at his international school and IHE Prep, Francis played clarinet in competitions and ran an online store. I greeted and asked how his day was going.

Barely opening his eyes, he mumbled that he was supposed to be working on his college essays. Treading carefully, I asked how that was going. Francis informed me that he had his sights set on UPenn’s Wharton School or MIT. As the only son, it was imperative that he attend a name brand school, he explained. He compared himself to his older sisters, both of whom went to local art colleges. He made it clear that while that was acceptable for his sisters, it was not an option for him. Francis was quite aware of the heteronormative expectations placed on him. The heteronormative expectation in securing elite American college branding is that this would be a stepping-stone to marrying a woman of equal educational status\textsuperscript{124} even though he would still be expected to be the breadwinner.

These intergenerational, reciprocal relations of debt and credit prompted many of the philanthropic activities that adolescents undertook. By virtue of attending expensive schools with curriculums designed to teach students about the spirit of charity, my interlocutors were expected to lead by example and engage in activities that have been briefly mentioned previously. These activities include building homes with Habitat for Humanity in places like the Philippines, or drafting a proposal for a new school club that would distribute pharmaceuticals to the elderly poor in South Korea. Oftentimes, as I have discussed, these projects also fell under the purview of the instructors at private academies such as IHE Prep, resulting in additional educational fees being charged to the parents. These multiple layers of investment and socialization in many ways begin and end with the students recognizing that their parents are the ones footing all the bills. On some level, the act of helping impoverished others in far-away

\textsuperscript{124} South Korea has one of the highest rates of marriage homogamy in the world where men and women of equal educational status are expected to marry one another (Brinton 2001).
places becomes less about improving a stranger’s life and more about proving that their parents’ monetary and emotional investments are appreciated and will be reciprocated. Take for example, my conversation with Do Young (no English name). Born in Europe, Do Young spent the majority of his childhood and adolescence attending a public school in a wealthy American suburb. His father, a high-level executive in a Korean corporate conglomerate, was relocated several times to different locations around the world, eventually returning to Korea with his family. Acclimated to “Western” styles of education and possibly not entirely cut out to survive “Korean education,” his mother tells me that they made the decision to send him and his brother to an international school. Choosing not to attend a local school is a decision that reflects the parents’ belief that attending an international school with the explicit goal of raising a “21st century global citizen” is a more favourable, suitable, and less stressful educational choice for their children. Clearly, aiming to attend an American college in order to replicate the god-like status of Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, of Steve Jobs comes with relentless demands. Yet, as mentioned in Chapter 3, “Escaping Obsolescence the Shift from Subject to Skill-based Education,” “Western” education is considered the “easier” route when compared to the South Korean public school experience.

When I started my fieldwork, Do Young was a high school junior at a local international school, and both he and his younger brother were my students at IHE Prep. Given my status as his teacher, Do Young’s mother gave her permission when I asked if he could become one of my interlocutors. She also consented to be an interlocutor and would call me regularly to talk about her son, the state of his current studies, and future success. Outside of class, Do Young and I had intermittent correspondences on Facebook, Skype and KakaoTalk, Korea’s largest third-party text messaging service. We mostly talked about his assignments and class schedules. But one evening, we conducted a more formalized interview with his mother’s approval. On Skype, set on the texting function, as per Do Young’s request, I asked whether he felt solely responsible for his future. Do Young emphatically replied, “Yup!”

I followed up by asking whether parents, other family members, friends, and teachers also played a role. Do Young replied, “They’re extremely small factors, it’s 99% my responsibility in my opinion. ^^.” When I rephrased my question to state, “Do you think anyone helps you achieve your goals?” Do Young told me, “My parents, of course! They’ll always try to help me as much as they can, and I really appreciate it. They’ll get other people to help me in my
journey, and help raise my morale 😊 They always try to push me to do things and tell me that I can do it ^^.” When I remarked how lucky he is, he agreed.

Asking whether he felt indebted to them, our conversation took a more solemn tone. “yeah, lots :c.”

I continued, “Do you feel any burdens to them when they help you reach your goals?”

Do Young replied, “Not enough burden ;;.”

Asking him to clarify, Do Young stated, “I feel some burden, but not enough in my opinion 😊. I mean they’re giving up so much for me, and I just don’t feel enough burden. I’m not sure haha.”

Wanting to know more, I threw out the question, “What do you think they give up?”

Do Young typed, “Money, and lots and lots of time.”

“Do you ever think about repaying them? Financially or emotionally or any other way? Either now as a hs student or as an adult?”

Do Young answered, “Yes, I always feel like I have to in the future.”

“How do you imagine yourself giving back to your parents in the future?” I asked.

“I’ll try to visit them as often as possible and support them financially ^^.”

Looking for more clarification, I asked whether he thought it was important to give them both financial and emotional support, or whether one was more important than the other.

“Emotional’s probably more important 😊. I mean any son can toss his parents money. Mental support is way more important in my opinion. I’ll try to visit them as often as possible :p.” I tested Do Young, wanting to know whether he would give his parents support “even if they were bazillionaires.” Do Young replied, “I still would, because I’m paying back what they’ve given me right now.”

As our conversation continued to unfold, Do Young told me that he understood that his individual success was an indication of his family’s success, “because I can help them with money later. And I assume that I’m helping my family’s mentality by succeeding personally.”
Do Young confessed that he did not feel guilty about the amount of time and money invested in his well-being and success so much as he felt guilty that he was “abusing what [parents] gave me so many times, yet they keep trying to help.” When I asked him what he meant by “abusing,” Do Young responded, “Well I mean I’ve told [my mom] that I’m studying while shooting things in League of Legends often. Haha.” In fact, Do Young’s mother was well aware of his extracurricular habits, which we discussed in a tone of semi-laughter over lunch at Tower Palace, a high-priced apartment complex in Gangnam. Undoubtedly, there was an air of consternation at this point in our discussion, but Do Young’s mother expressed genuine affection for her son, recognizing he had a good heart (*chakhada*).

While the formation of the “venture philanthropist” subjectivity cannot be divorced from the “behind the scenes” relations supporting them, an adolescent’s “good heart” (*maum*) comes to be highly valued in both the private and public realms. In many ways, these public displays of interpersonal politics that adolescents are expected to exhibit and the associations they are meant to forge with strangers in far-off places echo many of Andrea Muehlebach’s (2012) theorizations on “ethical citizenship.” Following Hannah Arendt’s (1958) theorizations, Muehlebach (2012) argues that these forms of citizenship premised on the sharing of feelings or the ability to be empathetic with “the Other” are often rooted in “the cruelty of pity.” Presented as untainted by market logics, these charitable acts are aimed at creating forms of citizenship fundamentally premised on social inequality that here too hinge on the withdrawal or absence of the state. The “production of compassion,” as the bedrock upon which subjects perform acts of care, is a fundamentally different political orientation than focusing on universal rights. The inculcation of ideologies as a pure expression of one’s morality seeks to cultivate subjects who are moved through “unmediated affect” after being exposed to pedagogies extolling the “free gift.”

These ideologies resonate strongly throughout my dissertation and the way I formulate the labour of caring in the production of subjectivities and socialities. I look specifically at the propensity of my interlocutors to form a sentimental bond with those they find worthy or feel a

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125 Both *chakhada* and *maum* can mean “good heart.”
“natural” affinity towards. This puts the onus of deciding who is “worthy” vs. “unworthy” on what I will refer to as “the general public,” which bases decisions on the sentiments of the majority. By virtue of private emotions shaping public realms, citizenships are formed — that undoubtedly hold much promise and potential — but that ultimately elide state power altogether.

Though there are countless instances where this power could prove interesting, within the parameters of my dissertation, one must ask oneself how these politics play out when it is the aspirant 1% that largely ignore or pays attention to marginalized, “undesirable,” populations such as the elderly poor that seeks to fill the political voids. It is also necessary to interrogate how structures of social inequality are reproduced, solidifying the “1%,” through venture philanthropy. Michel Feher’s (2018) work on “investee politics in a speculative age” helps to shed light on this issue. The way capital is amassed, accumulated and most importantly accredited is central to attracting financing (Feher 2018: 47) for any project. In turn, subjects as well as legal and other entities, hope to become “the object of investment or, better put, [are] hoping to be considered worthy of investment” (Feher 2018: 47). Since the material ambition aimed at becoming “the 1%” is “greedy,” “selfish” and “individualistic,” it runs against the proposed moral code discussed throughout my dissertation. Having a good heart, as a prerequisite to venture philanthropy yokes human capital production to its subjects in a way that usurps psycho-emotional realms. Care and interdependent relations are not only a valued act in terms of venture philanthropy, but also within interpersonal, intergenerational relations.

5.5 Joy or when students invest in themselves

As I have discussed, care comes in many forms. Parents take a gamble when choosing the school that they hope will nurture the life-long project of human capital appreciation (Feher 2009). The relationship between Paul, as sole consultant, and Francis was a highly unusual arrangement that clearly showcased these reciprocal relations. Francis’ parents paid for the best. Paul was then compelled to care for Francis. In turn, Francis was compelled to care about his applications, through his indebtedness to his parents. Though Paul oversaw all college application processes, in most cases the division of labour was split between himself and another instructor. Francis was the only student who received the entirety of his assistance from the CEO, as a result of his parents’ enormous investments in his future.
Towards the end of July 2015, Francis came in to write his college application essays. In fact, what this meant was Francis used IHE Prep to Facebook and catch up on his sleep in the teacher’s room. I let him sleep. Mr. Huh, the assistant manager (Taerinim), let him sleep. The Vice President (Puwŏnjangnim) let him sleep too. This abruptly ended when Paul, the CEO (Wŏnjangnim), came in and gave him a death stare, which of course Francis couldn’t see because he was fast asleep. Francis was given a rude awakening when Paul threw the book, *Rule of Four*, into his lap. At that moment, Mark, another instructor, walked into the room and witnessed Paul’s outburst, complete with a wild-eyed expression and spittle hurling across the room as he yelled at Francis. Mark was unfazed by Paul’s display of anger. He walked over, picked up the novel and commented that he had enjoyed this book and that it was a good read for younger level students. I, on the other hand, was startled from my lesson planning and sat frozen while watching. Paul told Francis he should sleep at home and not at the private academy. Francis, bleary-eyed and slowly becoming conscious, was sternly told to “*Chŏngshinch’aryŏ!*”, which translates to “recover one's senses; recover consciousness; be wide awake” (Naver dictionary). Francis seemed undisturbed, bearing no signs of anger or irritation by Paul’s violent verbal outburst. Emerging fully from his slumber, Francis sat up and quietly resumed writing his personal statement for his college applications.

Though Francis frequently broke the rules by sleeping in the teacher’s lounge, many felt sympathy for him. As teachers we discussed Francis’ understandable exhaustion. That did not change the fact that his lack of energy repeatedly posed problems for IHE Prep staff, who were paid to guarantee his familial classed reproduction. Adolescents — especially those who have studied under the direction of one teacher over an extended period of time — know that their achievements or lack thereof reflect back on their private educators’ economic success in a cutthroat market (Kim 2012:108). Likewise, teachers are starkly aware that their careers hinge on the academic performance of their students (Kim 2012:108).

In our capacity as teachers, Casey and I would often discuss our frustration with Francis. During one such conversation that had turned from an impersonal discussion attempting to figure out how best to deal with Frances to an opportunity to vent, Casey’s face brightened. Her reaction cleared the air and she shared quite an endearing anecdote about Francis. She asked if I had seen Francis at the front desk a few days earlier holding a large bag. I had. Casey then told me that Francis arrived with a large bag of change and asked her and Mr. Huh (who like Ms. Ha was
never referred to by his name but only his title, “Taerinim,” or assistant director) for help. It was Francis’ friend’s birthday and he wanted to buy a present, but first needed to exchange his bag of coins for cash. Casey found this request to be rather endearing, prompting her and Mr. Huh to extend their service as staff to assist Francis. There are many stories showcasing how Francis’ mundane interactions livened up private academy life. For instance, we also laughed when younger students bowed and deferred to Francis out of respect. Jamie and I found the optics of these exchanges particularly funny given Francis’ short stature, compared to other students who towered over him. As Jae Hyun told his other friends at academy during one of our classes one day, Francis is “legendary” — which teachers all found entertaining. Casey couldn’t help but break out in a smile when talking about him, even when annoyed. “He’s spoiled but cute!” she once recalled, with a giant smile erupting, ending the episode of exasperation. Francis was able to successfully elicit these warm responses not only because his parents were one of the school’s biggest clients and the IHE Prep’s reputation depended on their satisfaction, but also because his personality was overall pleasurable.

Teachers and even high-level management let Francis sleep in the lounge not only because of the money his attendance brought the school, but because they genuinely cared about Francis’ physical well-being. Paul’s ire and ensuing outburst was a measure of his own investments in Francis’ success, to the point of momentarily rupturing their bond in order to maintain a sound relationship over the long run. Both can be understood as examples of how the private academy setting cares. Francis’ long-standing status as a loyal client afforded him both these luxuries and harsh treatments.

To that end, demarcations of what constitutes “the market” and “gifting economies,” — built on emotions, affects, and pleasantries — which have long been considered separate and incommensurable domains, remain ambiguous, yet complementary (Graeber 2001, Marx 1976, Mauss 1990). The constellation and economies of affect and capital here however are deeply intertwined. As evidenced in my conversation with Do Young, one cannot be severed from the other. Paul and Ms. Ha’s business model would not seek this separation either. Within the parameters of human capital appreciation, endeavours encapsulate and seek the seamless fusion of psychic incomes to the breadth of affective life (Feher 2009). As such, these interwoven economies are those specific to classed
attempts at social reproduction and are animated by both spectres of failure and large investments of capital.

Despite these moments of explosive tension and frustration shared between teachers and students, remarkably, convivial banter, affectionate teasing, and sharing of personal stories, created an atmosphere where laughter, food, and beverages were routinely gifted (Graeber 2001; Mauss 2000; Riles 2010).

5.6 Classroom reciprocity

As demonstrated in the opening vignette, the obligatory contractual elements of care between parents, students, and teachers are fixed on the reciprocal exchanges taking place amongst these respective parties. Students are also shaped by the curriculums foisted upon them during their regular daytime schools. For the purposes of delving into the unique qualities surrounding the valuation of care, this section further explains how through daily academic performance and mutually shared conviviality students and IHE Prep educators produce their own system of credit and debt.

What is important to bear in mind here in regards to Lauren Berlant’s argument of care as a means to draw boundaries, is that while students treated teachers as individuals who — for the most part — deserved respect (a point I will elaborate on in the following chapter), the janitorial staff however were treated with indifference bordering on contempt. Before I jump into the main vignette where I showcase teacher-student exchanges rooted in warmth, sympathy, and playful teasing, I want to draw attention to another incident at IHE Prep. Like other instructors, I let my students take quick trips to the nearby convenience stores or order delivery in between their classes or during breaks. Sensitive to the fact that they had demanding schedules that included long commutes, I let them eat during our lessons. At the end of one of my one-on-one tutoring sessions with Jae Hyun, to my dismay, I watched him pack up his bags and begin to exit the classroom, leaving a pile of his trash behind. Potato chip bags, soda bottles, and candy wrappers littered the long desk. “Um…aren’t you going to throw that in the garbage?” I asked. As Jae Hyun casually continued to saunter towards the exit, he replied, “The ajumma [word that denotes middle-aged woman although in reality she was really more of a senior citizen] will clean it.” He saw my face tense as images of the elderly, overworked, exhausted-looking woman holding a mop, flashed through my mind. I got angry. “No, you will throw out your own trash,”
I curtly replied. Jae Hyun didn’t seem too pleased with my request but complied. The consideration, attention, and courtesy that framed Jae Hyun’s interactions with people such as Ms. Ha, Paul, and even the lower-ranking administrative staff working the front desk vanished when confronted with blue-collar workers. In fact, I regularly saw students walk past her and the other members of the cleaning staff without even giving a nod in greeting. They were quite literally invisible to them. The principles of respect and deference that are so central in shaping intergenerational social exchanges were discarded in the face of classed hierarchies. After all, the cleaning ajumma was not someone who could even marginally contribute to enhancing Jae Hyun’s potential worth. At least not in the same way as someone like Paul could. And acknowledging and easing her hardship would most certainly not pad one’s resume in the same way as humanitarian efforts to help poor North Koreans or Filipinos. It was somewhat disheartening to see that these matrices of care that adolescents, as the aspirant “1%,” insert themselves into and formulate did not extend to the lowliest in their own country.

This attitude disconcertingly contrasted sharply with the respectful and courteous behaviour teachers at the school were the recipients of that I will turn to now. Students saw these interactions with teachers, unlike the non-existent ones with the janitorial staff, as ones that were mutually beneficial and an extension of the credit and debt relations that existed between children and their parents. What further strengthened the ties between teachers and students were the daily interactions in the classroom that allowed students to maximize their academic potential. While classroom etiquette is based on intergenerational and hierarchical forms of respect that are also prevalent in places like North America, my aim in the context of this dissertation is to show how the teacher-student interactions fit into a broader cosmology of giving and receiving in the production of a “1%” subject. As this following section will show, the reason that teachers and students reciprocally cultivate relationships is to achieve a clearly expressed goal, knowing that there are no guarantees of success and that all their efforts could come to an ambiguous end. But this is precisely why I draw from Appadurai’s (2011) arguments regarding investments as “a derivative gamble,” rooted in uncertainty. One can never be sure that the end results of an investment will yield profitable returns. Yet, it is precisely the nebulous promise of success and open-ended possibilities that fuel these orientations towards futurity. However, even without a guarantee of success, building friendly relationships with
teachers contribute to the temporal dyads of present and future, in addition to the dyads of credit and debt.

According to Lauren Berlant (2004: 5), intricacies of the upper-classed solidarities are formulated as “a social and aesthetic technology of belonging,” much like the relationships being discussed here, and strengthen the hold the “1%” have on their elevated status — socially, politically, and economically. The boundaries of classed belonging manifest in multiple ways, and one of the ways they are sustained is through care. As I have discussed, the anxious attention parents and children lavish on one another not only maintains intergenerational, reciprocal ties but also differentiates members from non-members. This level of commitment to reciprocal relations is nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than by Paul’s dedication to his students, coming in day after day to teach them despite his diagnosis of a terminal illness, taking his role as the manager of parents’ investments quite seriously. Students picked up on Paul’s self-sacrifice, understanding that his presence in the classroom, in light of his ill health, was an honour.

In between his chemotherapy treatments, Paul faithfully taught his SAT Critical reading courses with enough gusto to keep his high school students roaring with laughter. Though he tried, in his weakened state Paul could not match the eight to ten hours a day that the students put in at IHE Prep frantically working to boost their exam scores. Recognizing his limitations, he conceded to taking a daily nap after lunch so that he could give his all when conducting consultations with students and easing their concerns through the college preparation process. However, he also made time for leisure activities so necessary to remaining invigorated and would meet with his friends for several rounds of tennis when he could manage. His condition and actions were noticed not only by staff but also students who repeatedly beseeched him to please go home and rest. And maybe forego his unwavering dedication to his athletic hobbies.

Although Paul was the only one living with a terminal illness, there was indeed a shared sense of exhaustion in the air shared by all. Students, normally reticent to advise an adult, succumbed to the urge to suggest he take a nap as if almost feeling his bone-deep tiredness themselves. On one occasion, May (went by her Korean name, which was phonetically similar to an English name) — a high school junior and a friend of Ms. Ha and Paul’s daughter Amber (primarily went by her English name, although she also had a Korean name) — made a sign complete with
cartoon animals that said, “Wŏnjangnim (CEO) nap time!” and posted it on the door. For weeks after May made that sign, Paul hung it on the door every time he went for a sleep.

To give this vignette a framework, I draw from John Hamilton’s (2013) philological analysis of care. Hamilton (2013:11-2) states that while care is a prerequisite for security, this can become a fundamentally paradoxical configuration. Care, from the Latin root cura, connotes anxiety and attentiveness. Security, from the root securitas, on the other hand, connotes tranquillity, indifference, safety, and negligence. In the absence of care, security is unachievable.

Attentiveness to another’s limits, safety and well-being shapes ethical orientations to the preservation of life. Yet, as Hamilton (2013) cautions, an excessive pursuit of security can render acts of care devoid of meaningful attention and connection. Of specific interest here is how both adolescents and adults maintain intersubjective relations in this “age of anxiety” by taking on one another’s anxieties in attempts to produce futurity126 (Hamilton 2013:18). Within intergenerational dynamics shaped by excesses in parental love, adolescents in the private education industry pass on their care to ameliorate feelings of precariousness — their own and the ones expressed by adults.

Anxieties and attentiveness contribute to the formation of “deep alliances,” where students “care for the body, emotions, and even the soul” of the adults who invested in them and appreciated that they had value as human capital (de la Luz Ibarra 2010:124). The “unpaid care in economic organizations” (Zelizar 2010: 276) contributes to sustaining IHE Prep and upholds the reproduction of class and public domains127 (Arendt 1958; Boris and Parreñas 2010; Hochschild 1983; Kittay and Feder 2002; Strathern 1988; Tronto 1993). At some point, I noticed that Ms.

126 Another underlying question I have is to what extent do adolescents’ excessive attention to their studies contributes to what Emily Martin (2007) calls “manic capitalism?” To explain further, Martin (2007) argues that “mania is valued as a vital source of perpetuating economic growth.” Martin’s (2007) analytical twinning of individual emotional states to market behaviour shows that mood matters. “Manic” episodes are considered necessary for further enhancing the functioning of a capitalist culture imbued in valuing an intrepid spirit that will spark economic growth. “Mania” is revered for its creative potential only when its productive capacities contribute to the production of value. “Mania” is also deeply feared for its destructive dimensions, for example, when an individual succumbs to suicidal acts, falling into the abyss of depression. Thus, “mania” can only be valued when it conforms to social norms, never when it signals deviant behaviour.

127 Boris and Parreñas (2010), on the other hand, focus on how subjects performing commodified forms of “intimate labour” retain meaningful connections. Hochschild (1983) discusses the dimensions of gendered socialization and how women are taught specific ways to perform “emotional labour” from their familial experiences; however her work analyses how feminized work, understood as “natural” upholds the public social fabric and colludes with the production of value.
Ha hung May’s sign in the office she shared with Paul, as if it was a token of affection for her husband and family. The sign, designating the teacher’s room as Paul’s private area of rest, was an indication of May’s sensitivity to his needs. Reminiscent of my time at Berkeley Institute (Chapter 2) where students returned after their classes were done with food and drinks for their tired teachers, the overworked and exhausted students at IHE Prep were similarly benevolent. Rather than take out any anger and resentment they might feel on their teachers, they transformed their educational settings into spaces of mutual empathy and understanding by acknowledging that their teachers shared their conditions and burden of labour. This consideration did not, as previously discussed, extend to the blue-collar workers: janitors and security guard who were also exhausted.

The regimes of care at IHE Prep are loosely organized, which allows teachers and students to express themselves in many different ways. The school itself takes a pedagogical route and creates a warm environment conducive to teachers and students expressing their care and concern for one another in both tangible and intangible ways. There is an air of spontaneity that has a catalysing quality and activates latent human capital, stirring students and teachers alike from the exhausting depths of creating quantitative results in condensed periods of time. Summer “vacations” do not provide much respite for those labouring in the American standardized test preparation industry in South Korea, but the bonds between teachers and students forged during this 6-to-8-week period are ones that will last well into the future.

In July 2015, I experienced the mad build-up of test preparation that was to be my summer. It was an uncomfortable and exhausting time not only for students, but also for instructors and staff who carefully monitored their students’ progress over the course of a few intense weeks. It was undoubtedly a time full of seeming juxtapositions and contradictions. Outside, the air was heavy, hot and muggy. Skies were an unrelenting grey, filled with smog and looming thick clouds on the verge of bursting during South Korea’s monsoon season. On the street, pedestrians, many of whom were wearing button-down shirts, trousers, skirts, and high-heel

128 Since the students preparing for SAT exams and college in the U.S. attend international schools and boarding schools abroad, their summer vacations follow the standard American academic calendar. Generally, their break starts in mid to late June, ending in late August. This is in stark contrast to Korean students within the domestic system who only have a three-week break in the summer and one month off in the winter.
shoes — standard office attire — trudged through the sub-tropical humidity. Mr. Huh (*Taerinim* or “director”) deliberately cranked the air-conditioners to frigid temperatures, explaining to me that these measures were not taken to provide relief but to keep drowsy students uncomfortably alert in an otherwise dark, damp atmosphere. Adolescents wore sweatshirts. Sometimes they walked around IHE Prep with fleece blankets draped over their bodies. These swathes of cloth were small nuggets of comfort for my upper-class interlocutors whose lives were worlds away from that of the farmers dying of heat stroke during that unbearably hot summer. Mark took in the scene, commenting on this juxtaposition: “How fucked up is that?”

This six-week window of test and college prep tutoring is the most profitable portion of the year for IHE Prep, which charged exorbitant fees for exam preparation and consulting that ultimately limited their clientele to a select few of South Korea’s wealthiest. The SAT preparatory class carries a price tag of around US$10,000, and college consulting commands another US$15,000. Typically, students also took crash courses to preview the material in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, in addition to SAT II subject tests.

High school adolescents are value-in-potentia that can only be realized in a broader social context. As such, rather than having a break, summer vacations were no less dedicated to the pursuit of education than the rest of the school year. Preparing for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Test (ACT) and college applications during one’s junior and senior year of high school is a highly stressful undertaking. Identified by students, teachers, and parents as a “crucial time” (*chungyohan shigi*), everyone involved is prone to heightened emotional and psychological sensitivity (*min’gamhada*). Students began class at 9 am, often staying until 7 or 8 pm, five days a week, but on Saturdays, students were only expected to stay until noon after taking a mock SAT test. Barring special lessons, students for the most part had Sundays off.

Already several weeks into the intensive SAT preparation course, students and teachers suffered from the accumulated exhaustion of spending approximately ten hours a day, five days a week

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129 Another SAT prep private academy where I conducted preliminary fieldwork had longer hours where students stayed from 8 a.m.-10 p.m.
at the private academy. Students ambled around, dragging their feet, shoulders slumped over as if they carried the weight of the world on their backs. Everyone was tired, but Paul’s fatigue was palpable. Even for his morning SAT Critical Reading classes he had trouble drumming up enthusiasm. Though I observed from the very back of the classroom, Paul’s exhaustion was glaringly evident. Even though he was comfortably clad in Nike tennis shoes, athletic shorts, and a flamboyant graphic T-shirt to play tennis after class, looking at his bleary eyes and swollen face, I wondered how he managed even this scaled-down version of himself. Everyone including the instructor sounded nasally and congested, as if having just barely awoken from slumber. Most students had their heads on their desks. Paul asked his listless class whether last night’s homework had taken long to complete. Silence. Mina (no English name), a soon to be high school junior, piped up when no one else would and admitted the homework was hard.

Paul officially started class by administering a daily vocabulary test. At first, students remained quiet. Jae Hyun (no English name) startled me by asking, “What does draconian mean?” Unfamiliar with how Paul conducted this class, I chose to adhere to my role of observer and firmly stated, “I can’t tell you that — this is a quiz.” He seemed a bit jarred, annoyed and even seemed slightly injured by my response. Moments later, I realized why Jae Hyun had so casually asked me to assist him. The thick atmosphere bearing down on the classroom soon dissipated. A playful melee of questions and answers erupted.

“What’s forlorn?” a student asked.

Paul put on a show. Wiping his eyes, he stated in a melodramatic voice, “She’s goneeeeeeee!!!”

Everyone started to laugh, lightening the mood further. Christine (Korean name Young) told Paul, “You deserve an Oscar.”

Another student blurted out, “What’s bereft?”

Paul answered, “Devoid.”

Questions continued to fly. “Chicanery?”
Paul here pronounced the word with a Korean accent, breaking each syllable up, mimicking the accent of someone who cannot smoothly produce the sounds like a native English speaker. Students giggled. Paul then replied in earnest, “Charlatan.”

“Spartan?”

“Ascetic,” Paul replied.

James (Korean name Ji Hoon), one of the consistently highest scoring students asked, “Is prudent small or is petty small?”

Paul smacked down his pen in joking frustration, making a loud noise and eyes growing wide. His students laughed some more. Paul responded by stating that it was amazing that James managed to consistently score 750 (highest score 800) on the verbal section and ignored James’ question.

Moving on, someone else asked, “What’s dirge?”

Paul started to sing the melody of Chopin’s Funeral March.

“What’s toady?”

Paul blurted out, “TOADY!”

By now the whole class was laughing together. The stress evaporated as the pleasures of shared laughter overwhelmed the room. Nevertheless, everyone remained focused on the task at hand: increasing their verbal SAT scores. “What’s volatile?” Paul created some explosive noises with his mouth. Though his students lamented that today’s words were hard, Paul disagreed and said that this selection was better than yesterday’s list.

“Resilient?”

Paul took his pen, stood it upright, knocked it down, only to make it stand up straight again.

“Zenith?”

“High point,” Paul muttered.
“What’s bumbler?”

Paul yelled, “YOU!”

Jae Hyun said, “Someone who fucks stuff up?”

Paul confirmed, “Someone who effs stuff up.” Paul allowed his students to ask questions about each word. He responded by giving clues designed to help them retain information. These exchanges not only captivated his students’ attention but also further ignited classroom dynamics amongst the students themselves.

Paul was also laughing and joining in on the banter, putting his students at ease.

While they were writing their tests, Paul suddenly shifted gears to ask his class, “Guess what I ate yesterday?” He tells them he had eel. “EWWWW,” they chorused in unison. This prompted a broader discussion of favourite foods. Students pressed on and finished their daily test while engaging in conversation with Paul and one another. Some confessed that they were nervous about the looming exam. Paul reassured them that taking the test was no different from being in the classroom. Students needed to remember that. When everyone completed their quiz, Paul gave them the answers and asked if anyone scored perfect. Jae Hyun admitted that he did.

These reciprocal exchanges of conviviality and effort made to maintain a lighter type of social interaction are modalities of care that aim to produce students who will yield high standardized test scores. As I have already stated, that in and of itself the test is still not the end goal. Expanding the field for new educational possibilities is just another opportunistic phase for students to become adults with respectable white-collar careers and have desirable qualities that will elevate their status in the marriage market. To that end IHE Prep, as the guardian of these life trajectories and classed aspirations treated their students as the investments their parents believe they are. Adolescents needed to reproduce familial status, and with the proper attention and guidance they would eventually bear desirable returns. Though the pedagogical methodologies at times seemed aimless with no rhyme or reason and occasionally Paul appeared to be lax in his teaching approach, he maintained a loose disciplinary hold on his students by gifting convivial feelings rooted in care. That the students remained loyal to his leadership even
though they could see what the current exercises had to do with their future can nonetheless be understood as a form of care directed back to Paul.

In an attempt to explain value production and the concept of the gift in these interactions, I turn to Arjun Appadurai (2011) and David Graeber (2001) who ground their arguments in Marcel Mauss’ theorizations of the gift. While Appadurai is interested in explicating the key factors that make financial capitalism tick, Graeber (2001) is focused on a broader theorization of the production and realization of value. In both arguments, the giving of the gift is a binding force and remains the most potent feature in obligating recipients to return gifts. Gifted acts of care (see Muehlebach 2012) become crucially important in holding market economies together. Care not only facilitates the production of value but also aids in value realization. The latter process however will only be realized at a later, unknown date. The temporal dimensions then are contingent on adolescents as “value-in-potentia” in the present. The sensitivities and vulnerabilities of my interlocutors are embroiled in aspirational regimes that are undoubtedly stressful, but also open to new opportunities for play, conviviality, and care.

The exchanges between Paul and his students can be understood as elements that are necessary to maintaining the structure matrices of care, credit and debt. Unlike the conscious philanthropic acts of collecting and distributing pharmaceutical drugs to needy North Koreans that only forms a superficial connection, the daily sharing of laughter and the dedication of both teachers and students even during stressful times inadvertently forges bonds that run deep. Tiny links in a bigger chain, these affective exchanges that psychologically boost teachers and students can later yield results. For example in Francis’ case, on first meeting him, he could be a bit of a “spoiled” pain, but those daily interactions gave his teachers the opportunity to discover other sides to his personality, let them see his vulnerability and that he could be “cute.” While I should qualify that in most cases, individuals’ actions in these day-to-day exchanges were not consciously designed to elicit sympathy, there was a general understanding that one should be able to successfully read a situation regarding emotional responses, mood (gibun), and body language (see Lo 2009). Failure to recognize when a student was struggling could tarnish the overall atmosphere or “punwigi,” and teachers who could not empathize would be stingy in helping students like Francis who were often in need of extra tutoring.
These chain reactions of reciprocity, relationships of credit and debt, that are often indefinable are why I consider care to be a “derivative gamble.” In other words, care as a “derivative gamble” comes to fruition when students’ acts of care become “future contracts.” In Bill Maurer’s (2002: 19) reading of Michael Pryce and John Allen’s (1999) essay on money, Maurer emphasizes that “[t]he new monetary imaginary is spatial, too, for derivative instruments make present economic returns dependent not just on the future, but on the ‘future performance of distant spaces.’” By taking a risk that their gamble will reap rewards in the future, subjects must believe there is value in a particular action in the present. This is as true within the classroom dynamics shown above as it is when adolescents perform charitable acts, in essence fashioning themselves as the next generation of “21st century global leaders.” Care, as an unwaged, non-monetized act is a modality of investment that attempts to make the future “calculable.”

5.7 Conclusion

As discussed throughout this chapter, adults repeatedly expressed concern for adolescents’ psycho-social development into subjects who in the future will consider and care for others. Projects to procure financial contributions for the disadvantaged and staged forms of physical suffering were starkly juxtaposed with the everyday realities of affluent students. Jerry’s reflections however suggest that this is a fundamental qualification, and students must be encouraged to think, feel, and act beyond the immediacy of their classed habitus. The growing potential of money somehow does not hold the same power as the perceived infinite expansion of care as a performed act. It has been demonstrated time and again that market exchanges have not only the transformative power to alter people’s lives but can in fact also do the exact opposite and stymie individual growth.

The fact that care is bound up with even the promise of infinite potential is precisely what renders it so powerful. As shown in the ethnographic examples above, care as an individualized praxis draws in the bodies, sentiments, and exercises of prudence (however itinerant). The secularization of Christian ideals and doing unto others is being taught in schools and considered to be a valuable lesson. To that end, Jerry and his colleagues attempted to fold the asceticism in Weber’s Protestant Ethic into their pedagogical approaches to cultivate good humans who are capable of empathy and understanding. These principles must be deliberately introduced however, and to this demographic especially since comforts and privileges of
familial economic security demarcate students from the global population’s majority. Moreover, monetary donations are deemed to be limited in their capacity to truly help when contrasted with the bodily commitments of experiencing poverty. Money alone cannot nurture a sense of duty or responsibility that engenders sought after dispositions such as compassion. While individual students purposely fasting for a limited time in order to experience starvation is a highly individualized practice, the idea is that these experiences carry subjects forward, altering the course of their decision-making and global outlook. The purpose of this experience was to cultivate a sense of visceral understanding and consciousness for the impoverished Other. By faithfully carrying out these acts unquestioningly, students display how deeply entrenched the intergenerational, reciprocal familial relations are.
Chapter 6
Globalized Adolescence: Investing in Human Capital in a Failed State

6 Averting a life of mediocrity

In the spring of 2015, I joined Jinny (English name: Jennifer) and Karen (Korean name: Jia) one afternoon at a Starbucks in Bundang, a fairly new site of urban development (sindosi) for the affluent just outside of Seoul where both teens resided. This was the after-school spot where they usually met. Normally, both were busy with classes at their respective “cram schools” (hagwŏn) or with private tutors visiting their home. When our schedules coincided, the three of us “studied” together. Jinny and Karen completed their homework and prepared for upcoming exams while I hung out tidying my own fieldnotes and jotting down more. We broke up the tedium with intermittent chats, and sometimes they would ask me questions as if I were their academic advisor. I could give them informed answers since I had completed the same American Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum as Jinny and Karen. “How did you study for the APs (Advanced Placement Exams)? Did you start preparing for them early? What was dorm life like?”

Hungry after one of these sessions, the three of us decided to eat barbecue afterwards. They chose the popular chain restaurant Saemaul, named after the military dictator President Park Chung Hee’s aggressive development policy that was launched in 1970. Though aggressive, this policy is often identified as a turning point for South Korea, transforming the country from an agrarian to industrial economy. While Jinny’s and Karen’s parents lived through that period in modern history, we sat eating in a chain restaurant memorializing its legacy. As we ate, they were both constantly checking their phones while we chatted. Jinny and Karen were preoccupied by the lack of updates on Moodle, the learning platform that their international school teachers used to post assignments, discussions, and grades. At the beginning of our dinner, their grades for an Advanced Placement Language (AP Lang as it is abbreviated in common parlance) assignment had not yet been posted. They were impatient to learn their score and complained that their teacher was taking too long. This was just one example of many incidents that led Jinny and Karen to be dissatisfied with their AP Lang teacher, who according to them assigned course work with only vague instructions that left them open to harsh critiques
of their work later. During some of our study “sessions,” they would seek my opinion on literature such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, which inevitably almost always led to an airing of grievances on how a previous assignment was unfairly marked. Sometimes they showed me the comments made on an essay or assignment, asking if I could “de-code” their instructor’s language, which they found frustratingly cryptic. They relayed stories of their peers who somehow managed to get an “A” on assignments when they received Bs or, in a few instances, Cs. Lamenting how “unfair” all of this was, Jinny and Karen seemed to fret over AP Lang, more than any other class.

Clearly, this class was a giant thorn in their side. About midway through dinner, they checked Moodle again using their smartphones to see if there was any news. An update was posted. In another moment of part of this vicious cycle, neither received their desired “As” and claimed to not know why. While they languidly chewed on their spicy BBQ pork and cold noodles in a slumped posture, I decided to examine the open wound. I asked Jinny and Karen why it was important for them to go to a good university. Nearly instantly, their mood went from gloominess to fiercely passionate. Jinny rattled off the following spate of reasons: “I don’t want a mediocre life, a mediocre job, a mediocre house, a mediocre husband!!!” If I wasn’t shocked already, the next comment was a home run statement. Jinny exclaimed, “I don’t want knowledge!” Karen then added, “It might sound superficial, but I just want to go to a better college than everyone — I’m competitive. Chances are you’ll get a better job if you graduate from a good school.” Clearly, a life of mediocrity was highly undesirable for Jinny and Karen. For these teenagers, their impossibly stingy AP Lang teacher was not just giving them a low mark on, in the grander scheme of things, an insignificant literature assignment. This teacher was spoiling their prospects of marrying well in the future as part of the larger picture related to class reproduction where they envisioned themselves “at the top.”

As I have repeatedly discussed elsewhere, receiving news of an undesired grade was a source of stress that went beyond the significance inherent to a particular assignment or test and intensified their insecurities regarding their status as investees and class reproduction. Reflecting on quantifiable representations of the self, adolescents understood their academic performance within a broader cosmology of credit and debt with the aim of countermanding future economic uncertainty. In the spirit of building my arguments, in this chapter, I examine how upper-classed adolescents come to understand themselves as the aspirant but precarious “1%.” I aim to
demonstrate that their self-reflexivity is not only an effect of their status as investees but also a result of undergoing these processes of self-appreciation in a political climate that saw the manufacturing of socioeconomic inequality by those “at the top.” Nowhere was this exploitation of social positioning more perceivably abused than by former President Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of former President Park Chung Hee, who became the poster child for elites’ corruption and their stranglehold on power. However, in this instance her power could not protect her and she was taken down by the 99% who persisted in their candlelight vigils. President Park Geun-Hye’s celebrated impeachment and removal from office is a clear-cut case that proved there are limits in maintaining one’s status as a powerful elite. Both the candlelight protests and subsequent impeachment took place in 2016-2017 not long after I had completed my fieldwork. However, even in 2014, anger and discontent were brewing.

As I will elaborate on more fully, in 2014, the neologism gapjil, meaning “an abuse of power,” was hyped by the media as one of the hottest new terms. Gapjil is used specifically to identify situations where someone of a higher social ranking abuses their power to subordinate, humiliate, and degrade someone of a lesser social standing. This term gained popularity in light of several globally publicized stories such as the “Nut Gate” or “Nut Rage” incident (ttangk’ong hoehwang) involving Heather Cho, the Vice-President of Korean Airlines. When Cho was not served her macadamia nuts on a silver platter on a flight departing from JFK International Airport, she demanded a full kowtow from the flight attendants and then ordered that the plane return to the terminal to have the chief flight attendant removed. This incident only served to further reinforce the Hell Joseon discourse that declares that South Korea is a “failed state” and the rules of meritocracy do not apply. According to South Korea’s “have-nots,” all that matters is whether one is born with a “golden, silver, or dirt spoon” in their mouths.

While Jinny and Karen may have seemed oblivious as they stated their desires to marry a man who — like them — was “better” than everyone else, the truth of the matter was they were fully aware of the vitriol that the “have-nots” hurled their way. Witnessing the impeachment of a president due to citizens angered by flagrant class inequalities and a corporate vice president fired and jailed just added another layer of anxiety to my interlocutors’ sense of precarity. My interlocutors knew that they were hated for their sometimes unsavoury upper-classed behaviour, which I will discuss throughout this chapter.
As I previously discussed, the reproduction of class is an “intergenerational pact” (Greenberg and Muehlebach 2007) formulated through gifting economies of care and monetary investments from parents. Adolescents, as recipients of monetary and emotional investments, also come to understand their classed positionality within their peer groups in addition to academic, social, national, and global hierarchies of power. Until now, I have focused predominantly on anxieties pertaining to the global economy and intergenerational relationships. In this chapter, I include an examination of domestic classed tensions that targeted the upper-class and elites (a distinction I will discuss further) in order to elucidate my theorizations on feeling precarious while privileged. I intend to show that while my interlocutors are “at the top” of political-economic hierarchies, there are several factors that contribute to their apprehension of losing their standing. As the opening vignette shows, something as “minor” as receiving a bad mark on a minor assignment was enough to trigger the students’ anxieties about where they might end up in the future. A bad mark, according to Jinny and Karen, could lead to a “mediocre husband and a mediocre life.” As I will argue, these anxieties should be analytically contextualized within the broader South Korean political climate where — to put it bluntly — the rich were hated. And where upper-classed adolescents lacking familial ties to high-ranking politicians or corporate conglomerates (chaebol) demonstrate their understandings of intra-classed fissures and comprehend that as privileged as they are, they are not elite.

Thus, in an effort to more fully elaborate on the main themes brought forth in this dissertation thus far, in this chapter, I analyse several discourses. First, I examine peer-to-peer conversations to highlight the many ways in which adolescents come to understand themselves as precarious subjects. As Marjorie Goodwin (2007: 353) argues, “Through their talk about behaviour of others, children actively create their own standards of action and notions of morality that guide action in their group.” While Goodwin (2007: 354) focuses on preadolescent girls, I believe that her arguments remain germane to my own analysis as my interlocutors’ intersubjective relationships were grounded in conversations with “a common or divergent stance toward the target.” Adolescents’ “explicit use of membership categories” organize their social worlds and allow them to explore forms of classed belonging from within the boundaries of friendship (Goodwin 2007: 354). When Jinny and Karen commiserated about their frustrations with their AP Lang teacher’s negative assessment of their assignments, this gave them a foundation upon which they established their solidarity as friends through the identification of specific social
actors in their lives. Their conversation also gave an inadvertent glimpse into their worldview where educators are seen as gatekeepers to their classed reproduction. In examining my interlocutors’ feelings and the actors influencing their lives, I explain how social membership amongst the “1%” is formed.

Second, I examine my interlocutors’ anxieties that, quite aside from their academic performance, were rooted in the classed tensions that were running high in South Korea during the time of my fieldwork. The ethnographic analysis shifts from conversations with Jinny to ones I had with her Mother where she expresses her own anxieties about negative attention that her children might invite when speaking English in public. I end my chapter by examining the term gapjil and “Hell Joseon” discourse so as to establish a correlation between the ethnographic conversations analysed in this chapter to the political-economic climate of the time.

In the previous chapter, I gave examples of how adolescents were taught that acts of philanthropy and care are integral to being a “good rich person” and will distinguish them from being a “bad” one. My purpose in this chapter is to juxtapose the ethnographic data in the previous chapter on how modelling oneself after a venture philanthropist casts the rich into a favourable light with how throwing temper tantrums and demeaning individuals of lower socioeconomic ranking has the opposite outcome. I discuss how this is one of the several ways (more of which will be discussed throughout this chapter) that affluent individuals incite the ire of middle- and lower-classed subjects and jeopardize their position of power.

Thus, I aim to show that adolescents’ status as “investees in a speculative age” (Feher 2018) brings with it a host of uncertainties. Will parental investments materialize into equal or greater returns? Will adolescents ascend to be the next generation’s “1%?” What position will these adolescents occupy as adults on a more global stage? How will middle- and lower-classed South Koreans make sense of their existence? Moreover, how do my interlocutors — none of whom come from families with direct ties to Samsung, LG, or Hyundai (chaebŏl chip) — understand their privileged positionality? Through every twist and turn, my interlocutors questioned, managed, and negotiated their classed positionality and sense of precarity. Sometimes they felt secure in their position and could justify their behaviour to themselves when they treated those “lesser than them” such as their teachers with disdain. At other times, their sense of insecurity
prevailed. At times, this chapter meanders back and forth, in and out, up and around various feelings, beliefs, actions, and reflections. A tidy presentation, in some ways, would take away from the tortuous paths and mental gymnastics undertaken by my interlocutors to claim their classed positionality as the “1%” while not being the “1% of the 1%” but still being hated by the vast majority of South Koreans.

6.1 Experimental Exuberance and Intra-Classed Fissures

My adolescent interlocutors, as representatives of the ascendant “1%” occupy a unique social positioning. Their parents are for the most part, highly successful entrepreneurs, hedge-fund managers, or occupy high-level positions in South Korean corporate conglomerates (chaebol). Though these occupations are possibly considered as upper-middle class rather than elite, the adolescents included in this study are favourably positioned to a fiercely competitive domestic job market through their international schooling that sets them apart from the vast majority of their peers (Jon 2013: 456). They are also the beneficiaries of the “English Divide” or “the schism between the privileged and the other social classes, accentuated or reinforced by the ability to have access to English-language education outside the national education system” (Song 2013 141-142). That is to say, the emergence of the private education industry more broadly and the international school market more generally are the outcomes of the “appropriation of schooling, in all its diverse forms, as an instrument of economic political, and social control” (Carney 2003: 88, also see Apple 1993).

On the one hand, the adolescents in this study are distinctly unlike their middle- and lower-classed peers. They are set apart by their “superior” language skills, everyday attire that does not include wearing uniforms, and enrolment in schools that are free to implement educational curriculums that do not follow governmental standards. Though the adolescents in this study are highly privileged, they lack elite status though regularly rubbing shoulders with the elite’s progeny. This is acutely important when considering how educational in addition to family lineage heavily impacts the public and private sector. The elite has close ties to the state through corporate conglomerates (chaebol), not surprising since 44% of Samsung Group’s outside directors are recruited from government ministries and prosecutors’ offices (Yoo and Lee 2009). Children of this elite group are “children of the socio-economic elite” who are identified as “members of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) who ‘see their own interests, and/or the
interests of their nation, as best served by an identification with the interests of the capitalist global system, in particular the interests of the countries of the capitalist core and the transnational corporations domiciled in them” (Cambridge and Thompson 2004: 170). For this reason alone, they are positioned quite differently than the adolescents in this study whose education and familial monetary classed status are the gateway to becoming the “1%.” Though adolescents seem to be assured a bright future, under “parentocracy,” where families’ unbridled investments are welcomed by the state, students’ life opportunities are made increasingly vulnerable to market forces. This is attributable to the fact that the state abandons any responsibility for students should educational outcomes be low. In other words, a students’ poor performance is a burden for families — not educational institutions — to bear (Brown 1990: 79).

Thus, this is a story of becoming, of not yet become, and perhaps never being. To put succinctly, their educational outcomes have not yet been determined. Their status as white-collar workers not yet confirmed. Their familial classed reproduction still incomplete. Though adolescents as financialized investments should attain “1%” status and realize economic classed reproduction, uncertainty in conjunction with market turbulence solidify their identities as inherently precarious and vulnerable to eventually living a “life of mediocrity.” Their sense of security is further undermined by growing classed antagonisms targeting the rich and elite for ruining South Korea.

To explain the reflexivity of the interlocutors in this study, I draw from Michelle Murphy’s (2017: 82) theorizations on “experimental exuberance.” As Murphy (2017: 82) argues, “experimental exuberance calls social relations into febrile rearrangement, legitimizing a continuous refreshing of destruction at a microscale as relations are offered up as decomposable and called to recomposition over and over.” As I have discussed thus far, unrelenting investment in education has a long history in South Korea (Chapter 1-2). However, the ways in which my interlocutors invest in “skill-based” education evidence how pedagogical innovations are entwined with political-economic ones (Chapter 3). These innovations foster regimes of play and are an example of how “the Play Ethic” (Chapter 4) has replaced “the Protestant Ethic” by using creativity to innovate solutions for market instability. New pedagogical innovations have also initiated “venture philanthropy,” a core tenet of producing model “global citizens” (Chapter 5). In sum, the parents and educators in this study take pre-existing educational practices and
institutional channels to create a highly exclusive, niche, private school market. Investing heavily in English-immersion education, the adults transform the ubiquitous pursuit of English education in South Korea into a capital-intensive one that sets the bar higher and excludes lower classes.

Adolescents are at the centre of these investing schemes that seek to organize South Korea’s classed hierarchies. Through channels that are fundamentally different from how their parents achieved their positions, subjects such as Jinny and Karen will have to rewrite the rules of belonging to South Korea’s upper class if they are to reproduce themselves as the “1%.” At the life stage preceding adulthood, the outcomes of human capital production remain unclear and uncertain — but sites of potential, nonetheless. “Cultivating human capital is generated from heterogeneity and difference, and from our varied pursuits of being and becoming particular kinds of people, families, or communities” (Bear et al. 2015). Adolescents are converted into human capital where class, nationality, linguistic capital accumulation, institutional belonging, and gender intersect, producing privilege and feelings of precarity simultaneously. Consider the first vignette in this dissertation that highlights Ms. Ha’s anxieties regarding the dwindling prestige of white-collar professions that in the past guaranteed an impressive income. Doctors, lawyers, and engineers, she claimed, were no longer good career choices. Supply had outstripped demand. And the ones who made it were susceptible to going bankrupt. Finding employment with a corporate conglomerate was considered difficult if not impossible. According to Ms. Ha, they no longer needed workers as they did in the past when Korea was a developing economy. International school educators shared similar worries. Finding innovative educational approaches that will produce leading-edge workers that will thrive in the new, and in some case as of yet unimagined, economies can be understood as a mutual goal of upper-classed parents and educators. The intention of the experimental synergy is to produce forms of human capital that are modelled after Google workers, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg who are all considered pioneers of new technologies and economies.

6.2 Class in Korea

Although I trace the educational practices of the “1%,” it is important to recognize that many of South Korea’s elites have long sought Ivy League educations and these practices are not new or radically different. Syngman Rhee, for example, the Head of the Provisional Government of the
Republic of Korea and President from 1948-1960, obtained his undergraduate degree at George Washington University, a master of arts from Harvard, and Ph.D. at Princeton prior to stepping into political office in Korea. During his time in the United States, Rhee made many political connections in Washington, D.C. Another similarity between my present-day interlocutors and political elites in the past — not only in Korea, but also Japan, India, and China — is that they all have had to reckon with political-economic changes and newly forming technologies from around the globe (Brooke and Schmid 2003: 10). Both old practices pursued by those who can claim membership to South Korea’s elite class and the new practices pursued by those lying outside of it but who can purchase their way through educational branding and inhabiting a set of moral codes are used in the making of this new “1%.”

I would argue, however, that if there was one major difference between now and the past, it is how claims to “global” regimes are made by the “1%”. In the past, nationalism was built by positioning South Korea as the epicentre of all political agendas. The state launched an import-substitute economy (see Nelson 2000), the objectives of which continue to vivify nationalist projects, to some extent. However, as Nancy Abelmann and Sojin Park (2004) argue, “cosmopolitan strivings” are central to domestic nationalist agendas. The expanding scope of nationalism leans towards “global” orientations.

As mentioned above, Jinny and Karen will take paths quite different from those their parents trod mostly due to changing governmental policies. For instance, in 1989 the government implemented new domestic policies that lifted the ban on South Koreans travelling to other countries (Han and Chun 2015), widening the scope of those who could pursue their “cosmopolitan dreams” (Park and Abelmann 2004). Adolescents such as Jinny and Karen apply to American colleges at a point in South Korean history when it is the 11th largest economy in the world — a radically different political-economic terrain from preceding generations. To put

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130 To clarify, these agendas were drafted with the sole purpose of maintaining autonomy by strictly controlling indigenous practices and discourses (Brooke and Schmid 2003).
this into perspective, in 2018, the GDP per capita was recorded at US$38,350, according to the OECD.\textsuperscript{131} In 1960, the same statistic was US$158.24, according to the World Bank.\textsuperscript{132}

While the disparity between the aggregate statistics is astounding in and of itself, these larger numbers serve here to highlight Jinny’s and Karen’s positionality. Nearly all international schools included in this study came with an annual price tag of $35,000 per year, nearly equalling the GDP per capita. This puts a spotlight on the issue of income inequality. In 2018, South Korea had a Gini coefficient rating of .29 in terms of income inequality.\textsuperscript{133} This growing gap is cause for concern for many South Koreans. These anxieties are tied to the lagging economic growth rate, which in 2018 was recorded at -.4%. This is not a slight decrease from previous years; it is a major slowdown since President Park Chung Hee’s time, which had an astonishing 15% growth rate between 1962-67. This growth rate nearly doubled the state’s target of 7.1% per year (Seth 2017: 5). During this time, South Korea experienced exponential economic growth whilst also living under a state that made efforts to thwart growing classed divisions — namely by creating a population suited to build up the industrial sector. Today, the top 10% in South Korea possess 66% of the wealth. In contrast, the poorer half holds only 2% (Kim 2017: 844). While Jinny and Karen worry about slipping into a life of mediocrity, the vast majority of South Koreans grow anxious about how difficult life has become, blaming the upper-classes such as the families in this dissertation for many of the nation’s socioeconomic problems.

\section*{6.3 The New “1%”?}

As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, the formation of the new future “1%” involves capital-intensive investments in a child’s global education. The ubiquitous pursuit of English linguistic capital also can be traced back to the 1997 IMF Crisis. These elements are nothing new. The widespread pursuits amongst the upper-class in sending their children to international

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\textsuperscript{131} See OECD data: https://data.oecd.org/korea.htm).
\textsuperscript{133} To contextualize, the United States carries a score of .39, while Canada is .29 (https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm).
schools with the goal of American college admissions are a twist on pre-existing practices. Parents’ investing schemes, while designed to bypass many of the inefficiencies and pressures of “Korean education,” in actuality, reproduce many of the same symptoms and hierarchies. Moreover, the language surrounding the zealous pursuit of English language acquisition are not class-based capital investments but a step towards “globalization” (Song 2011).

Eileen, a guidance counsellor at a local international school, pointed out the irony of parents sending their children to these institutions with admission to an Ivy League college as the end goal. She pointed out that this trajectory was to give their children an education that was less stressful than what Korean public schools offered. In so doing, parents produced a whole new system of educational competition, and their attempts to avert stress in fact catapulted their children into a realm of stress that was just as strenuous if not more so. This type of educational experimentality takes the “rearrangements and losses” (Murphy 2017: 93) of long-standing practices and weaves them together to produce status through education. Drawing from a globally integrated world where networks and spaces are stratified according to class, parents envision a mobility for their children that will afford them respect, a certain freedom of movement associated with consumption habits and educational attainments, and the possibility of avoiding the harsher realities of working life. It is the production of habitus as a global citizen that they seek.134

Today’s upper-classed positionality and subjectivity are produced at a very particular political-economic juncture in South Korea’s recent history. While this appears to afford Jinny and Karen undeniably amazing educational and life opportunities, both experience anxieties about living a “life of mediocrity” all the same. Though Jinny and Karen are capital-intensive commodities in the making, a quick cursory glance may not make this obvious. Neither Jinny nor Karen was particularly “flashy” in their appearance. They wore slip-on sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts — all of which had nice, clean lines, but for the most part lacked designer labels. It is true that in fact

134 The global orientation and modality here are fundamentally different from migrant workers lacking rights (see Constable 2007). Both migrant workers and adolescents in this study depend on their hyper-mobility, flexible labour, attunements to global flows of capital and their place within it. Despite these glaring similarities, their classed positionality within domestic and global landscapes present vastly different spectrum of opportunities.
their nondescript clothing could still have easily cost a small fortune. But compared to their peers who dressed in more expensive streetwear and activewear brands such as Comme des Garçons, which is easily recognized by the heart logo with two eyes, or Canada Goose expedition jackets that cost well over $1,000 US (sometimes closer to $1,800US depending on the style), their fashion sensibilities did not scream of conspicuous consumption. They carried backpacks, but they were not designer brands (but again could have easily cost a healthy sum of money). Lightly applied pencil liner and some subtle lip gloss was usually the extent of their make-up.

Evidence of conspicuous consumption was more apparent in their habitus and health. Both had long hair, which was kept fairly neat. Both had straight teeth and clear skin. Both were considerably taller than myself, who stands at five foot one. While I have no evidence regarding their specific medical practices, plenty of other students in the Gangnam neighbourhood were on human growth hormones. Others were being trained by private Pilates instructors who were hired by their parents to produce long, lean, muscles, which would create the illusion of height. I heard of other more extreme measures taken, but worst by far was a leg-lengthening procedure that calls for a doctor to deliberately break the legs to recast the bones so that an individual might be a few centimetres taller.\(^\text{135}\) It was so well known that these practices were common amongst affluent families that some South Koreans I spoke with swore that all teenagers in the Gangnam neighbourhood were taller than everyone in the rest of the country.

Other procedures to alter appearance of course include plastic surgery, with a focus on augmenting one’s face. At the time of my fieldwork, neither Jinny nor Karen had undergone plastic surgery. It was only towards the end that Jinny sought out the “double eyelid” surgery, where a small incision is made into a monolid and stitched back up. The healing process produces a crease, making it easier to apply makeup as well as making the eyes appear a bit larger and sometimes rounder. As far as seeking help with skin issues, I was certainly aware of the fact that many of my students regularly saw a dermatologist to deal with acne and other skin blemishes common to people in this age bracket.

\(^\text{135}\) This particular procedure was spoken of in the late 1990s during my first trip to South Korea. I did not hear of it much during my fieldwork.
The dead giveaway to their privilege, however, was their ability to slip into English that had an American accent. At Starbucks one day, Karen asked me in nervous whisper whether I thought the young couple sitting next to us departed because we were “speaking English.” Looking over at their table, I noticed two empty cups and recalled that the couple was there before we arrived. It seemed as if their time at the café had run out and they were likely moving on to other things. When I pointed this out to Karen, she seemed unconvinced. Many of my interlocutors including Karen were anxious about speaking “clean” American-accented English in public that might draw unwanted attention to one’s classed positionality. In a volatile climate of heightened class conflict, speaking in English was perceived as obnoxious at the very least and an insensitive, crass display of one’s privilege at the very worst. The fact that Karen seemed so uncomfortable to the point of paranoia underscores the extent to which she felt her privilege could put her in a precarious position.

In fact, it was the very subjects heavily investing in the production of this type of human capital — parents — who harboured the most anxiety regarding the reactions of others to the production of this “new” globalized “1%” subjectivity. They did not know whether their strategies to propel their children to the top would reap rewards or backfire. And as Jinny’s Mother’s comments illustrate, there was palpable anxiety over how their children would be targeted in times of class conflict. They were concerned that the effect of “globalized information networks” that rest on the “transformation of world culture” may in fact make “many groups feel marginalized by the market values of this new culture” (Carnoy and Rhoten 2002: 6).

Surprisingly, my interlocutors were sensitive to the alienation and marginalization they caused others to feel. My interlocutors knew they were targeted as the “bad ones” by an overwhelming majority. The often taken-for-granted act of speaking in a second language when done in public was enough to generate nervous self-awareness. Jinny’s own mother’s behaviour is a prime example of this nervousness. Unlike my interactions with her daughter, which were almost entirely in English, barring a few words here and there, my conversation with Jinny’s mother was completely in Korean. At the time of my fieldwork she was a young, pretty woman who dressed in simple, chic styles and drove a brown BMW Mini-Cooper. In a conversation over dumplings at the family home, Jinny’s mother confessed feelings of embarrassment and disdain when she saw “international school kids” roaming the streets of the affluent Apgujeong
neighbourhood and speaking “loudly in English.” She did not want her daughter or son to elicit negative reactions and feelings similar to those she had personally experienced. She did not want her children to be scorned or suffer embarrassment by those others who might recognize their privilege based on their linguistic habitus.

It was not only the conspicuous performances of global habitus that irked her. The lack of mastery over the Korean language was also a point of consternation. Jinny’s mother lamented that her daughter struggled with more formal terms — for instance when the cell phone company sent a text about her contract. Jinny had trouble understanding the message. This particular situation came up in conversation numerous times with other parents and students. To hear my students speak Korean would not raise any initial red flags. Their accents were clean and unquestionably native. However, Ms. Ha worried that her children would never acquire a sophisticated vocabulary in Korean. Once she asked me, “What good is it if a kid goes to Harvard but can’t speak Korean? No company will hire them!” Students also felt self-conscious about their lack of language skills. The irony is that the upper class created this private education “social malady” in the first place as a means to get one step “ahead” of the rest\textsuperscript{136} (Song 2011: 49). This became yet another source of anxiety as parents and educators worried that English language proficiency came at the cost of Korean language fluency, thus hurting their children’s chances of becoming fully integrated with domestic elites (see Willis 1977).

Once when Jae Hyun was struggling with his SAT vocabulary list, I was asked to gently take him aside for a quiet talk (although I was not his SAT instructor). Upon opening up the conversation, it was clear I had hit a sore spot. Jae Hyun immediately became touchy and embarrassed. Looking crestfallen, avoiding eye contact and talking while looking down with his fingertips cradling his head, he stated, “My English isn’t good and my Korean isn’t good.” This was a common concern for many of my students who spent much of their childhood and youth switching between multiple types of schooling in both South Korea and abroad. Lacking

\textsuperscript{136} As Thomas Clayton (1998) points out, this is what Louis Althusser (1971:149) calls, “the dominant Ideological State Apparatus,” where students are given “the know-how” in accordance to ruling class ideology. I raise this point to emphasize how the ubiquitous pursuit of English language skills and global aspirations are government initiatives that technically apply to all South Koreans but can only be whole-heartedly pursued by a select few.
consistency — and stability — adolescents felt they had been robbed of the opportunity to fully develop a native tongue, complete with an advanced vocabulary.

While these matters were of grave concern for my interlocutors, Jinny’s mother was particularly offended by the fact that her daughter rarely used the honorific form when addressing her in Korean. Typically, when addressing elders and superiors (for example, one’s boss at work), Koreans default to the polite form. Jinny broke this rule with her mother on a regular basis. Once, Jinny’s mother confronted her daughter in a fairly gentle way. “What if we used honorifics?” (chondaennal), her mother asked. To her mother’s dismay Jinny indignantly responded, “WHY??!!!” (wae). It was a sore spot, but Jinny’s mother decided to leave it alone and accept it as an effect of sending her children to a school where South Korean identities were “ambiguous,” or “vague” (aemaehada). In her opinion, their identities and cultural performativity were neither “Korean” nor “American.” They fell somewhere in between what Jinny’s mother saw as distinctly bounded categorizations. These subjectivities that are read as “ambiguous,” constituted primarily through language and bodily hexis, at once indexed my interlocutors’ precarity more specifically than perhaps not becoming the “1% within the 1%.”

While there was a sense of hesitation on Jinny’s mother’s part to ask how her daughter compared to others in her peer group, she cited the fact that as a teacher, I interacted with students with far more frequency and could give an informed opinion. I validated her thoughts that Jinny was in fact mature for her age and had a healthy intellectual curiosity. Jinny’s mother seemed to be both appeased and pleased by this. She agreed that her daughter, despite her concerns, seemed to be on the right track. She commented on the fact that Jinny was “tall,” a much coveted physical trait, and outwardly her personal appearance clearly showed her to be a healthy and unequivocally “fit” individual.

Throughout this conversation, Jinny’s mother remained well aware of her role in manufacturing this situation. In fact, she spoke fondly of her time in Canada with her family. She had had opportunities to practice her English, make new friends, learn to cook new dishes, and lived in a house with a yard. I got the sense that life was pleasantly quiet for Jinny’s mother then. Their current home in one of Seoul’s satellite cities also exuded a relaxed vibe. Perched on a verdant tree-covered mountainside, their two-storey apartment with floor-to-ceiling windows was completed by two Papillion dogs (their golden retrievers lived in a nearby kennel). It was hard
to believe I was still in Korea and so close to densely packed, dirty Seoul. This spacious abode was where they were living temporarily just until the construction on their stand-alone house was complete (a sign of extravagant wealth in this part of Korea).

Jinny’s family traversed the world according to their whims, while Karen’s American upbringing was a by-product of her father’s pursuit of a doctoral degree at a highly prestigious state university. This was a major source of internalized stress for Karen, who once buried her head in her hands and in a pained voice told me that she “felt so guilty, because school was so expensive.” By comparison, Karen told me that Jinny was “really rich,” while her family was “solidly middle class.” Karen brought up the fact that while her family lived in an apartment complex, Jinny’s family was building a new, stand-alone house. Karen’s father held a position at a coveted company and had a doctoral degree. Unlike Karen, her brother spent much less time in the United States. Since her family lacked the funds to send both children to an international school, her younger brother had to attend a Korean public school.

Jinny wasn’t oblivious to these differences between their families either. In a separate conversation, Jinny told me that Karen’s mother tended to be extremely strict, putting considerable pressure on her daughter to become academically successful. However, Jinny admitted that sometimes she felt unfairly judged by her own parents when they wondered why their daughter found her studies difficult, despite the fact that she went to “an easier school.” As she explained to me, her parents, like many others, believed American-style international school was an escape from all the stresses of Korean public schools. Many of the parents I spoke with, mentioned more fully in Chapter 2, saw the investment in international school as an investment in their children’s mental health. The strain on Jinny’s relationship with her mother was also an effect of the language gap existing between them. Despite these tensions, Jinny believed that her situation with her parents seemed to be less fraught with tension in comparison to Karen’s situation.

In contrast to Karen’s father, who despite holding a Ph.D. was an office worker for a corporation, Jinny’s father was a hedge-fund manager. Meanwhile, both Jinny and Karen’s mothers were “housewives.” But, the flexibility and financial success of Jinny’s father’s job allowed her family to live abroad as they wished. Though born in Korea, Jinny and her family lived to Canada for a number of years, before choosing Malaysia, and finally returning home. In
Canada, Jinny and her younger brother attended public school. It was in Malaysia that they first began their international school education. Jinny’s mother narrated these decisions quite proudly. Their family sojourned in different countries around the world independent of any social or financial support provided by a major corporation such as Samsung. Clearly, Jinny’s mother differentiated her family from other Koreans with similar mobility patterns. Had they been employees who were relocated, the company would have handled the expenses of moving and provided social support to acclimate them to a foreign environment. In some cases, those families that wished to enrol their children in international school abroad would even receive an additional tuition stipend from their employer. Jinny’s family, however, relocated of their own volition, drawing on their own financial resources to do so. Their decision to return to Korea was motivated by the fact that both parents were a bit fatigued from moving around the world, where neither were fluent in the languages spoken in Canada or Malaysia. In the interest of continuing their children’s “Western” educational trajectory, they settled on Global School in Korea, which at the time was actively looking to recruit attendees and had a fairly lax admissions process.

The pursuit of adventure seemed to be a large factor in Jinny’s family’s decisions to live abroad. However, the opportunity to select from a variety of educational choices was another point of attraction. As Jinny’s mother told me, a private academy tutor made the suggestion that both her children would fare much better abroad. At the time, Jinny’s mother said she couldn’t fully understand the teacher’s reasoning. Over time, however, she came to realize that neither of her children were well-suited for “Korean education.” Her son was incredibly bright, but shy. He needed a lot of encouragement and support. Sensitive to her son’s individual developmental path, Jinny’s mother confessed that during their travels abroad, her son struggled to adjust. Jinny’s mother pulled him out of school and let him be, giving him a year to rest. Jinny, on the other hand was mature for her age, also incredibly smart, and benefitted from the attention she received in her and interactions with teachers working within “Western-style” schools. She was curious and had interests outside of school, such as horseback riding. In sum, she was a good candidate for a “Western-style” education.

The points of pride Jinny’s Mother enumerated when taken from a different perspective are the same points generating anxiety about their family’s classed positioning. Now, though, the anxieties are less about whether the choices they made were the “right” ones in regards to their
children’s educational paths. Instead, Jinny’s Mother expressed some apprehension over raising children who spoke fluent English and were comfortable living abroad, unsure whether the “end result” will in fact benefit them. By all means, this sounds like a “success story” so far. But at what cost? Fears that her children’s global habitus as well as their limited grasp of their native tongue would make their privilege glaringly obvious and lead to them being excluded from South Korean society raised concerns for Jinny’s Mother, adding another dimension to her sense of classed precarity.

6.4 Speculative Anxiety

As I have discussed, Jinny’s mother feels disconnected from her daughter, given the differences in upbringing and linguistic practices. Meanwhile, teachers worry about their students’ futures, which are inextricably bound to their own career success. Students get stressed not only over their grades and college prospects but the contempt lower-classed individuals’ have for them, of which the students are fully aware. Anxious about their own relative socio-economic positioning, middle- and lower-class South Koreans gaze at the new “1%” with suspicion, envy, anxiety, and anger. Class-based insults were certainly hurled at many international school students based on their status as privileged adolescents. Take for instance this following observation made by Jinny and her friend Sumin (requested this pseudonym, no English name, though the Korean name is remarkably phonetically similar). Sumin and Jinny told me that security guards at their school would routinely lambast them for being “rich but dumb.” In fact, this is a common perception amongst South Koreans who view “Western” education as the “easier” route. Jinny and Sumin told me that the security guards think Korean foreign language high schools are where “the really smart kids go.” In their everyday experiences as students, the few working class subjects they encountered such as these security guards at their school are the very individuals who taught them first-hand about class conflict. These matters continued to be a topic of conversation between Jinny and Sumin.

Jinny introduced me to Sumin, who attended IHE Prep where she took college entrance examination preparatory classes, though she was never my student. She was a high school junior at Global School with Jinny and Karen. Jinny and Karen however belong to separate circles, Sumin explained to me. Sumin is different from her peers in that she never lived abroad. Instead, she started attending Global School of Korea in third grade and learned English entirely
in Korea. Speaking with a noticeable Korean accent, Sumin stands out from the rest of her peers. Sumin is an only child and her father works in real estate while her mother is a housewife. She dresses in clothes often a bit on the bulky side, mostly jeans and nondescript shirts. In the winter months, Sumin who is about five feet tall seemed to be nearly engulfed by a giant bubble jacket. While Karen and Jinny would sometimes wear light makeup, Sumin did not. Her hair was permed (maybe?), a bit unkempt, and usually haphazardly pulled back into a ponytail. In short, Sumin exemplified normcore fashion at its best, nondescript, casual, nonplussed — proudly “nothing special” in that Mark Zuckerberg sort-of-way. Over time, Sumin’s look stood in stark contrast to Jinny’s, who eventually underwent double eyelid surgery, sported waist-length long straight hair and applied standard feminine makeup to accentuate large eyes. By her freshman year in college, Jinny was conventionally pretty — a transformation that her friends enthusiastically commented on in social media.

Given the everyday struggles of my adolescent interlocutors, whose lives are dominated and determined by studying and attempting to attain the highest marks possible, Sumin and Jinny were horrified by this categorization of being “rich but dumb.” They found this comment offensive for several reasons, but it also felt like an attack. The fact that the very people who were hired to ostensibly keep them safe at school were the very ones who seemed to hate them the most was extremely unsettling and left them feeling exposed. Add to that the fact that their academic lives were somehow considered to be less demanding than their other South Korean peers, and they felt deeply misunderstood and harshly judged. Sumin told me she frequently pulled all-nighters and when she didn’t, would go to bed at 3 or 4 am. Our texting exchanges at all hours of the night are confirmation. Jinny, on the other hand, looked at Sumin in disbelief and responded that while she could not do that — she needed sleep — she also struggled with her schoolwork. Jinny vented about an ongoing conflict with her parents, who were mystified by the fact that their daughter did not effortlessly breeze through her academic life. “They always compare me to Korean kids in public schools and ask why I have trouble when they sent me to the ’easier’ school.” Now it was Sumin’s turn to express horror. Her parents would never dare say such things to her. The two friends turned to me to explain further that non-international school attendees view international institutes as places where families “just drive around in their foreign cars.” Or put differently, international schools were a space for the upper-classes — as not the brightest crayons in the box — to live frivolously doing nothing more than showing off
their luxury goods. Their embarrassment in telling me this however was fleeting, sublimating into laughter when Jinny spurted out, “Actually — that is true!”

In actuality, the claim that international schools are places where “the rich but dumb kids” go is one that I encountered myself first-hand. I read the incident as a clear case of classed animosity as well as a product of intergenerational tensions. Once, early for an appointment at Jinny and Karen’s school, I was told to sit in the security guard office with middle-aged security guards bordering on senior citizen very like the ones Sumin and Jinny had mentioned to me before. In Korean, they complained to me about the students, pointing to a nearby foreign language school — that teaches mostly in Korean despite its name — saying “smart kids” attend that school. In the introduction, I explained in more detail the landscape of high schools in South Korea. Aside from public schools, there are many other categories and designations, including international schools that the government grants special permission to administer all classes in English or another foreign language in addition to implementing curriculum that is independent of state mandates. Foreign language schools — briefly mentioned above — admit those who are high-achievers and can afford the yearly tuition, which generally hovers at the $3-4,000 mark. There are also many privately owned and operated specialty schools, some even run by multinational companies such as the one steel conglomerate POSCO has set up that focuses on science and technology. As institutes that lie outside the public education system and are stratified by the forces of capital that sustain certain educational streams, these schools have long been the targets of reform. Time and again, politicians made various attempts to shut down elite high schools but to no avail.

The security guards’ appraisal of international school attendees is representative of the prevailing critiques on the elite classes that undoubtedly question the future socio-economic landscape of South Korea. Foreign language schools, as symbols of elitist institutions, have also come under heavy criticism by parents whose children are not eligible to attend (whether it is because the family cannot afford the tuition fees or the intensive private preparatory lessons), and they have therefore demanded their closure. Yet, for all that, the security guards at the international school still found the foreign language schools less offensive than the international schools. Adolescents, attuned to the hostility, begin to question their path to becoming the desired “1%.” Despite the visible efforts of international school staff to produce human capital that possesses intelligence, resilience, creativity and compassion, many of my adolescent
interlocutors and family members questioned the likelihood of the promised results. In other words, the security guards were not the only ones to harbour negative feelings towards international schools. Some students also felt these schools were not all that they were said to be. Over our Americanos, Jinny and Sumin complained about the “necessity” of having to attend private academies, citing their international school as “really expensive” and “not worth the money.” These universal lamentations could be heard far and wide. Parents, students, and private academy teachers all routinely expressed similar discontent. I asked Sumin and Jinny how much their yearly international school cost. Jinny filled with sombre consternation and turned to Sumin. “Does it cost 1 ők (approximately US$100,000)?” Sumin coolly replied that tuition costs were about US$30,000 when she started attending in third grade, but costs were now closer to US$40,000. She explained to Jinny that tuition increases 1% yearly, but since it is “so expensive,” the hike is dramatic. Sumin went on to explain that a portion of the tuition must be paid in U.S. dollars, driving up prices when the currency exchange rate is unfavourable. In addition to their disapproval of the inflated rates charged by the school, Sumin, Jinny and their peers loathe the fact that any free time they have after school, on weekends, and during vacation is spent at these costly private academies. To adolescents, parents, and private academy instructors, this arrangement evidences the shortcomings of their international school education. Regarding these matters more broadly, in Sumin’s words, “Capitalism and education aren’t working! The ETS (Educational Testing Services- responsible for college exams such as the SATs) and Texas Instruments (the calculator company) are the most evil organizations!” Needing to vent their disapproval, parents and students found a scapegoat: the international school teachers who are dubbed “incompetent,” and it is believed that they “don’t care” and “don’t understand.”

Jinny and Sumin wondered whether their parents’ investments were a profligate waste. Jinny and Sumin wondered how they were supposed to become appreciable assets when taught by “incompetent” staff. On top of their more generalized anxieties about South Korea’s future, their place within it, and the stresses associated with being investees, doubts regarding the worth of their education further sensitized them to their precarity. Their self-awareness and acceptance of their social privilege led to moments of anxiety and reflexivity, reflexivity that on occasion led to flashes of levity as shown in Jinny and Sumin’s shared laughter over the truth to the luxury car stereotype. Therein lies the rub. Aware of their positionality as one situated at the apex of
social-economic hierarchies, subjects such as Sumin and Jinny are also cognizant of the various types of vitriol and animosity aimed at them. The school security guards hated them, comparing them to the students they believed were truly intelligent at the neighbouring foreign language school and finding students at the international school lacking. Conscious of the hostility harboured by the multitude, some subjects who were to be the future upper-class and elite have almost a crisis of conscience that inhibits building confidence.

International school attendees are aware of the hostility directed towards them. When insulated by their peer group, adolescents show concern for one another’s well-being, soldiering on through academic pressures to succeed. Outside of their immediate circles, international school attendees inspire feelings of apprehension in those who cannot claim membership to this social group that seeks to become the globalized elite. Susan, the Director of Williams International’s Service Program stated that she felt anxiety about her students’ future. When I asked why, Susan asked if I “heard about Hell Joseon?” which I will discuss more fully in a moment. I confirmed yes. She saw so much promise in her students who she believed would become the next generation’s leaders. Citing all the community outreach services that students were engaged in, Susan found it deeply unfair that discourses such as Hell Joseon targeted the upper-class like students at Williams International. She admitted that the school’s clientele was indeed “privileged,” but found classed-based criticisms — where the country’s failures were blamed on the rich — to be ultimately misplaced. After all, educators such as Susan saw themselves as cultivating the next generation’s leaders. In her view, even at a young age, her students were already improving the world. That did not change the fact that due to familial wealth and educational practices leading towards the “1%,” adolescents such as Jinny and Karen are a considerable source of anxiety for South Koreans more broadly.

Anxiety is a core theme in other social scientific investigations on the most affluent. Focusing on China in the post-Maoist era, Mark Osburg (2013) argues that the entrepreneurs that constitute the emerging nouveau riche class are not only anxiety inducing to those outside of their circles, but also for subjects who can claim membership. With new money comes new interrogations into morality and what it means to be a good rich person. What kind of personal qualities should an individual possess within this new landscape? Rachel Sherman’s (2017) work on New York City’s “1%” outlines the moral codes that one should live by in order to justify extreme wealth. Many of Sherman’s (2017) interlocutors feel their hard work justifies
their social position, and while they make an effort to enjoy life *in light of* growing social inequality, they temper it by downplaying spending habits and finances while “giving back” through charitable acts.

Similar to my own findings, affluent individuals are concerned about preserving their image — especially in front of those who have less. Both scholars examine gifting practices — those in personal networks to solidify mutual obligatory contracts, to “take the edge off” unequal interpersonal relations and through philanthropic work — establishing that being “moral” is a fundamental pillar of upper-classed subjectivity. While that last point is explored more fully in the previous chapter on care and venture philanthropy, here I wish to analyse the process of becoming the “1%,” which comes with a set of expectations in behaviour, evidencing a capacity to both exhibit the traits of an elite even if they themselves are not. As I have discussed, the necessity of being innovative, resilient, compassionate and charitable, are all qualities that the ascendant “1%” should possess. More than just having good grades and elite educational branding, the sum total of human capital should amount to “a good human” — one who will meaningfully think about and transform the lives of those who are less fortunate and not abuse them. Bill Gates, after all, is famous for being a wealthy tech entrepreneur, but he is also revered for his philanthropic work through the Gates Foundation. Going back to Karen’s and Jinny’s Mothers’ anxieties, I would like to reiterate here that their concerns were valid because in truth when those less fortunate hear privileged South Koreans loudly speaking English it infuriates them. Broadcasting their privilege in this manner proves to those listening that the speaker is tone deaf to the class conflict in South Korea. Alternatively, those wealthy people using their privilege to elevate others in need by donating money, goods, and performing charitable acts inspire respect and gratitude.

Adolescents then need to manage their own classed performance, walking a tightrope and trying to keep a balance between maintaining their extreme privilege while deflecting the unwanted negative attention it can attract. In other words, they must placate those with less lest they rise up to topple them, but to continue their ascension, they need to outstrip their peers and the elites to rise to the top and maybe become the “1%” of the 1%. They must continuously manage and negotiate their positionality is in order to not only maintain their position but improve it. As affluent subjects but not elite, my interlocutors are in an uncomfortable position between the lower classes and the very upper class. They rub shoulders with the progeny of corporate elites,
politicians, and celebrities, well aware of the fact that their lineage is not quite the same. This is a particular anxiety for those who are firmly upper-class, are socialized to become the elite, but are not currently members of these exclusive social circles. These anxieties were succinctly expressed by Do Young and Jae Hyun, both males were high school sophomores at the start of my fieldwork and juniors by the end of it. Both were also my students and attended Global School with Jinny, Karen, and Sumin.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, both Do Young and Jae Hyun became my students at IHE Prep because I was the designated “expert” on a particular teacher’s pedagogical style at a certain international school. I came to know both teens even better once they became my interlocutors. As my student, I learned Jae Hyun’s father is an entrepreneur, his mother a housewife. Prior to attending Global School, Jae Hyun completed six semesters on the West Coast accompanied by his mother and older brother, who finished high school in the United States. This gave Jae Hyun the three-year minimum required to qualify for international school applications. Though he spoke with a slight Korean accent — namely due to the fact that his time abroad was limited — he possessed “global literary skills” facilitating “intercultural communication” (Spring 2008: 351). Jae Hyun’s global leanings were reflected in his clothing, what might be called “hip-hop style,” with baggy pants, hooded sweatshirts, and baseball caps adorned with phrases such as “ILLIONAIRE.” As my interlocutor and apropo of his fashion choices, our extemporaneous conversations usually covered topics such as West Coast rap and mutual liking of Schoolboy Q and Kendrick Lamar’s music.

Unlike Jae Hyun, Do Young was born in Europe but spent is public school years in an affluent East Coast suburb. Do Young had a preppy style, clad in fitted khakis, button-down shirts or polos that were often worn underneath a zip-up hooded sweatshirt. Due to the large eyeglasses he wore, he had earned the endearing nickname “Mort,” the mouse lemur with sad eyes from the film Madagascar 3. As mentioned, Do Young’s international upbringing was the result of his father being relocated several times for work. His father held a “very high position” at a major corporate conglomerate. This point was brought to my attention not only by IHE Prep staff but

137 In reality, this meant that I was asked to “study” her assignments and her justification for the grades she administered to students.
also by Jae Hyun, who relayed this information to me in a tone of admiration. Do Young’s father held a highly coveted, highly respected position, and accompanying social admiration.

While both boys came from wealthy backgrounds, they were very aware of intra-classed fissures. Once, in between typing out their homework for our class, Jae Hyun and Do Young began a casual discussion about whose houses amongst their schoolmates they’d visited. Jae Hyun mentioned that he had been invited over to a friend’s house whose family owned one of South Korea’s corporate conglomerates (chaebol jip). Do Young’s eyes grew big, asking Jae Hyun if the house was nice. Jae Hyun coolly replied that it was “huge” and had “two floors.” Do Young remarked how Jae Hyun was “lucky.” Though Jae Hyun’s father was successful enough for his family to move into a house valued at US$2 million, these discussions reveal the extent to which my interlocutors are still in some ways at the margins of their exclusive circles.

These cleavages are yet another source of anxiety for adolescents who are in the process of becoming the ascendant “1%” but not quite there yet. It is a reminder of their immediate competitors, and the fact that these competitors have access to social networks running generations deep that my interlocutors do not. This particular dimension heaps another complication that adolescents as the sites of investment have to survive.

As sites of investment, adolescents’ lives are not all work or “mediocre,” as Karen and Jinny worried in the opening vignette. This is evidenced by their extracurricular activities. Jinny’s parents rent out space in an atelier in Gangnam where she spends her “free time” painting. In addition, Jinny goes for equestrian lessons. Karen is also an artist, but her focus is more on academic or medical related activities. Between her junior and senior year, Karen conducted cancer research under the supervision of a professor in the United States. When I asked Karen about her project while instant messaging on Facebook, she replied:

“So my project is about like

So my project is about like

Cancer and metabolism basically [Cancer and metabolism basically]

U kno how tumors have to have blood vessels to grow and get nutrients and metastize
[You know how tumours have to have blood vessels to grow and get nutrients and metastasize]

So there’s a process called angiogenesis which is the creation of new blood vessels

[So there’s a process called angiogenesis which is the creation of new blood vessels]

It’s regulated by a lot of different signal transduction pathways but there is one

[It’s regulated by a lot of different signal transduction pathways but there is one]

Alk1 mediated angiogenesis

[Alk1 mediated angiogenesis]

Also there’s a protein called AMPK that my PI hypothesized that can inhibit Alk1 mediated angiogenesis

[Also there’s a protein called AMPK that my Primary Investigator hypothesized that can inhibit Alk1 mediated angiogenesis]

Because nobody has connected Alk1 and AMPK

[Because nobody has connected Alk1 and AMPK]

So we are trying to prove that AMPK can inhibit Alk1 mediated angiogenesis and to find the specific pathway…mechanism something something lol.”

[So we are trying to prove that AMPK can inhibit Alk1 mediated angiogenesis and to find the specific pathway…mechanism something something lol]

Karen had frantically rattled off this series of texts before abruptly exiting the conversation without signing off. I was no longer surprised by her ignoring my messages, then profusely apologizing afterwards and making up for her lack of response with a burst of texts. While my students responded to my messages to varying degrees of slowness (barring sessions we set aside specifically for texting interviews), Karen was the most extreme. Like many of my interlocutors, Karen often cited being overworked, too tired, and too scatter-brained to keep
track of all incoming digital media as her reasons for going silent for prolonged periods of time. Referring to the opening vignette, Karen’s comment that Jinny is “really rich” rang of feelings of inferiority and explains her anxieties surrounding her academic prowess in ways that are linked to her identification as “solidly middle class.” However, it may have been due to her upbringing in a middle-class home that she was the only one of my students who freely had conversations centred on her own intellectual pursuits and rigour with me. In contrast, while Francis ran his own online retail store, I never heard about it until it was time to discuss his extracurricular activities with other IHE Prep teachers. It took Do Young months for us to have a conversation about the app he was developing to collect data and track the spread of the MERS virus that erupted during my fieldwork. That discussion only came to fruition as it evolved from a preceding exchange about his father’s previous job at a tech company. Even still, these matters only surfaced when I was helping Do Young complete a school assignment where he felt inspired to talk a bit about his family’s work history. In sum, Do Young treated his app development more as a side-line or casual hobby, relaying this information to me with an air of nonchalance. I did not sense the intensity behind his storytelling as I did with in my discussions with Karen about her academic pursuits through an American university. And while many of my interlocutors attended summer programs offered at big American universities, including Ivy League ones, most of our discussions were about other tangential matters: the weather, the fashion trends in larger U.S. cities, roommates, new friends, and so on.

Perhaps most telling, Karen was the only one of my interlocutors to admit that she “felt guilty” about the amount of money that her parents spend on her education all the time and not just when she received a poor grade. She offered this information in confidence one afternoon when it was just the two us at Starbucks, and from her manner I sensed her bid for a sympathetic ear. I believe this to be the case especially since her younger brother attended public school. Her father’s status as a Ph.D. holder from a very well-respected American state university is the family’s marker of status — not income. In turn, Karen’s educational achievements are the sole carrier of her identity as the ascendant “1%.” As Young-Kyun Yang (2011) argues, this is an anxiety common to South Koreans who have achieved high levels of educational ranking, often from elite universities, but whose incomes fall far short of those who are firmly situated in the upper-class. The clearest example of someone in this situation would be a university professor at a domestic institution whose salary is not particularly high (in comparison) but holds a Ph.D.
from a “name-brand” institution, usually American. The best option for these highly educated parents, as those who are unable to pass on an inheritance in the form of money or real estate, is limited to investing in their children’s education. The hope is to equip their children with the credentials, degrees, experiences, and skills so that they may find their own way to financial independence as adults.

The adolescents in this study are expected to become the peers of those they are differentiated from, and to that end they occupy a marginalized space within their extremely privileged settings. In this sense, my interlocutors are fundamentally different from those included in Rachel Sherman’s (2017) study who tend — in many cases — to identify as “middle class.” The subjectivity that is being developed here is one where adolescents are firmly aware of their status as sitting at the top of socio-economic hierarchies, knowing they need to manage their privilege in a way that is highly productive for themselves and least offensive towards “have nots.” It is an orientation towards others that justifies socio-economic incongruities, potentially placating anxieties amongst those who are excluded from claiming membership in these circles. Here though I diverge from the particular anxieties that go into developing a “good” rich person and move on to discourses on being a “bad” rich person in contemporary Korea.

6.5 Being a Bad Rich Person: Gapjil

If “venture philanthropy” is the path to becoming a “good” rich person, using one’s power to abuse those in lower socio-economic positions is the recipe for being a “bad” rich person. At any rate, 2014 was not the year to be a rich person — good or bad. My adolescent interlocutors knew this, which became abundantly clear during a “hangout” session with Jinny and Sumin after an Advanced Placement (AP) exam preparatory classes at IHE Prep. They each had one hour to spare for a coffee break before rushing off to their next meetings. Both were tired and stressed. Sumin had an orthodontist appointment afterwards, and then she had plans to go shopping with her mother for new bedroom furniture. Jinny had to spend the rest of her afternoon and early evening at the atelier. Adding to their exhaustion was the fact that both were living in a wealthy satellite city of Seoul that is an hour away from IHE Prep.

Given that the bulk of my discussions with Sumin and Jinny centred around critiquing “the South Korean education system” and “expensive” international schools, it is unsurprising that this conversation pivoted to matters of class. “The only bad thing about rich people is that they
know how to use capitalism. And they take advantage of poor people,” said Sumin. She added, “People shouldn’t be mad at rich people because they’re rich. Maybe that’s just how they were born or maybe they worked really hard. Some rich people are really bad but not all of them — some are really nice and good. But when people say that rich people should pay more taxes — like France 70% — I’m like OH MY GOD NO WAY MAN!” Jinny interjected, “But rich people do gapjil so much. I get embarrassed by rich people’s behaviour sometimes…rich people can’t poo without plumbers!”

Jinny’s use of the term gapjil in and of itself is an interesting example of self-reflexive behaviour as an upper-class subject, evincing her self-awareness as a historically classed subject. As mentioned briefly in the beginning of this chapter, in 2014, gapjil was considered one of the “hottest neologisms,” in popular discourse. Describing the abuse of power by a person of higher status, this word and concept is a derivative of what South Koreans call “gap/eul” relations. In South Korean contracts, gap represents the higher-ranking person or institutional body, such as an employer or landlord. In such cases, the employee or tenant is referred to as eul — the subordinate. These are terms used to substitute names in contractual agreements. Jil on the other hand, as stated by Naver dictionary, is “the act of doing.” As my Korean language teacher, also a Ph.D. candidate at one of the nation’s elite universities, reminded our class, incidents identified as gapjil and their contents are not new. The public’s insistence on naming such scenes and engaging in critical discourse, however, signal fresh approaches to confronting long-standing abuses of power by the “haves” towards the “have nots.” Our teacher thought the linguistic marking of these re-occurring incidents was a politically promising turn.

During the time of my fieldwork, dominant anxieties emerged in discourses on the neologism gapjil and Hell Joseon — both important prerequisites to understanding the lead-up to the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye in 2017. I will discuss more fully how the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of the former military dictator President Park Chung Hee and the first female president, was very much animated by classed antagonisms that sought to re-structure fields of power within South Korea.

It is telling that new terminology to identify socio-economic asymmetries emerged during this time. Discussions regarding gapjil caught on like wildfire, particularly in light of the highly
publicized “Nut Rage” or “Nut Gate” (ttangk'ong hoehwang) episode, which is now memorialized. Heather Cho, the Vice President of Korean Airlines, demanded that her flight from JFK to Seoul return to the gate to remove the flight attendant when her macadamia nuts were not served by him on a silver platter. Before having the attendant removed, Cho created a spectacle and demanded the flight attendant beg for forgiveness on his hands and knees. Though many South Koreans viewed Cho’s behaviour as repugnant, this was not an isolated incident and was rather viewed as symptomatic of systemic social inequality. Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that her position was ostensibly inherited from her CEO father, Cho Yang-ho. Media hoopla surrounding the incident culminated in a public apology that saw Heather Cho walk in front of cameras, head hanging in shame, tears streaming down her face. Part of this performance was meant to express remorse for causing her victims mental distress. One has to wonder if it also had something to do with being found guilty of breaking aviation law. Cho was sentenced to a year in prison, which was reduced to ten months. She also stepped down from her role as an executive.

While this notorious incident was an international media sensation, other episodes of abuse were reported on the Internet and domestic media. For instance, in the Gangnam neighbourhood, at the famously expensive Hyundai Apartment complex, a fifty-three-year old security guard covered himself in paint thinner and set himself on fire. While he survived, the security guard had written a suicide note. This incident occurred after the affluent residents verbally abused the security guard repeatedly. In a Korea Joongang Daily, a conservative newspaper, cited a National Human Rights Commission of Korea report showing a sharp increase in incidents where security guards were abuse victims.138

This event generated much attention and discussion amongst Seoulites, many of who were horrified. In fact, during my fieldwork in South Korea there was a spate of working-class and service industry personnel being verbally, emotionally, and in some cases physically abused. Identifying a gross imbalance in power dynamics on a more “mundane” level, a viral video

documenting a department store customer yelling at and demanding a full kowtow-style apology from the parking lot attendant likewise fomented many critical discussions on the social-economic state of the nation. Referencing these incidents, “gapjil” became one of the hottest neologisms of 2014. Identifying hierarchical relations as a determinant in who gets abused, gapjil was employed as a classed critique of South Korea.

These lesser known incidents in addition to the widespread negative attention that Heather Cho elicited as an undeniably “bad” rich person, attuned Jinny to broader classed antagonisms that were directed towards subjects such as herself. Perhaps it is also one reason why Karen and Jinny’s Mother expressed concern over speaking English in public, which the “have nots” might interpret as an obnoxious act evidencing conspicuous consumption. But notably, Heather Cho and my adolescent interlocutors also share some similarities in their educational opportunities. Heather Cho earned an MBA at the University of Southern California, where her father, brother, and sister also obtained degrees. Prior to that, Cho attended Cornell University’s School of Hotel Administration. In 2011, she ascended into the senior vice president of Korean Air. The mother of twin boys, Cho was criticized for giving birth in Hawaii, which assured the boys U.S. citizenship and got them out of mandatory military duty — a tactic that is common amongst the most privileged. While my interlocutors could possibly replicate Heather’s educational pathways, none of the adolescents in this study belong to chaebol families — families that run major corporate conglomerates such as Korean Airlines, Hyundai, Samsung, etc.

In a kind of reflective mirroring exercise, my interlocutors place themselves in the shoes of fallen wealthy public figures as a way of understanding the vitriol hurled at members of their class for the mistreatment of others. Not only was it a reminder of what one should never become, it was also a clear example of how one’s credibility could be tarnished by class-based actions. The shaming of Heather Cho is an instance when someone “who had it all” jeopardized their classed positionality and imploded decades of human capital investment and grooming to ascend to a leadership position in one fell swoop. Classed tensions leading up to President Park Geun-Hye’s impeachment is another example of how even the most powerful politician who is

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139 Repeatedly, in conversation and on social media, I heard cases where an irate, wealthy customer would yell at attendants. This became a trope during my fieldwork.
the direct descendent of South Korea’s political elite could be ousted from office. The quick
descent from the top also just happened to be covered by international media outlets,
exponentially aggravating the element of public humiliation. It is within this context, in addition
to economic crises, that interlocutors such as Jinny and Karen came to understand themselves as
inherently precarious subjects.

6.6 Gapjil in the Classroom

Focusing on techniques students use to assuage fears about an uncertain future and analysing
how intergenerational relations are “regenerated” (Cole and Durham 2007: 17) under economic
transformation have been the central focus throughout my dissertation research. But even
members of the affluent class, identified as those “born with a golden spoon in their mouths,”
face precarity and anxiety that are evident everywhere from boardrooms to classrooms. My
adolescent interlocutors’ status as students within the private education market exposes a
number of paradoxes inherently bound to their position as minors, dependents, pupils, and
upper-class subjects.

In this section, I would like to draw attention to the ways in which the “hagwŏn hierarchy” can
be reversed by students who as consumers hold a considerable amount of power despite the fact
that they occupy the bottom rungs in private education hierarchies. In wise words of Paul, “all a
kid has to do is complain to his parents and then they leave.” Moreover, I aim to show how
instances of gapjil give students the upper hand in interactions with their teachers, who are
essentially service workers or “hired help.” I will also show that this is often a short-lived
advantage as roles are reversed and the teachers become instruments of discipline.

Figure 2: Cartoon from Korea Exposé
The above image accurately portrays the ways in which students are subordinated within the extreme academic regimes in South Korea. The fact that the Ministry of Education had to implement a 10 pm curfew in 2009 that banned late-night private lessons of any kind evidences the harsh realities of being a student in South Korea. The fact that pupils preparing for the SAT are expected to memorize one to two hundred vocabulary words on a daily basis and spend their summer vacations cramming for the exam illustrates the expectations place on their young shoulders. High teenage suicide rates, where intensive academic preparations are identified as the main factor, drive home the intense pressure put on adolescents.

While I do not wish to diminish the ways being at the bottom of the hagwŏn hierarchy forms the daily experiences of my interlocutors, I do think it is necessary to also consider that the portrayed hierarchy can be reversed to a degree. This is quite simply because adolescents are ultimately clients.

At a quick glance, the generational division of labour in the South Koran education industry puts adolescents at the bottom, but they are also positioned to wield power over teachers who are hired to provide academic assistance. As Jae Hyun told me during one of our private lessons, his drama teacher’s contract was terminated early because students rallied together and complained that he unfairly handed out C’s and D’s. Considering that drama is an elective, Jae Hyun and his peers felt making students work hard to achieve grades that would affect their future was draconian, cruel and unnecessary. In recalling similar episodes, students confessed to feeling mistreated by the demands of the South Korean education, but Jae Hyun told his story with a sense of pride, suggesting that theirs was not “an abuse of power” by those armed with capital. Thus, it is necessary to consider these acts of rebellion as students pushing back against a system that is designed to exploit their academic insecurities and vulnerabilities. Indeed, though the schools’ mission statement objective is to obtain high standardized test scores for the students, ultimately this adds to a school’s track record and profit margin.

Students exercising power is a fairly recent development that once was heavily frowned upon. There were instances when perceived disobedience was disciplined — with limits. Students engaged in more “mundane” challenges to authority, brazenly acting out in ways they knew would not conclude in harsh punishment. One day during summer intensives, students spilled into the windowless teacher’s room located in the middle of the academy. Matthew, the SAT
reading teacher, walked in looking agitated, a trail of students behind him. When I asked what happened, he relayed the story to a chorus of oohs and aahs of laughter from other students. During class, Matthew told his students that he once worked as an orderly in a hospital, explaining that he had to push corpses down the hall. Upon finishing his tale, Matthew carried on with his lesson. He lifted the red marker to write on the whiteboard, but when the red ink dribbled down the board, Jae Hyun yelled, “CLEAN IT UP ORDERLY!” I caught Jae Hyun laughing at his own ingenuity during the retelling of the story. Needless to say, Matthew was neither impressed nor very pleased with the interaction and while he regularly disciplined students for not doing their homework or focusing in class, this particular incident did not seem to warrant a serious punishment.

Mark also struggled with his students on occasion. After losing his patience with the class and giving them a lecture, Mark’s students complained to Paul and Ms. Ha. He was reminded that students are paying customers and that they are “always right.” The managers likened him to a server in a restaurant, emphasizing that when someone paid for an expensive meal, he also expected superb service. Although Mark was frustrated by this entire ordeal, he attempted to give himself “an attitude adjustment.” To his dismay, his students continued to be filled with ennui the next week as well, telling him they would rather be at a karaoke bar (noraebang). Losing his patience again, he put his own twist on “the customer is always right” lecture Paul and Ms. Ha have previously given him. Resigned, Mark told his class matter-of-factly, “The customer is always right. Go to noraebang. Class is cancelled.” Refusing to teach, his students abashedly followed him around the premises for the remainder of the day with their hands folded in front of their chests, begging for class to resume. In the parking lot, Mark and I watched his students who stood behind the glass doors, wistfully looking at their teacher. Realizing that his students’ parents were going to be very upset by their children’s misuse of their invested money, Mark retook his power and meted out an unconventional form of punishment.

For a number of reasons, I consider working in this sector as inherently part of the service industry. Selling a service — tutoring — commodifies knowledge, emotions, and one’s interpersonal skills (see Berardi 2009, Hochschild 1983). The object for sale is not material in the sense it is tangible, such as an automobile or coffee mug. Instructors and staff, grooming and managing parents’ expectations and investments, perform “immaterial labor” (Hardt 1999).
Hearkening back to IEP Academy in 2010 (Chapter 2), it was nearly midnight when I waited for the elevator on my way out the door. I saw a group of my co-workers, all women, clustered in the lobby. Complying with the government-imposed curfew banning lessons past 10 pm, IEP Prep was empty of all students. The hallways were filled with staff, though, tying up loose ends and preparing for the next day’s lessons. I approached my co-workers to see what was happening. In the middle of the huddle, I saw a teacher, puffy-faced, crying, and looking incredibly worn out. One of her students’ mother had stopped by to complain about the efficacy of her teaching. Growing increasingly irate, the interaction ended in a scene that one might expect from a K-drama, with the mother yelling at the teacher, grabbing a cup of water and throwing it in her face. This incident happened years before the term “gapjil” was coined but it very much identifies that exchange.

These ethnographic scenes are in stark contrast to Adrienne Lo’s (2009) ethnographic study of Korean heritage schools in California that examines the formation of intergenerational relations between students and teachers. They are also in stark contrast to the many ethnographic scenes in Chapter 5, where I discuss intergenerational exchanges of reciprocity, expressed through care. Throughout her argument, Lo (2009) maintains that respect for teachers is indexed beyond linguistic practices through the production of feeling (gibun) and soulful exchanges of affect and emotion (maum) that are expressed through one’s bodily disposition and pace of breath. Ethnographic documentation shows that a “well-mannered” child is one who has the ability to subtly read the psychological, affective conditions of others — in this case their teachers — and modify behaviour to exhibit consideration. Within a hierarchy of emotions, where teachers’ feelings are prioritized, the burden of emotional labour disproportionately falls on the shoulders of high school students.

But sometimes the burden of emotional labour can also disproportionately fall on the shoulders of the teachers who are treated as “hired help.” While students might understand themselves as precarious, cognizant of the acts that will get them in trouble, it did not always stop them.

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140 Nearly all the teachers at IEP Prep were women. The CEO, a middle-aged man, acknowledged this was a deliberate decision in business planning. Students needed “motherly” attention and affection to thrive. He believed women were naturally inclined to provide a nurturing atmosphere.
Especially when it came to dealing with subjects who they clearly identified as only having power over them for as long as their family’s capital pays them to be there.

6.7 Becoming Human Capital in Hell Joseon: South Korea as a Failed State

Anxieties that compel people to become human capital are deeply embedded in the perception that South Korea is a failed state. The ways in which these failures are interpreted and defined, though, are ranked according to class. In this section, I examine the *Hell Joseon* discourse that drew a lot of attention and generated much discussion during the time of my fieldwork to explain how various forms of stress, anxieties, despair and hope manifest in South Korea. As I have discussed in other chapters of my dissertation, escaping obsolescence is an orientation towards futurity that soberly accepts the conditions of human capital depreciation under market volatility. For Williams International instructors, the solution is to produce hyper-flexible subjects who will withstand the vicissitudes of turbulent capital flows.

This eschatology is fundamentally different from that posed in the *Hell Joseon* discourse, popular especially amongst 20- and 30-somethings. There is an overlap of foreboding that colours orientations towards futurity in a general sense. Most ominous of all, though, is the disavowal of the South Korean state to provide the means to support the reproduction of class. For the interlocutors in this study, and many other South Koreans, the state primarily breaks down in the area of public education. And as discussed in the chapter on care, my interlocutors identify other areas as well such as a failing social welfare infrastructure. However, for international school attendees, these state failings leave openings ripe for monopolization that add to their personal gains in the appreciation of human capital.

The scope of the state’s failure for those circulating and reproducing the *Hell Joseon* discourse is much bleaker. For 20- and 30-somethings especially, the *Hell Joseon* discourse highlights the ways in which South Korea is a dystopic hell on earth. While the Republic of Korea (ROK) is “Daehanminguk” in the Korean language, the “Failed State of Korea” is “Daehanmanguk.” The switching out of one vowel redefines the country’s identity. Those people responsible for creating this hell on earth are those “born with a golden spoon in their mouth,” a population that for many South Koreans included international school attendees. The development of “Spoon Class Theory” during my fieldwork is complementary to the *Hell Joseon* discourse — both of
which I will examine in this section. What is important to bear in mind here is that although I have suggested that the interlocutors in this study are not members of the elite class, these distinctions were not always drawn by middle- and lower-classed Koreans who more generally identified rich families as the culprits preventing their upward classed mobility or worse — manufacturing their move downward. With an entire discourse produced and mobilized around blaming the rich and powerful for single-handedly ruining a nation, educators, parents, and students had a potentially angry mob threatening their hold on power to worry about. The mounting tensions to take down the ostensibly most powerful person in the country — the president — made my interlocutors aware of just how vulnerable their social positions are.

My intention here is to demonstrate how a continuum of political-economic transformations shape the aspirations and development of new populations that South Koreans labour to keep up with and live within. I have two main questions in this section: What does it mean to join the ranks of South Korea’s most privileged class in a country perceived as a failure? How do adolescents in turn understand themselves as either a good or bad investment in a milieu that does not favour the reproduction of familial classed status?

While the *Hell Joseon* discourse chiefly points to the current “new” conditions of youth unemployment, it draws from historical precedents as well. The Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) is remembered as a time period in Korean history when elites had complete control over society, leaving little to no leeway for nonelites to ascend the social ladder. *Hell Joseon*, on the other hand, is a discourse that first emerged on the Internet in 2010 and had gained widespread popularity by 2014. This narrative refers to achieving social mobility in South Korea as a maze without a way out. Who created the maze trapping people in dead-end paths? Those born with a golden spoon in their mouth, sitting at the apex of social hierarchies, deploying their resources to maintain their status, whilst fortifying boundaries to their exclusive circles of social belonging.

In June 2015, the term “gold spoon” referring to those “at the top” had not yet come into existence, but by December 2015 it had become the most-searched term on social media that year (Kim 2017: 843). According to these discourses, those “at the top” — “comfortably” situated in the “Armory of Golden Spoons” — are culpable for manufacturing the conditions that oppress the “have nots” and leave them destitute. “The Spoon Class Theory” became
another popular discourse that emerged in 2015. Explicating the workings of social reproduction and class oppression, “The Spoon Class Theory” holds great explanatory power for many South Koreans for their limited life choices, chances and imaginaries. Simply put, one’s classed status is predetermined by parental assets. Those born with a “golden spoon” are identified as the nation’s “1%” where the annual salary equals US$250,000 plus a total of $2 million in assets. “Silver spoons” are the top 3% of the population with $80-200,000 in yearly income with $1-2 million in assets. “Bronze spoons” are the top 7.5%, making US$50-80,000 annually and $500,000-1 million in assets. “Dirt spoons” make up approximately 50% of the population, with less than $50,000 in assets and less than $20,000 in annual salary.141 Even more important than the parents’ wealth, scholarly work has shown that the key indicator in Korea to one’s adult classed positionality is determined by grandparents’ wealth (Kim 2017: 844).

The rapid proliferation of the “Spoon Class Theory” was heavily supported by the fact that President Park Geun-Hye is the daughter of military dictator President Park Chung Hee. Her father’s lineage and legacy of rapid industrial development are often understood to have paved her way to the Blue House (Bourdieu 1998). In light of the Sewol Ferry Disaster and a number of other political scandals that exposed a number of legal violations, Park Jr.’s credibility was severely tainted. The general public saw her presidency as the quintessential case study of family influence ensuring privilege, and people harshly criticized how she had inherited power rather than earned it (see Kim 2017). In other words, not only was Park impeached but long-standing ideals of meritocracy were discredited (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

As the “populist princess,” Park Jr. became the poster child for these entrenched classed problems, leading to candlelight vigils that gained international attention and ultimately her impeachment in 2016 (see Kim 2017). While South Koreans protested cronyism, they also rallied against the lack of social mobility, abuses of power by the elite, and economic inequality. One of the most pressing concerns still today is that corporate restructuring and labour market

reforms are beholden to elite networks and their commitments to market principles, resulting in hyper-competitiveness (Schmidt 2002, Yoo and Lee 2009).

South Koreans feel that these matters are disastrous not just for themselves as individuals but for the country as a whole. In fact, the website www.goldspoons.org was started by a lawyer who refers to this as the “Dirt Spoon Hope Center.” This site identifies “gold spoons” within public organizations and large companies with the goal of changing the employment culture (Kim 2017: 847). For the vast majority born with “dirt spoons,” viable options for bearing the unbearable conditions of everyday life include 1) never being born 2) dying as soon as possible 3) emigrating to another country. The “gate” to Hell Joseon is the misfortune of being born.

As the Hell Joseon narrative goes, those “at the top” will further perpetuate the endless cycle of government corruption, abuses by military personnel, a youth unemployment crisis exacerbated by living in a country without an adequate social welfare net and forced retirement in one’s forties after toiling to accumulate academic credentials. This discourse is filled with hopelessness, ennui and rage. While South Koreans of all generations believe it is an appropriate descriptor for the current conditions, Hell Joseon was mostly popular amongst those in their 20s and 30s — a life stage where the foundation for social reproduction into adulthood should be laid. Complementary to the Hell Joseon discourse are the “3 P'oshidae,” “5 P'oshidae” and “7 P'oshidae,” narratives. In Korean, p'ogihada means “to give up.” The term “P'oshidae” is a neologism combining “to give up” and “period” or “era” (shidae).

The generation of “3 P'oshidae” gave up three major markers of adulthood necessary for social reproduction: marriage, childrearing, and home ownership. The generation of “5 P'oshidae” gave up these three things plus dating and personal relations. The generation of “7 P'oshidae,” lost career dreams and hope in addition to this already bleak list. Rather than securing long-term, salaried employment, finding life partners, and purchasing houses, many

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142 For media coverage of these discourses refer to: http://biz.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/04/30/2015043002080.html
143 For more references on these discourses: http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/economy/economy_general/680663.html.
144 For more references on these discourses: http://daily.hankooki.com/lpage/economy/201503/dh20150305082552138160.htm.
South Korean youth instead find themselves in dead-end, subcontracted positions. 
Pijŏnggyuch‘ik — irregular, subcontracted work — is viewed with prejudice, an occupational go-nowhere zone rife with social ostracization. This is a path meant for “losers” and subjects who cannot even muster up “a mediocre life.”

As Michael Olneck (2011: 684) argues, “Labor market stratification, restrictive immigration and citizenship policies, and the sharp distinctions that native Koreans make between themselves and others will continue to ‘brighten’ ethnic boundaries, rather than to blur them.” Indeed, the distinction between those who secure stable, white-collared work or become successful entrepreneurs and those who become mired in irregular, sub-contracted work are central to the “giving up” and Hell Joseon discourses. As the diagram below shows, the map of Hell Joseon includes the “Pool of Joblessness, Lair of Self-Employment, and Slave Outpost” where many youths spend their miserable days. “Chicken Temple” refers to one possible job option — to open a fried chicken chain, which is a low-status job garnering zero social respect. Even lower than a life of “mediocrity,” self-entrepreneurship of this kind is seen as a kind of surrender to the bleak job market. Toiling over hot frying animal flesh, scurrying around cities to deliver batches of cheap food is almost the lowest form of servitude.
Figure 3: Korea thy name is hell — Joseon Voices from Korea Exposé

It is important to keep this backdrop in mind when envisioning my interlocutors as they attempt to toil through the stages of their education and achieve their life goals more broadly. On the cusp of breaking into adulthood, the images of youth under- and unemployment bombard them on a daily basis. Yet, as the opening vignette shows, neither Jinny nor Karen were ready to give up on dating, childrearing, marriage, careers, and hope. Of course, this can be attested to the fact that they are still teenagers, but it is also worth considering that these are concerns are not thematically present in their upper-classed orientations towards futurity.

In fact, adolescents’ dating habits and the advice given by adults such as Paul suggest the opposite. Benjamin, a student at a respected American state university returned to IHE Prep during his summer vacation to spend time with Paul and Mark, both of whom he was quite close with. In fact, Mark would make the arduous journey to the United States to visit Benjamin during some of the school breaks. Whether it was because I was not his teacher and did not spend considerable amounts of time with him, once when I asked what his father’s profession was, he simply smiled, laughing a bit and said he could not tell me. Mark, with a smirk on his face, said his father was a famous singer. It was hard for me to tell whether Mark was joking or not, and Benjamin did nothing to either confirm nor deny the comment. Paul offered no further clarification, instead laughing that Benjamin was a bit of a miracle case. Who would have thought he could make it to a respectable American university with the SAT marks he had at the beginning of their working relationship. Rather than rephrasing the question, I took it as a sign. I interpreted this as yet another strategy amongst the elite and upper-class to hide their wealth and family lineage so as to avoid needless confrontations with those not in their intimate circles. Often dressed in nicely cut black skinny jeans, white T-shirt and nondescript black baseball cap, Benjamin would sit in the teacher’s lounge and talk to Paul and Mark about his life in America, including his girlfriend. Paul grilled him about her background to discover that an American family had adopted her. This was how she had acquired her documentation to legally reside in the United States. Paul told Benjamin to find a new girlfriend. Clearly her family was not rich since this is not how affluent parents raise their children. Benjamin’s reaction was one of sheepishly weak refutation. He clearly had feelings for this girl and wasn’t sure how to process Paul’s orders. In another example of avoiding a “mediocre life,” adolescents would accept their teachers and parents’ “horizons of expectations” (Kosselleck 1985) completely, which went
against the blatant dystopic orientations towards futurity widely circulating at the time of my fieldwork.

6.8 Never Being Born

Never being born, dying as soon as possible, emigrating to another country just to live a little better are quite stark options in contrast to Karen’s and Jinny’s fears of living in mediocrity. While Jinny and Karen planned to attend Ivy League schools in the United States, like all of my interlocutors, there was an understanding that their studies abroad were to better position them to secure a job in South Korea after graduation. In fact, a commonly held belief that I encountered in Seoul amongst upper-classed adults was that Koreans living in diasporic communities were “poor quality” (*najŭn chil*) people. This assessment was also once used by an opera singer from an affluent background at my yoga studio when we discussed the population of female nurses that were sent to Germany in the 1970s as part of Park Chung Hee’s agreement with a major European creditor at the time. In exchange for a big loan package, nurses (and coal miners) were sent as labourers to Germany.

The argument was that Koreans who emigrated did so because they could not “make it” at home, thus necessitating the move to places like the United States where they worked in low-paying jobs such as running corner stores and laundromats. I was struck by the historical amnesia undergirding this narrative. This discourse completely disregards the effects of the Korean War that raged from 1950 to 1953 and continued to shape everyday life in the following decade. Considering the source, though, it was evident that the categorization of these South Koreans who went overseas as lower class was just another way to create classed divisions. I felt this tension at times given my status as a Korean-American, as an insider and outsider, and as I spent significant amounts of time with individuals, they started to somewhat shamelessly make their worldviews towards me known.

Yet, parents were less clear about this goal of emigrating to the U.S. For instance, when I asked Jinny’s mother whether she hoped that her daughter settle in the United States, she wasn’t sure. She thought that decision was for Jinny to make years down the road. Of course, given Jinny’s education, upbringing and habitus, this eventuality is highly unlikely even if she would not have to live in a marginalized ethnic community working as a nail salon technician, for instance.
What a future abroad entailed was not entirely clear. The only thing that mattered was embodying Silicon Valley confidence to secure a white-collar job.

Karen, Jinny, Sumin, Do Young and Jae Hyun’s classed family background undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in their educational opportunities and orientations towards futurity. I would add that their classed status also lends itself to what Michelle Murphy (2017: 80) refers to as “the endless futurity of experimentality” (Murphy 2017: 80) where “experiments are conjectural future-making assemblages. In experimentality, access to different futures can be conditional on attaching to experiments.” In some sense Karen’s path to classed reproduction has more of a historical precedent than her peers. Her intense drive to become a member of the academic elite falls more clearly in line with long-standing practices in South Korea, a country identified as having “education fever” (see Seth 2002). Arguably, Jinny’s family embraced independent globetrotting in the production of global subjects has more of an impromptu flair. However, parents choosing to send their children to international schools, which are still fairly new entities in South Korea, certainly include experimental qualities. These deliberate choices are designed to produce “21st century global citizens,” if not “21st century global leaders.” Or more specifically within the context of this dissertation, Silicon Valley cool, driven by uncertain end goals and enabled through self-fashioning as a hyper flexible subject. Someone who is ready to embrace new challenges, shaping the world as they go, all whilst dressed in streetwear. This new type of subject draws from historically rooted practices of educational investment that lend themselves to status production in a turbulent global market but from within a tight-knit affluent circle.

Educational institutes aside, it is necessary to consider the adolescent life stage as one that is understood as a vital phase, where one’s potential is limitless and infinite. As Cole and Durham (2007:5) argue, there is a need to further investigate how adolescents shape the ways that “broad-scale processes of economic globalization and state restructuring play out.” While race, class and gender frequently frame studies analysing social reproduction, age has overwhelmingly been ignored (Cole and Durham 2007:5). As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, they note that currently, investigations should place attention on how members of younger generations change both the spatial and temporal dimensions of life stages, ideations of personal development, as well as definitions of dependence and independence (Cole and Durham 2007:5).
To date, much work has been done identifying the ways in which adolescents contribute to existing practices, modalities of exchange, and patterns of global consumption (Allison 2008; Anagnost 2008; 2013; Bucholtz 2002; Cole and Durham 2008; Fass 2008; Flanagan 2008; Ruddick 1990). As Paula Fass (2008: 40-1) argues, adolescence in the United States is treated as an extended life stage shaped by a plethora of institutions but ultimately isolated from work. With an emphasis on “play and leisure,” adolescence is adulthood suspended — a “moratorium.” Yet, as I have shown, the upper-classed adolescents in this study are deeply attuned to issues of work in adulthood and the prevailing political-economic climate. As I have discussed, play is revered not as an activity but as an end in and of itself. It is mobilized to incite productivity, creativity, and innovation in a tech-dominated economy. It is difficult then to argue that the primary objective of adolescents in this study is to whole-heartedly enjoy their free time. As I have shown throughout this demonstration, their status as students or hak-saeng, which is treated in South Korea as a clear life-stage and identity that typically begins in middle school, is well-known as a life-phase where one prepares for their adult working life. It is understood as an intensely busy period, where adolescents should sacrifice their sleep and social lives to best prepare their future. This life phase is considered a time when one might also postpone romantic relationships as they may be distracting and not necessary since marriage generally comes after landing a job. While their labour may be unwaged, their cultivation of human capital is consciously embedded in current existing worlds of work, creating out new mechanisms for producing “1%” status in Korea.

It is precisely for this reason that Nancy Abelmann et al.’s (2013: 103; 106; 121) observation that the “vitality” of youth, akin to adolescence, is highly valued for sustaining self-development and human capital cultivation. Theorizing these ethnographic findings further, Ann Anagnost (2013: 2) provocatively asks, “to what extent the new regime of capital accumulation relies on the energy of youth and its optimism and resilience in the face of life’s challenges?” It is not a question of how adolescents shape global consumption as influencers of culture. It is a question of how high the human capital production of the aspirant “1%” re-sets the bar of belonging and success in worlds of high-paying jobs, public recognition, and social membership.

Adolescents in this study do not enjoy a sustained period of leisure, divorced from work. As I have reiterated above and shown in Chapter 4: Work Hard, Play Harder, fears of obsolescence undergird pedagogical approaches by folding in play to work. But whether the work is playful,
or the play is fruitful, ultimately my adolescent interlocutors view their position as precarious — despite their privilege. Their place within the broader classed-based hierarchy in South Korea depends on their ability to negotiate a turbulent global market and maintain their classed positionality and privilege when they become targets of the angry 99%. If that were not enough, their sense of insecurity is further exacerbated by their status as investees who have not yet proven their worth as a “good” return-on-investment. At every twist and turn of their lives, adolescents were negotiating their classed identity and positionality. Sometimes they were shy and nervous about their privilege, as evidenced in my interlocutors’ insecurities about speaking English in public or Jinny’s critique that rich people can at times, be very bad. Jinny and Sumin did not like the fact that the blue-collar security guards at their school thought they were “dumb but rich.” Do Young expressed envy upon hearing that Jae Hyun was invited to hang out with another peer from their school—someone clearly a part of South Korea’s elite. Karen went insofar to clearly differentiate herself as “solidly middle class” in comparison to Jinny, who was “really rich.” At other moments, they felt confident enough to treat their teachers with utter disrespect, reminding us where we belong in relation to them. Benjamin (as well as Paul and Mark) refused to disclose his father’s profession, guarding his family’s privacy. Jinny’s Mother was proud of the fact that her family was affluent enough to be hypermobile on a global scale. Students spent a lot of their time cultivating a philanthropic spirit, even though educators such as Susan worried it would be fruitless in an atmosphere of unrest in which the Hell Joseon discourse was so popular. In sum total, these actions, practices, and beliefs speak to the largely dubious classed identity of those who are part of the “1%” but perhaps not the “1% of the 1%.” With enough grooming however, maybe they would make it into a high-paced job in the finance or the tech sector with their Silicon Valley cool habitus. But even if they do attain these lofty heights, they must always remain aware that they can slip back down the socioeconomic ladder as well and end up with “a life of mediocrity,” or worse yet a potentially angry mob could tear the ladder down entirely.

As I have shown, the formation of the future “1%” adopts old practices with the new. Jinny, Karen, Sumin, Do Young, and Jae Hyun — and all the adolescents in this study — are investment experiments. As Michelle Murphy (2017: 90) argues, “Experimentality presumes a world open to intervention and productive of change, but even more than this, neoliberal experimentality was premised on a sense of the world as generative not despite of but because of
its precarity.” The experimentality that Murphy (2017: 93) identifies is one that aligns with capitalist modes of production and accumulation. These processes are contingent on the “externalities, loss, and waste” of others. Resilience (Chapter 3), optimal health, creativity and playfulness are contrasted against wishes for early death or to have never been born by the “have-nots.” In a social-economic setting, the power of one’s vitality as a fundamental aspiration for the “1%” is far more pronounced when juxtaposed with the lethargy of the “have nots” and their dream of not existing at all.

The “endless futurity of experimentality” (Murphy 2017: 80) is a practice, ethos, and ideology that is open only to those who are privileged enough to re-orchestrate, navigate, and recombine disparate elements in the production of new subjectivities and identities. Jinny, Karen, Sumin, Jae Hyun, and Do Young are prime examples of precious commodities in the making. But their future value constantly is under assessment in the present and marked by economic instability as well as classed antagonisms that threaten their status as the future “1%.” In the process of becoming, the future remains open as to whether they will ever become the idealized, hyperflexible, hyperfit, resilient, warm-hearted, compassionate human capital that will be able to ride the eddies and flows of global market turbulence. And in this post-impeachment era, questions remain as to whether currently existing structures of classed inequality favouring my interlocutors will endure.
Chapter 7
Conclusion: Suicide

7 When value-in-potentia goes unrealized

The bulk of my dissertation focuses on vital forces, such as skill-building as tools for managing potential obsolescence, play, care, and emotional and psychological health — all deemed necessary for human capital to appreciate even in turbulent conditions. What happens when intensive investments designed to nurture adolescents as value-in-potentia goes unrealized? While my research subjects exhibited no signs of suicidal tendencies, during an interview with Tyler, an upper-level administrator at an international school in Seoul, our discussion took a sombre turn.

Tyler spent much of the first half of our meeting showering his staff and students with accolades. His tone was bright and optimistic. Working at Global Institute of Korea since the 1970s, Tyler was one of the only administrators who had a longitudinal view of international school attendees spanning several decades. For the most part, teachers and administrators fulfilled their two- to three-year contracts, moving on to their next international destination. In some cases, teachers moved on once they grasped the difficulties in fully realizing their educational vision in South Korea. Students’ exhaustion, excessive competition, an exam-taking culture, and fighting the overwhelming onslaught of work from the after-school private education industry, were some of the most common reasons given for departure. In most cases however — especially amongst the younger staff — being an international school teacher was a means to travel the world, fulfilling a wanderlust while building a career. Globetrotting was the name of the game. Tyler, on the other hand, remained committed to his institution and its students. That was very clear, not only in his own choice to stay in South Korea, but also in the way he warmly spoke of their initiative, drive, intellect, ingenuity, and charm. Like many of the international schools, the faculty here boasted many students with Ivy League degrees and long lists of charitable services to their credit.

Tyler’s extensive years of experience in South Korea afforded him the perspective of seeing many “successful” international school students go on to fulfilling careers. It was clear he was proud of the kinds of individuals Global Institute of Korea could lay claim to. It was also apparent that Tyler understood many of the intricacies of what life was like for students. Unlike
many of the other international school educators I spoke with, Tyler did not seem to resent the fact that nearly all his students received private tutoring. He accepted that it was just another aspect of the milieu he too had to work within. In our conversation, he had a clear sense of the pressures they faced, the familial expectations placed upon them, and the struggles they encountered when adjusting to American college life. After slaving away as children and adolescents — working so hard to secure coveted spots at highly respected college campuses — Tyler sympathized with the students who could not acclimate. He recognized that it was hard to smoothly transition from every moment being strictly scheduled into academic and personal independence after being subjected to years of structure. He acknowledged the difficulties students faced upon moving to the United States, alone. I got the impression that Tyler would work wholeheartedly with his students so that they would thrive.

Cognizant of the harsh realities that adolescents face, our conversation about academic pressure turned to the topic of precarity and anxiety. In full agreement with many of Tyler’s observations, I mentioned that I had also noticed that highly privileged, upper-classed subjects felt anxiety and a sense of precarity. I framed my observation on political-economic circumstances, shaped by rapid changes in South Korea (much of which he witnessed and lived through first-hand) and current global market instability. Tyler agreed that no one — not even the wealthiest — feels secure in today’s world. Clearly our discussion was dredging up some painful memories and it was at this point that Tyler grew teary-eyed, excusing himself while he quietly wept through the remainder of our talk.

With several decades of career experience in Seoul, Tyler came to know thousands of students. As high school graduates, they were filled with promise, but sadly, several of them committed suicide. He mentioned that rarely did the incidents of suicide occur while students were attending Global Institute of Korea. It was usually after the students had graduated from American colleges — many of them highly prestigious — and returned to Korea as adults. Unable to live up to their parents’ expectations and fully realize the value of the educational investments, these individuals took their lives. This was particularly devastating for Tyler because of the promissory potential he saw and nurtured.

Ms. Ha saw potential, too, but more so in educational investment strategies as opposed to the actual student. At the very beginning of this dissertation, Ms. Ha staunchly defended educational
investment as the method she thought best to prepare her children and students to survive in South Korea — “the most capitalist country in the world” or “kajang chabonjuŭi” in Korean. Similar in scope and also entering the general lexicon during the time of my fieldwork was the neologism kwadojabonjuŭi, which translates to “hypercapitalism.” This term can be understood as a form of perfected capitalism. It is a system where the process of value extraction has been so refined, has become so highly efficient at devaluing and disposing of labour in the process of profit production that it literally kills its workers.145

This chapter considers suicide to be a backlash to “hypercapitalism” and a form of economic protest by those who object to becoming obsolescent under the new regime (see Muehlebach 2014). Within the social-economic hierarchies of hypercapitalism are the core features of underemployment, complete with low wages even for the highly educated and becoming a target for abuse. And while the people from this demographic are being abused, there is also the expectation that they should be prepared to go to the frontlines of volatile markets without hesitation and create new frontiers. After all, adults saw global markets as also highly abusive. It was a matter of best preparing students to withstand the cruelties and injustices of the market. Either paid badly or tasked to perform unalienated labour yoking play to work, this fusion gives subjects virtually no room to escape from their work. With every aspect of their lives tied up to projects of class reproduction in uncertain times, suicide should be examined within a broader social-economic context rather than from the vantage point of individualized pathology.

### 7.1 After 2008: The end is still nigh

It is necessary to consider the broader context within which South Koreans understand their livelihoods to be threatened — or enhanced — by pending economic crises. Even if their privilege has not waned, the prevalent feelings of precarity spark the investments practices of the interlocutors included in this study. This is despite the fact that South Korea escaped from the 2008 Global Financial Crisis mostly unscathed. As I demonstrated, these feelings of insecurity infiltrate the lives of my interlocutors through and through: IHE Prep owners,

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teachers, parents, international school staff, and adolescents. Taken together, my interlocutors’ lives are shaped by the structures of feeling that shape everyday life in South Korea, cutting across classed lines (Williams 1977). The paradoxical formulation of affluence and feelings of precariousness is one that surfaced repeatedly, and the ripple-out effect is far-reaching.

Despair is a feeling that was expressed over and over throughout my fieldwork by South Koreans of all classes. In a bizarre and almost physical manifestation of people’s sinking spirits, sinkholes started to appear throughout Seoul and were becoming quite common. Images of cars swallowed by concrete, video clips of pedestrians suddenly disappearing into the ground beneath them, news reporters televised waist-deep in a freshly formed hole were becoming everyday sights. Who or what is to blame for these sinkholes? Two immediate answers come to mind: the rapid expansion of the express Line 9 subway in cutting across Seoul and the hasty, haphazard construction of the Lotte Tower in the Jamsil neighbourhood. Though the tower is now fully finished and open it was a cause for concern. It stands as the tallest building in South Korea and fifth tallest in the world. During my fieldwork however, construction was still underway.

Seoulites worried that the structural integrity of the surrounding land was forever compromised. Holes had been dug too deep, too fast. Min Jae (whom I will talk about in a moment) stated in a conversation that cracks appeared in nearby buildings as a result of shifting land and sinkholes. The shoddy electrical wiring of streetlights next to the nearby Seokchon Lake was bound to result in the electrocution of the entire neighbourhood. Seoulites — and my mother who would nervously call from New York — nearly all gave me the same warning. Stay away from that part of town at all costs. The Lotte Tower was not to be trusted. It might collapse. Janice, who was a key interlocutor in 2012-2013 and remained my roommate for almost the entirety of my fieldwork, and I swore we would never step foot near that thing.

These worries echo past collapses. The Seongsu Bridge collapse in 1994, death toll 32. The Sampoong Department Store collapse in 1995 where 502 people died. Both cases are stories of structural failure and developing “too fast.” Hasty construction was to blame. South Koreans often refer to these two incidents as the growing pains of their remarkable rise to becoming one of the Four Asian Tigers, “the Miracle on the Han.” This time though, the narratives surrounding the sinkholes and the looming collapse of Lotte Tower are allegorical of an
uncertain, economic future, and loss of control. Would the future eat them and swallow them whole? Could public infrastructure be trusted? Could private infrastructure be trusted? Would one be crushed by infrastructure, thanks to capitalism’s failures? Is anyone safe?

While I focus on South Korea, it is worth noting that these anxieties and discourses are eerily familiar to those that take shape in other global cities. They are reminiscent of my conversations with a friend who graduated with a master’s degree from the University of Toronto Daniels Faculty of Architecture. Saddled in debt, she quickly took a job designing condos during the boom. Although her graduating class had a 100% employment rate, they all experienced the same frustration, quickly churning out blueprints for buildings that had only one purpose: catering to a speculative, unsustainable market. Instructed to “turn closets into bedrooms,” my friend also vented about the fact that none of these firms were interested in sustainability and durability. Openly, her co-workers discussed that cracks in walls would inevitably appear after twenty years, maximum. Intentionally, each unit was only supposed to last the duration it took for an individual to pay off the mortgage. Likewise, my friend was horrified when taking contracts with American firms who would often hastily start production before securing all of the financing. It is unsurprising then that Toronto journalists also expressed worry about the booming condo market (which according to another architect friend of mine, instigated a crane shortage in North America during those years). This is perhaps most explicitly evidenced in the coverage of the high-priced Shangri-la condo in 2014 where glass fell fifty stories onto a crowded sidewalk during the rush hour commute.

Like South Korea, in Toronto too the inevitability of crises crept into many mundane conversations. To paint a clearer picture of how these discourses took shape during my fieldwork in Seoul though, take for example, my friendship with Min Jae, who I met outside of my research routine proper.

We had a conversational routine. I would ask Min Jae how his week went. Without fail, his response was, “Bad, because Jesus didn’t come.” Min Jae worked in the financial department of one of South Korea’s major corporate offices. Like many South Koreans, he also kept a close watch of the Greek Debt Crisis that also prompted IMF bailout. Our weekly conversations were about the future of South Korea’s economy, often in relation to the economic health of other countries. Min Jae remained vigilant, watching for economic catastrophes abroad, citing South
Korea’s vulnerability as an export-oriented country. Even if South Korea escaped a direct hit in a crisis, losing clients and consumers abroad could have devastating effects on everyday life.

Moreover, Min Jae also predicted that if the United States raised interest rates, South Korea would do the same, causing a crisis akin to the 2008 U.S. Subprime mortgage disaster and the domestic collapse of the economy. The 1997 IMF Crisis would be dwarfed in comparison. He explained that due to the real estate bubble in South Korea, even a 1% increase in interest would result in mortgage defaults, foreclosures would flood the market causing housing prices to plummet. He was more optimistic about this outcome. If lucky, he might be able to grab some cheap property. Nevertheless, in his opinion, the effects of the next crisis are beyond our imagination. In 1997, South Korea was still relatively “poor.” Today, as the eleventh largest economy, the losses would be on a much grander scale. Maybe the best he could hope for was for the Book of Revelation to come true, where the returning of Christ the Messiah would just be the endgame to this madness, once and for all.

7.2 Suicide and hypercapitalism

While Min Jae does not explicitly talk about suicide, the eschatology of his longing for Christ’s return evidences a desire for a definitive ending and liberation from the vicissitudes of living under hypercapitalism. In fact, suicide seems to be the by-product of hypercapitalism. Until now, I have shown the numerous ways in which upper-classed adolescents become sites of investment — appreciable assets. This all-encompassing process enfolds the adolescents’ academic potential, creativity, imagination, physical vitality, social relations, and psycho-emotional fortitude. Mutating play for its potentiality to innovate, adolescents are socialized into regimes of unalienated labour. Endless innovation to oneself, to move within the eddies and flows of capital, are what allow value production. After all, the beauty of investment is that “while poor in teleology- one never knows what connections might become relevant next- the ecology of investment is rich with history” (D’Avella 2014: 176). But, these forms of value extraction are inherently vicious, where the entirety of one’s existence is cast open to serve the promissories of capitalism. Though measures are taken to ensure that adolescents coming of age in a climate characterized by global market turbulence will survive and thrive, the systems they are being prepared for will efficiently devalue and dispose of their labour. The suicides that
Tyler identified can be understood as another form of obsolescence: suicide when value-in-potentia goes unrealized.

Suicide in South Korea is a daily occurrence. For many South Koreans, suicide — like the prospect of economic collapse — shapes the banal. According to a 2015-2016 OECD Factbook, South Korea had the highest suicide rate amongst developed nations (OECD 2016). While the rate of suicide amongst the elderly was the highest, I do not want to discount the aggregated data here. In addition to the number of cases mentioned above, “economic suicides” were also widely reported in the domestic media during my fieldwork.

Certainly not all suicides are motivated by financial problems but the high frequency at which South Koreans take their lives means that most everyone been has been touched by a suicide or suicide attempt. The anecdotal tales are endless. A middle-school student at IEP Academy recalled seeing a body fly past his high-rise apartment window as he studied. My former student who is now in college recalled an incident when her classmate at a prestigious public high school in Gangnam rose from his seat and jumped out the window in the middle of a lesson. An entire family sat in a car as it filled with carbon monoxide. Celebrities found dead. The Vice President of Danwon High School whose students perished in the Sewol Ferry sinking found hanging from a tree.146 A Seoul taxi driver who self-immolated in front of the National Assembly in protest of the new Uber-like Kakao T carpool service that threatens the taxi industry. The infamous Mapo Bridge in Seoul, known as “The Bridge of Death” for the number of suicides committed there, was retrofitted with inspirational quotes, photographs of mundane scenes such as a bowl of noodles, artwork, LED lights, and motion sensors as a prevention program.147

As I discussed in Chapter 6, an individual’s working-class status leaves a person open to abuse, leading to depression and thoughts of suicide. Everyday discourses crucified those at the top,

146 This incident was given international media coverage: https://www.cnn.com/2014/04/21/world/asia/ferry-vice-principal-funeral/index.html.
147 For a report in English on Samsung Life Insurance company’s initiative, refer to: https://www.cnet.com/news/bridge-of-life-projects-messages-to-prevent-suicides/
“punching down,” making life unbearable for someone unable to fight back. Suicides that explicitly identify these incidents as the cause reveal how economic conditions are motivating factors. At the same time, my upper-class interlocutors had, albeit differently, endured a lifetime of pressure and felt guilty about “overinvestment,” which also raises the spectre of depression and possible suicide. A low practice exam score would lead to despair as students buried their heads in their hands, proclaiming, “I’m wasting my parents’ money.” Fear of being a “bad investment” was evidenced daily. These feelings of deep insecurity were also present in the popular anecdotal tale of “someone who went to Harvard,” but works at a local karaoke bar, thanks to the horrific conditions of South Korea’s youth labour market. Amongst my interlocutors, becoming a “good for nothing” was the lowest of the low. The term *paeksu*, which literally translates into “white hand,” is a synecdoche for one who does not work and was frequently used in the Harvard horror story. At the core of these reactions are adolescents’ reflexive understandings of themselves as debtors. Their parents and teachers invest to produce precious commodities but in gifting and reciprocal relations, their payback is to become completely liquid.

7.3 It doesn’t always work

The vast majority of social scientific research on financialization focuses on financial media proper — algorithms, derivatives, collateral trading — exposing the ideologies, values and practices that constitute these systems. However, as I have shown, human capital production also adopts these “logics,” transforming individuals into forms of financial media as well. While Bifo Berardi (2012) maintains the same analytical orientation, focusing his arguments on how value is produced when untethered from labour, I have woven his theorizations on debt and credit through my dissertation. As Berardi (2012: 84) argues, “Debt is actually future time — a promise about the future…Something is wrong with this exchange. You take my (future) time, and then want my money back. The crucial mystery, the crucial enigma, the crucial secret in the financial age of capitalism is precisely this: is the money that is stored in the bank my past time, (the time that I have spent in the past), or is it the money that ensures the possibility of my buying a future? Well, is it a secret or an enigma?” Berardi (2012: 85) concludes that the financial age is, indeed, an enigma, “because nobody knows about the future, nobody knows what is hidden in the future time of debtors. So the only way to solve this enigma is with
violence. Either you pay, or you are out.” Upper-classed adolescents as sites of investment, as “value-in-potentia,” make promises to their parents about their future. The financialization of their lives, their bodies, their feelings, their thoughts, their creativity, their kindness, are all rolled into structures of credit and debt, where they are expected to become a “good” return-on-investment. But as Berardi (2012: 85) states, the future remains unknowable. Their value as a liquid asset remains an enigma.

Although we may never understand a suicide victim’s psyche, perhaps it is worth thinking through how hypercapitalism shapes reflexive understandings of the self as a labouring subject. As an investee in a turbulent global market, as human capital that is constantly being evaluated for one’s worth, is it possible for subjects to know what the future may bring? The short answer is, probably not. Adolescents are constituted as appreciable assets under the premise that their value-production occurs in an infinitely expanding space. The vitality of youth, the ingenuity ensconced in play, the transformative potential of compassion, the endless accumulation of skills and credentials are simultaneously a means to avert obsolescence and a direct path towards it.148

For Berardi (2009, 2012) the disconnect happens between language and the body. For the adolescents included in this study, the disconnect can happen on a number of different planes, for it is all those planes to which their lives become tethered. While the bulk of my dissertation focused on pedagogies, socialization processes, and practices directed at nurturing vitality, that is not to say that adolescents were always willing recipients. As I showed throughout Chapter 5: Venture Philanthropy, Francis appeared at IHE Prep on numerous occasions but not always to improve his candidacy for a school such as University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business. He often showed up to take naps, use Facebook, and plan his friends’ birthday parties. Karen was happy to work hard but drew the line at her grandparents’ offers to pay for

148 Because as Berardi (2012: 114) states, the premise of infinity — in space and value production — sustaining financial systems is merely an illusion. As Berardi (2012: 114) argues, “[t]he dream of the networked economy’s endless boom broke because psychic energy is not boundless, because the physical resources of the planet are not boundless, and because the infinite potency of the networked collective intelligence is limited by the finitude of psychic energy.” Desire is driven by “perfect forms” of “value, money, [and] financial excitement” (Berardi 2012: 116). I would add that adolescents’ as “value-in-potentia” are also “perfect forms” that cannot be brought to fruition.
intravenous vitamin drips to combat fatigue. Jae Hyun once arrived to class visibly upset. I asked him what was wrong? He had a fight with his mother prior to coming to IHE Prep. The night before he went to bed at 11 pm only to be verbally accosted by his mother who told him he could not sleep during this phase in his life. He needed to get into college. I witnessed an open fight between a mother and her 12-year-old son at IHE Prep over his utter refusal to take a human growth hormone, after a doctor predicted that his adult height may not reach 177 centimetres — the desired stature of an “attractive” man.

On numerous occasions, it was clear that adolescents took it upon themselves to alienate themselves from their academic labour. Play might be harnessed by educators to constitute productive, creative, innovative subjects (Chapter 4), but at IHE Prep, I caught my students engaging in a make-shift game of soccer or volleyball in the lobby with the stuffed Kirby doll kept on premises. I saw them play pranks on one another, make fake IDs, internet shop, play Smash Bros. or huddle away in empty classrooms to watch Korean dramas on their laptops, gasping at the antics. One adolescent once walked me through the steps of how he disabled his school’s security firewall so that he (and everyone else for that matter) could visit internet sites and play games during class resistance. Nearly every student had a sticker over their MacBook camera light. When I asked why, they all gave me the same answer: it afforded them the freedom to goof off during class as they silently video chatted with one another, texting while looking at one another’s face.149

In some ways then, it is not a stretch to claim that to some extent, students enjoyed spending time at IHE Prep.150 Once, Jae Hyun gleefully told me that he was going to “live at hagwŏn

149 Nearly every international school had a contract with Apple. It was mandatory for students to purchase a MacBook.

150 The alternative, sometimes families will make the conscious decision not to send their children to certain academies, as they are reputed to be places where “nallaridŭl” spend their time—those who are not invested in their studies at all but rather more explicitly focused on playing. Take for example one SAT academy in the same wealthy Gangnam neighbourhood known for the progeny of celebrities attending. When I talked to two teachers, Eric and Melinda, both Korean-Americans who spent substantial time working there, they admit that their academy was not particularly rigorous and instead functioned as a “social club” attended by students who showed up to class drunk and spent their time clubbing.
(private academy) during the summer” to prepare for his SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. This declaration was punctuated with a giant smile. Upon relaying this information to Paul, his eyes nearly bulged out of his head. In a rather exasperated yet somewhat amused tone, retorted, “AGAIN?! He did that last summer!”

IHE Prep, like many private academies, also functioned as a social club. It was a place where adolescents could see their friends and escape their parents’ gaze. Paul meandered in between playing the role of a teacher by giving advice on how to achieve higher test scores, a father by consoling and playfully teasing his students for their social misadventures, and a friend who in many ways let his pupils speak freely about their lives. Paul was not the only teacher actively cultivating these dynamics. On a daily basis, my other co-workers ate with, playfully chastised, chased and laughed with their students.

At the same time, Paul could be very stern about drawing boundaries between when he thought students should play and when they should put their heads down to concentrate. Although he had a reputation for being a jovial, youthful character around adolescents and teachers, he had no qualms about scolding students who he viewed as overstepping their bounds. One day, Paul irately yelled at Chloe, exclaiming, “You play all day!” (harujongillora) As usual, Chloe, Jae Hyun, and Mark, were sitting in the teacher’s lounge. Although Mark was the only teacher, the students were only a couple of years his junior and gravitated towards him, thinking of him as “an older brother” (hyŏng, oppa).

Out of all the students that summer, Chloe probably spent the most time at the private academy. In our conversations, she confessed that this was a conscious choice. “If I spend a lot of time at hagwŏn (private academy) my parents think I’m studying, so when I really want to play, they’ll let me.” She told me her actions were restricted by the fact that she couldn’t go shopping or eat with friends since her mother would receive a text message from the bank every time she used her debit card. For Chloe, gaining parental permission “to really play” motivated her to spend every waking moment at the private academy. On many occasions, when Chloe wasn’t stirring up a makeshift game of soccer or volleyball, I saw her with an open book in her lap while talking with friends. This positioning of the book served as her defence when teachers, such as Paul came by and scolded her for “always playing.” She would emphatically argue that she was “doing work” by pointing at the book.
I am somewhat unsurprised by what Chloe told me, as several other students over the course of my time as a teacher confessed that they used this exact strategy. One night, at Berkeley Institute, a group of students returned at midnight to “hang out.” One student’s cell phone started ringing. He picked up. Directly looking at us-teachers and his peers-with a mischievous smile, he said, “I’m at the private academy,” in Korean. Upon ending the phone call, we asked who he was talking to. He gleefully reported it was his mother who was enthusiastic that he was “studying,” inciting us all to laugh. I also suspect that spending time at the private academy provided Chloe the means to outright avoid her parents’ scrutiny and pressure to excel. In fact, Chloe’s mother once told her, “Don’t even think about UC Berkeley,” referring to its “low” status in comparison to Ivy League institutes. Chloe might have used every tactic available to her to avoid work and play as much as possible, but in the end if she were not to be admitted to a top Ivy League institute her ploys would not work.

7.4 Vitality and value

Along the way, my adolescent interlocutors made efforts to retract, retreat, perhaps even resist, the multiple regimes of labour constituted through gifting and market economies. Though I did not witness any explosive incidents that were cause for concern regarding their psychological state, I did however think about the possible repercussions of assimilating students into projects of infinite human capital appreciation. Their states of exhaustion did not go unnoticed. Their frustration, feelings of guilt, and desires to escape a life of “slavery,” were expressed in various ways. These particular observations cast them, as vital human capital in the making, in a different light. What will the repercussions of exhaustion be in a turbulent hypercapitalist market?

While I do not have the answers regarding the individual lives of my interlocutors, in Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide, another work by Bifo Berardi (2015), similar concerns are raised. As Berardi (2015: 53) states:

“Modern culture and political imagination have emphasized the virtues of youth, of passion and energy, aggressiveness and growth. Capitalism is based on the exploitation of physical energy, and semicapitalism is grounded in the subjugation of the nervous energy of society. The notion of exhaustion has always been anathema to the discourse
of modernity, of romantic *Sturm und Drang*, of the Faustian drive to immortality, the endless thirst for economic growth and profit, the denial of organic limits. Growth is not simply an economic phenomenon, but a cultural concept, linked to the vision of the future as infinite expansion.”

At the start of my research, the futures of my adolescent interlocutors were uncertain. What I do know now is that Karen and Jinny both landed spots in American Ivy League institutions. Sumin, Jae Hyun, Amber, and Francis secured spots at respectable college campuses. Do Young’s mother wrote me a thank-you email, letting me know that he had opted for a small private liberal arts college that specializes in computer science — his forte. All of them are on their way to carving out “the good life.”

As for Paul, approximately three months after concluding my fieldwork, he sent me text messages to say good bye. His body had betrayed him. He didn’t trust it would stop anytime soon. I told him to stop being silly, pointing out that he had already beaten the odds. Given four months to live in late 2014, we were now in 2016. Even upon my departure from Seoul in December 2015, I continued to marvel at the fact that Paul had all his hair and seemed energetic. Minus the fact that he had lost some weight, he looked healthy. But in this text message exchange, I sensed that his youthful vigour had substantially faded. Delirious from his medication, his messages were nearly entirely typos. His eyesight was going, he said. Despite my urges to maintain his spunky attitude, Paul insisted that his time was nearly over. We began our good byes. Paul thanked me for my hard work and friendship. He told me to keep in touch with his wife and family in the future. I obliged and proceeded to thank him too. For being my friend, mentor, affording me the opportunity to complete my fieldwork, and being one of the main instigators behind my graduate studies. Had he not hired me in 2008, opening my eyes to this new world, I very highly doubt that this project would have happened. Another week or so passed when Mark contacted me to inform me that Paul had passed away.

While some of my interlocutors are on their path to thriving, others withered away. Still, even in the last months of Paul’s life, his vibrancy was a commitment to expansive growth and appreciation for himself, his family and students. It is in this capacity that Paul too exhausted what was left of his vitality.
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