INTRODUCTION

The Melodrama
of Mobility

Although they necessarily fall at the beginnings of books, introductions
strike me as foremost betwixt and between. With one arm they coax the
readers, imploring them to read on, promising treasures in the pages that
stretch ahead. With the other arm, they pull back, warning that the offer-
ings are frail, that they falter here or there. Hubris makes her claims, just as
humility softens, or even retracts, them. And ethnography, with its often
resolutely local lens—focused, in the case of this book, on the talk of not
even a dozen middle-aged South Korean women—similarly straddles di-
verse claims: at its brazen-most it argues that this-or-that corner of reality
will render the world anew; more sheepishly, it often promises no more (or
less) than the integrity and humanity of a small story.

To the reader, let me say: at its boldest, this introduction will proclaim
that the lives of the South Korean women who figure prominently in this
book tell a story that is nothing short of the history and sensibility of
post–Korean War South Korea; in its more modest moments, this introd-
cution will suggest that these lives introduce the “talk” of a particular gen-
eration of South Korean women. The reader wonders, “But what does the
writer really think? Which is it, after all?” My answer: both, both, betwixt
and between.

But in another vein, let me be perhaps even more bold: it is not just in-
troductions that do more than one thing at once, at times even at cross-
purposes, but all writing and speech—all words. And this is a book that ex-
amines many words, those comprising the stories of eight South Korean
women, asking always about the various things they are doing, doing all at
once. Boldly again, I will assert that the myriad social contests that rivet
their words and stories reveal these women’s times, in the historical sense.
Pulling in the reins a bit, I marvel at the complexity of their stories, and the struggles of their lives.

If introductions are, as I suggest, precarious, I take titles to be straightforward promises. They are promises about ideas that figure centrally in the book, and about places, often metaphorical ones, the writer visits. My title promises, then, that at the very least I will introduce the reader to “talk,” “class” (and “mobility”), “women,” and “melodrama.” Much of this introduction is devoted to what I mean by these words and how I use them here. And the words, those five, vie for attention with other words, words that might just as easily have found their way into the title: “narrative,” “family,” “gender,” and “identity” among them.

This Book in Short
This book draws upon women’s social mobility stories, that is, their talk about the course of their lives and of the lives in their midst, most typically those of siblings, cousins, and in-laws (see Plath 1980, 8, on “consociates”; also see Stack and Burton 1993, on “kinscripts”). Unlike life histories, chronological accounts of people’s lives, social mobility stories take up the particular problematic of social origins and destinations (see Ginsburg 1989, on “strategic life stories”). I appreciate origins and destinations not as fixed points but rather as narratives or stories. As such, social mobility stories engage the social imagination—a topic I turn to later in this chapter.

I met with these women intensively during two extended research stays in Seoul, South Korea (one in 1992 and 1993; the other in 1995 and 1996), and thereafter more briefly during shorter stays in 1998, 2000, and 2001. I met each of them at least eight times, some of them a dozen or more times. In shorter visits we sat together for a couple of hours, in longer ones, for the better part of a half day. I tell in chapter 2 how I came to meet each woman—how they came to be what anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney calls “donors of personal documents” (1980, xxv)—stories that I use to begin my foray into the complexity of class and gender in South Korea. Although I assert that the women who figure in this book span South Korea’s class spectrum, I also argue that class is not a structural variable to be considered in isolation of women’s narratives like the ones readers find here. Hence, although I assert these women’s class diversity, I resolutely refuse to classify them—by the terms of class or by any other single variable, for that matter.

I chose to speak with women of a single generation, appreciating that
generation refers both to a stage in the life cycle and to a historical cohort. At the time of our first encounter in the early 1990s, the women were in their late fifties through, at the oldest, their early sixties. Why this generation? And why this historical cohort? In the context of life courses, these were mature women with much of their child-rearing behind them, but women who were nonetheless still in the middle of things, with at least some children yet to be educated and married. That is, in the more distant tones of social scientific language, they were still actively engaged in the social (and class) reproduction of their families, still worried about fashioning or fastening the lives of their children. This is not to say that at some magical age past their early sixties women—or men, for that matter—wake up one morning to have completed these tasks, but to suggest that there are ages when these concerns, and the activities they entail, govern life more fully, more tenaciously.

Historically—for life-span generations always span particular historical moments (see Elder 1974 and 1985; Halbwachs 1950)—these women came of age and matured over the period of South Korea’s dizzyingly rapid post–Korean War social, political, economic, and cultural transformations, from the 1950s to the 1980s. The numbers that sketch the contours of these women’s adult lives—be they rates of rural exodus, expansions of secondary and higher education, or the creation of industrial sector jobs—are mind boggling because they remind us that these women’s lives ford such huge transformations so quickly. Indeed, it seems even problematic to speak of social or class “reproduction” over an era in which the grammar of social life would again and again be so transformed. At its boldest and humblest, then, this book aims to consider origins and destinations of lives in the context of mind-boggling transformation.

In broad strokes, I argue that in the social mobility stories of these women we can find the social, political, and cultural contests engendered by transformation; I will assert that transformation itself can be understood precisely in terms of such contests. This book, then, takes up the contests lodged in the talk about things big and little—a just world, a happy family, and so on; Gwaltney aptly refers to the personal narratives that made up his Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America as “analyses of the heavens, nature and humanity” (1980, xxvi). A pillar of this book—the theoretical foundations of which I turn to later in this chapter—is my understanding (one shared by many in the human and social sciences today) that it is not that these women’s stories “reflect” or “represent” these larger social, political, or cultural struggles, but rather that, to some extent, they comprise those
transformations; that is, their stories writ large have played a part in fashioning the life and sensibility of South Korea’s transformation. I want thus to appreciate that the life—the feeling—of transformation is made by people and through narrative, through the sorts of stories examined in this book.

This book thus asserts that these women’s talk offers a window on the contests that are contemporary South Korea. To be sure, to assert that the social world is but talk and contests can appear far-fetched or far-flung. By no means, however, do I mean to assert that political economic histories or structures are irrelevant here. Furthermore, numbers do have their place in telling the story of contemporary South Korea, but it is important to remember that they tell a partial story (Clifford 1986). So too is the story told here partial—but, I like to think, critical.

Having briefly detailed my focus in this book, I now situate this research in the context of the 1990s. I turn to the 1990s to underscore its importance as the decade through and from which the women in this book spoke about their lives over the course of recent history. They spoke about their pasts (beginning as early as the late 1930s and 1940s) from the perch of the 1990s, a decade that was conflicted in its own right; we must remember that retrospective narratives, as I discuss in the following text, are fashioned in the present.

The 1990s: Betwixt and Between

My research began (1992–1993) during the election and early presidency of Kim Young Sam, South Korea’s first democratically elected civilian politician. The next phase of my research (1995–1996) then continued throughout the very public arraignment of grave ills of the 1980s (of both the state and business, and foremost of collusion between them) and of the undemocratic practices of the Kim Young Sam regime (1993–1997) as well. My fieldwork finished up (1998, 2000, and 2001) under Kim Dae Jung’s presidency (1998 to the present; the first democratically elected opposition-party president) and in the eye and early aftermath of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) Crisis (1997–2001), referring both to the debt crisis and to the IMF and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development bailout, which revealed again enormous contemporary and recent historical, political, and social ills.

Coming on the heels of the 1980s—a decade of enormous political oppression and popular struggle (one that I wrestled with in Abelmann 1996)—the 1990s was a decade of tremendous hope, much of which was dashed.
That the 1990s did not fulfill its promise of social and political reform is but another chapter in a history of volatile political relations throughout South Korea since 1948; South Koreans have been anything but quiescent (Koo 1999; H. Y. Cho 2000; J. J. Choi 1993). Again and again, we find the play of state repression and popular opposition, and the fleeting reality of social, political, and labor “victories.” Turning back the clock, Koreans did not acquiesce easily to Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) (Cumings 2002). In turn, the end of Japanese colonialism, in 1945, found an explosion of political activity in Korea, of all ideological variety—much of it very radical. Increasingly appreciated is that Koreans above all wanted to determine their own destinies, to create their own state (Cumings 1981; Cumings 1997); instead, external powers took over, leading to the partition of the peninsula, which remains divided to this day. South Korea’s first regime, Syngman Rhee’s presidency (1948–1960), was toppled by popular struggle in the 19 April 1960 student uprising. April 19 (referred to as 4-1-9) is but one in a chain of South Korean household dates—dates that commemorate either popular struggle or heavy-handed state crackdowns. The hope of 4-1-9 was answered in the fleeting democratic presidency of Chang Myón, only to be eviscerated by Park Chung Hee’s military coup (5-1-6 for May 16) in 1961. Park’s was a presidency (1961–1979) of double-digit economic growth, mounting autocracy, and tenacious labor struggle. Another link in the number chain is Park’s 1972 so-called Yushin (restoration), which spared few collective or personal freedoms in the name of “national security” and “anticommunism.” South Koreans were made into state subjects with the help of a very heavy hand (H. Y. Cho 2000; I. Kwon 1990).

Reminiscent of 4-1-9, another hopeful moment was witnessed by South Koreans, a “democracy spring” in 1980, in the transition from the long-lived Park presidency to the Chun Doo Hwan regime (1980–1987) (see chapter 2 in Abelmann 1996, and Jager 1996a, for a discussion of the genealogical aesthetics in South Korea’s recent narration of Korean history). Chun came to power, however, with the bloody suppression of the Kwangju Uprising (May 1980), quickly extinguishing the hopes for democracy. The memory of Kwangju was quietly nurtured throughout Chun’s autocratic regime, which ended in widespread democracy and labor struggles, in summer 1987 (Lewis 2002). Although Roh Tae Woo’s presidency (1987–1992) was one initiated by direct election and one that promised a great deal, Roh actually sustained many organs and practices of the repressive state (Cumings 1997, 390).

My point with this review is not to suggest the futility of the political op-
position and struggles of the South Korean people. There have in fact been very real gains, and they have been hard won; South Koreans can and do celebrate a remarkable grassroots history that has spurred considerable social and political reform. Instead, I mean—en route to the 1990s—to underscore both the considerable participation of the South Korean people in social struggle, and the often bitter fruits of that activity. The women in this book were children at Liberation (1945), came of age under the Rhee regime, were of marital age in 1960, and raised children through the Park and Chun regimes. Into the Roh Tae Woo and Kim Young Sam regimes, most of them were tending to older or adult children—putting the finishing touches on these children’s higher education; worrying about their employment and marriage; and, in some cases, caring for their children (i.e., these women’s grandchildren).

Although the women in this book are not activists—none of them boast of particular political participation—they are women of their times, whose sympathies and frustrations have been fashioned amidst the political sweep outlined. That their personal accounts do not necessarily refer to the public watersheds of that history does not obviate the often quite political flavor of their stories. As mentioned, this book stakes a strong claim against any easy demarcation of the personal and the political, the individual and the social. I turn now to the 1990s.

“Collapse” is an important word for 1990s South Korea, one symbolic even long before the economic collapse of the market during the IMF Crisis (K. S. Chang 1999). Most literally, there were two important early 1990s architectural collapses: the Sôngsu Grand Bridge over the Han River, and the Sampung Department Store in downtown Seoul (together killing hundreds) (K. S. Chang 1999, 47). On another front, the rate of South Korean traffic accidents reached an unprecedented (and globally impressive) high in the early 1990s (K. S. Chang 1999, 48). Be it the IMF Crisis, accident rates, or other disasters, many South Koreans understood these occurrences to be risks associated with their rapid-fire economic development—development at all costs. Furthermore, many appreciated them as risks associated with the character of that development: orchestrated by a strong state allied with a small circle of large and powerful capitalists or conglomerates (chaeból).

This sort of critical, if not cynical, understanding of prevailing state and business power took on a particular life in the 1990s precisely because this was the decade that, in the aftermath of widespread popular achievement in the late 1980s (culminating in democratic elections and considerable gains
for labor), had promised political and economic democracy. What converged in the 1990s was unprecedented freedoms (of the press, etc.) to reveal and reflect upon both the ills (and numerous they were) of the 1980s (and earlier) and the persistence of many features of South Korean authoritarian governance. It was one thing for the public to learn daily of untoward aspects of their national past: that, for example, the collapse of the aforementioned bridge and department store spoke to shoddy contracting under President Chun’s shady political leadership. But it was another matter entirely when in the mid-1990s South Koreans were daily learning of unlawful aspects of the Kim Young Sam regime, including his unlawful passing of a new labor law in 1997; the illicit acts of his son, Kim Hyun-Chul; and the Hanbo financial scandal (a case of enormous political patronage). While South Koreans might have appreciated to a point that the public airing of social and political ills itself spoke to considerable democratic reforms, it was certainly not enough to curb popular discontent. As South Korean sociologist Kyung-Sup Chang summarizes, South Koreans “could not but feel betrayed by these civilian politicians in whose political rehabilitation they had invested physical and emotional energy . . . public disgust with politicians grew stronger in the era of civilian democracy than in the era of military dictatorship” (1999, 35).

It is against this 1990s backdrop that the IMF Crisis, christened on the eve of Kim Dae Jung’s presidency, would signal a final blow to public tolerance for state-corporate collusion. This collusion was named the culprit of the crisis, rendering “South Korea’s capitalist economy totally devoid of cultural legitimacy” (Chang 1999, 40). A related important feature of the 1990s, which I take up in chapter 10, was the considerable class anxiety and realignment in this decade. Even before the IMF Crisis resulted in the downward mobility spiral (both in terms of circumstances and identifications) of many who had counted themselves among the middle class, there had been other economic and social shifts, of particular interest to this study, the retreat of interest and sympathy for manual laborers by many in the middle class and the increasing identification of some manual laborers with the middle class (see Koo 2001).

**By Way of a Story**

Small causes can have a determining effect on individual histories, just as moving the pointer of a railroad switch by a few inches can shunt a train
with one thousand passengers aboard to Madrid instead of Hamburg . . .
And a casual encounter, a bet at roulette, a lightning bolt . . .

—Primo Levi, Moments of Reprieve

As a result of that humiliating day in court Clarence Smith’s sense of cause
and effect suffered a permanent distortion. His mind was filled with thoughts
that, taken one by one, were perfectly reasonable but in sequence did not
quite make sense.

—William Maxwell, So Long, See You Tomorrow

I turn now to the constructs in my title—talk, class (and mobility), women,
and melodrama. I do so first by way of a story, one told to me by a woman
I call the Education Mother in this book. I call her that because of her Her-
culean efforts to educate her only son, a story told in chapter 4. In previous
publications that mention several of the women in this book, I have used
surname pseudonyms (Mrs. so-and-so—problematic because Korean women
never take their husbands’ names); in one case, I referred to one woman
as the mother of so-and-so, the much more typical way in which women in
South Korea are spoken to and spoken of (most-often naming the oldest
child) (see Abelmann 1997a, 1997b, 2002). After considerable deliberation
over naming for this book, and following a creative suggestion by Hyunhee
Kim, I decided to use diverse pseudonym styles. While some pseudonyms
are descriptive, as with the Education Mother, others mimic the particular
way in which a woman is known of and spoken to, or refer to the woman’s
vocation or avocation; and for one woman, I use the conventional surname
pseudonym. This naming practice also echoes another aspect of this book,
in which the women are not featured in parallel but rather appear variously
in its course and arguments. Never do I seek to align them. For this group
of women, such an approach would be folly given the complexity of their
lives and narratives. This uneven practice also speaks to my encounters with
them: never parallel. Foremost, however, I have opted for this naming con-
vention in the hope that across this book’s many conversations, the reader
might be able to keep at least some of the voices distinct.

The story that follows is the Education Mother’s account of the fate of
her only sister. Enveloped in a rich web of interpretive asides and after-
thoughts, the story was much more than a string of events.

At the time the story was told, the Education Mother’s younger sister was
peddling shellfish on the beaches of South Korea’s southeastern coast.
Abandoned by her husband early in her marriage, and then part of a marginal economy, this sister inhabited an entirely different world than that of the Education Mother in Seoul, who defined her own “middle-class” identity in terms of the “leeway to live entirely off the interest of stock and real-estate investments” and the “time and money to join a health club and travel with international tours.”

At the heart of this story is a melodramatic moment in which her sister’s fate had turned suddenly—the sort of moment that could easily be accompanied by high-pitched string instrumentation or thunder and lightning in a melodramatic film or soap opera. It happened one day when her sister struck up a conversation with a stranger at a rural bus station. At the time evoked in the story, the Education Mother’s sister and her husband were in transit. Her husband had recently quit his job as a policeman, and with his sizable severance pay in hand, they were off to the coast to open a business. Throughout the journey, the Education Mother’s sister clutched the pocketbook that held these bills—the promise of their new lives. Chatting with the stranger (at the bus station), she somehow lost track of the pocketbook; the bus station thus became the couple’s way station to poverty. The couple continued to the coast and began peddling wares, on the fringes of the formal economy, to feed their family. Shortly thereafter the husband took a mistress and eventually abandoned the Education Mother’s sister entirely.

The Education Mother mused that by today’s standards, the money she would have needed to stem her sister’s fate is but a trifling amount (especially to a middle-class person). But in those days, the Education Mother’s family was enveloped in their own struggles to survive in immediate post–Korean War Seoul. Moreover, it has always been harder in Korea to distribute resources against the patrilineal grain—to a woman’s natal kin—although much more frequent than norms might govern (see Kendall 1985).

What I found most intriguing about this story was the Education Mother’s reflections on her sister’s fate—that is, the way in which she told the story. No sooner had she led me to the story’s climax than she had attributed her sister’s ill fate to her boyish personality (sŏngkyŏk), namely her sister’s impertinence and impropriety. Snatching her sister’s tragedy from the impersonal winds of fate, she delivered it to the workings of personal proclivity. For a moment I was baffled—for all her sister had done was to misplace her purse, or less still to have had it stolen; it struck me as unjust or even unkind to pin the blame for a turn of circumstance on personality. And yet I knew that this was a sister who the Education Mother loved dearly.
and whose misfortune she was deeply sad about. But my understanding of these seemingly personal attributions changed as the story of the downward mobility of the Education Mother’s sister veered in a different direction.

As the Education Mother continued, she portrayed her sister’s personality as not only the source of a particular—and in this case devastating—social fate but also the product of a particular family history and of particular social times. The Education Mother detailed her sister’s relationship with their overly ambitious mother, a woman who had been permanently separated from her husband during the division of the country into what became North and South Korea (1945–1948). She explained that her sister’s “mistaken” marriage to a policeman (in her words, “such a low-class profession”) was the product of their mother’s “ignorant ambition” that had fixed itself on the policeman’s yangban (hereditary elite) origins. “Yangban only in name,” the Education Mother continued, as his family coffers were empty and his father had long ago taken up residence with another woman.

While the Education Mother knew how to bear with her mother’s domineering ways—to say “yes” while all the while quietly forging her own path—her younger sister grew up at once fighting against and, ironically, complying with her mother’s “twisted and ignorant” ambition.

When I reviewed my notes from this rather extraordinary story, I could see that “personality” was not simply a catalogue of personal traits or proclivities but rather a discursive site where the workings of a particular family history and even of national histories were at play. When the Education Mother turned from the lost or stolen purse to her sister’s personality, it was not to wrest this sad story from the larger course of South Korean social transformations but rather to place it squarely within them—from the national division to the structure of patriarchy, to the reconfiguration of status hierarchies.

This story captures the melodramatic dimensions of the profound personal dislocations that have accompanied South Korean rapid social transformation. The rapidity of post–Korean War development has made for many stories like this one, stories in which small turns of fate—like the “pointer of a railroad switch” or the “casual encounter” in Primo Levi’s analogy—spiral into great tragedies or enormous social divides (1995, 76). In her ruminations over her sister’s fate, the Education Mother was struggling with nothing less than social justice at its barest: whether people get what they deserve, whether “cause and effect” make sense, as Clarence Smith puzzled over in William Maxwell’s narrative (1980, 112; see Kendall 1985, 92, on causality and Korean women). Writing about contemporary
South Korea, anthropologist Hae-joang Cho offered similarly: “People begin to feel that intentional acts only bring about unintended, disastrous consequences” (2000, 54).

Asking the reader to keep this melodramatic story in mind, I turn now to the book’s central concepts and theoretical affinities. The reader who is less interested in the theoretical concerns of this book is invited here to meet the story of the Education Mother again on page 27 in this chapter and to thus proceed more quickly to chapter 2.

**Talk**

In this chapter’s opening pages I briefly introduced “social mobility stories” to suggest what I take them to be, and the work that I take them to be doing. The brief melodramatic vignette just offered is a snippet from just such a story—a snippet in which a younger sister figures as a critical cohort member and interlocutor in the reckoning of the Education Mother’s present. In this section, I draw on the words of several theorists of language and literature to reveal my intellectual sympathies with several understandings: that language or talk is an integral element in the constitution of social life; that talk is dialogic—its interlocutors are numerous and diverse, and it reaches here and there (its origins are often elusive, its extensions hard to follow, and so on) such that individual discourse reveals a dispersed, not centered, self; that conversation is integral to social change (the grand processes of industrialization, urbanization, and so on); that the imagination is constituted through narrative; and finally, that ethnographic dialogue is in no way exempt from any of these understandings. All of these sympathies inform my understanding of social mobility stories. I turn to theory neither to justify nor to rationalize, but in the simple hope that these borrowed words might help me to better articulate the understandings from which I proceed. In later chapters the reader will find other references, to a wider circle of writers who have helped me to see the world (and closer to the task at hand, these women’s stories) in the ways that I do.

I divide this section into four subsections devoted respectively to the understanding that “private” language is necessarily public and is ideologically informed; that narrative is constitutive of social groups and social life; that personal narratives are inextricable from their familial contexts; and finally that narrative necessarily engages the imagination, thus challenging prevailing senses of the “real.”
The Language of the Day

At any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another. Even languages of the day exist: one could say that today’s and yesterday’s socio-ideological and political “day” do not, in a certain sense, share the same language; every day represents another socio-ideological semantic “state of affairs,” another vocabulary, another accentual system, with its own slogans, its own ways of assigning blame and praise . . . Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present . . . and so forth.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination

Mikhail Bakhtin found words to say, eloquently, that every day, even every moment, has its own language (1981, 291). He stressed this not to seal off each day, moment, and generation or family (these too are the provinces of languages, he offered) in its own social world, but quite to the contrary, to mark both their specificity and their seemingly endless reference to other moments, days, groups, and so on. In so doing, he underscored the dialogic nature of words and language, the infinite webs in which they are caught. Most foundationally, Bakhtin wrote away from what he described as the prevailing view in the 1930s: “A simple and unmediated relation of [the] speaker to his unitary and singular ‘own’ language” (1981, 269).

In Bakhtin there is thus a refusal to take “private” speech or discourse at face value, to see therein a private world. Instead, speech is forever suspended in its past, present, and future, in the lines of communication—real and metaphorical—that comprise it. Profoundly interrupted, then, are “individuals” or utterances as stable centers of anything at all. In Bakhtin we find foretold an array of theoretical moves that have colored much thinking in many circles in recent decades: the appreciation of the “Western” “individual” as a particular historical and theoretical artifact (e.g., Crapanzano 1992; S. Hall 1996b; Taylor 1989; Weiner 1999); the questioning of identities, groups, and classes as coherent and stable entities (e.g., S. Hall 1996a; Kondo 1990; H. C. White 1992); and the insistence that individuals are not centers of social reality.

In the speech of the women who figure in this book, we can find the tracings of a multitude of what Bakhtin calls socio-ideological systems, while at
once appreciating that their discourse coheres, in this case as that of the women of a particular generation, and of particular times. This approach renders their speech at once the crossroads to all, and a humble way station.

I suggest that such a perspective gives us a place from which to listen to talk, ethnographic and other; to ask, for example, what are the tracings of socio-ideological systems in the pocketbook story above? It is in books of this sort—that do indeed tarry close to “individuals”—that perhaps we need to work hardest to argue and to show that individual creativity is not the only point. This said, however, I am deeply interested in the gift that is good conversation and good storytelling. And I will not eschew the beauty of human words and stories, even as I mean to tell what British cultural theorist Carolyn Steedman calls “resolutely social stories” (1986, 6). In Bakhtin’s idiom, I am interested in both the “taste” (1981, 293) and “accent” (1981, 290) of words as they give us a lively sense of places and people; and in the heterogenous worlds, real and imagined, that “heteroglot” words point to (see also Abu-Lughod 1993).

Indeed, this book proceeds from the understanding that in words there are tastes, accents, and various socio-ideological projects to be found. In the Education Mother’s narrative, for example, she grapples with an important inequality at the heart of her own life. This book is interested precisely in the taste of social divides narrated in that story, and in the socio-ideological regimes that govern tellings like it: about women, personality, social stratification, and transformation.

Language Makes (and Unmakes) the Day

This book furthermore proceeds from the understanding that words are productive: that they contribute to the making of social identities and social worlds, class, and, most fundamentally, of rapid social transformation, like that of South Korea. Most basically, this book offers, then, a (women’s) narrative perspective on the transformations that have configured postwar South Korea. Critical here is the aforementioned understanding that language does not represent a reality out there, but rather that it fashions the world (such that it looks, however, always already made). Margaret R. Somers summarizes this theoretical position in terms of a “shift from a focus on representational to ontological narrativity” (1994, 612; see also Ochberg 1994, 117). For Somers, social being is nothing other than the way in which events are made into episodes that comprise stories such as the pocketbook story (1994, 618). Somers is interested in the “social networks” (1994, 616), or “webs of interlocution” (1994, 618, borrowing from Charles Taylor), in