

Haley Yarborough

## Identity, Community, and Nikki S. Lee

Issue 10, Spring 2016

### Abstract

*This research sheds light on the complex artistry of Korean-born photographer Nikki S. Lee. Although Lee's work initially appears straightforward and casual, this essay explores how photographs in "The Hip Hop Project" and "The Tourist Project" actually reinforce and critique specific cultural stereotypes. In performing different ethnic and cultural identities for her photographs, Lee also investigates what it means to one's own identity to be labeled part of a specific community.*

---

Nikki S. Lee is a Korean artist and photographer who is best known for her series *Projects* (1997-2001), which explores concepts of identity and community within particular American subcultures. As part of her creative process, Lee immerses herself in each subject group, spending time with a group, studying its distinctive clothing, style, and activities. She then alters her own physical appearance to blend into the group in photographs. Although her presence is the common factor between all of the photographs, the portraits are not of *her* but rather are intended to suggest the popular image attached to a given subculture's identity. Lee's photographs both reinforce and critique cultural stereotypes. By performing different ethnic and cultural identities, she examines the social influence of what it means to one's own identity to be a part of a specific community.<sup>1</sup>

Lee's background, childhood, and upbringing have a lot to do with who she is as a photographer and why she chooses to explore the ideas evident in her *Projects*. Born in South Korea in 1970, Lee came to America in 1994 and settled in New York. Originally named Lee Seung-Hee, she changed her name after seeing an issue of *Vogue* featuring the model Niki Taylor, which indicates her evolving artistic focus on identity creation. After all, models change their appearance constantly for different assignments and take on various "characters." Lee's choice of name may not have been this intentional, but it does reveal her early fascination with identity, even if subconsciously. She began the *Projects* series as a graduate student without a clear sense of how it would eventually turn out.<sup>2</sup>

Lee approaches each of her series with the same basic methods and purpose; however, each collection, based on the subculture she is working with, is unique. Lee informs her subjects from the beginning of what she is doing and wants to accomplish.<sup>3</sup> Critics might say this affects the authenticity of subjects' behaviors toward her; however, it also grants her direct access to the characteristics that the subjects themselves believe most distinguish their particular group. Because of this, the subjects potentially are able to determine how they are represented.

Lee often also has herself photographed by someone from the community she's portraying. In some cases, a stranger passing by or a friend who is accompanying her will take the photograph.<sup>4</sup> The person who takes the photo is important because it reflects how they themselves view the subculture being represented; an outsider would likely frame or compose the image differently from a member of the group itself.

Though perception is a factor in Lee's *Projects*, her main focus is on performing identity. When writing on the motivations behind Lee's work, Jane Harris states that "some of her desire to fit in emanates from the very stuff of adolescent longing... [H]er resulting

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Berger, "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie Project," *Art Journal* 60 (2001): 54.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Lee, "Indefinite "Nikkis" in a World of Hyperreality: An Interview with Nikki S. Lee," *Chicago Art Journal* 18 (2008): 76-93.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Harris, "Nikki S. Lee: When in Rome," *Artext* (2002): 44-47.

<sup>4</sup> Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 54.

personas enact a kind of representational mobility that is nothing more than a contemporary guise for the human impulse to belong.”<sup>5</sup> Through these *Projects*, Lee is constantly seeking her identity in relation to others. The entire series began as a search for self-identity, which she accomplishes by looking at different cultural communities. Her work communicates that identity is merely a matter of choice and that one can really be whatever or whomever he or she wants.<sup>6</sup> Lee defines identity primarily as a social construct instead of as politically or historically inscribed, as it has often been seen in the past.<sup>7</sup>

All but one of Lee’s *Projects* takes place in America and shows American culture. Growing up, Lee learned about American culture through television.<sup>8</sup> As a Korean, Lee is able to see America objectively, as a relative outsider, and portray “the melting pot” without the bias of any pre-established American affiliation of her own. Still, it is apparent in the photographs that her own ethnicity is very significant in her work.<sup>9</sup>

Diverse ethnic communities are featured in both her *Tourist Project* and *Hip Hop Project*. One image in particular from Lee’s *Hip Hop Project* represents the overarching message of the series. In this particular photograph, titled “The Hip Hop Project (1),” Lee is shown with African-American companions in the back seat of a car. Cherise Smith observes, “her black blouse, with its cleavage-revealing neckline, glistening chain-link belt, and silky head-cover are in keeping with her cohorts’ ensembles.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, she seems to take posture cues from the only other woman in the frame as she lifts her sunglasses in a casually seductive manner.<sup>11</sup> This photograph, as well as many of her others, has an untrained, amateur quality.<sup>12</sup> The man in the right side of the frame is cut out, there is a glaring hot spot on Lee’s face, and the man’s knees on which she is leaning are a bright focal point.<sup>13</sup> This style, which is often associated with the straight photography and observation techniques of photographers including Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, lends her photograph a snapshot aesthetic.<sup>14</sup>

However, although Lee’s images may look casual, they reflect deeper questions of authenticity and realism that have come to be associated with this type of photography. The moment Lee includes herself, the authenticity is challenged and the photograph is no longer a straightforward snapshot of friends but instead turns into an intentional, artistic statement on race. For instance, upon further study, the viewer notices that the subjects’ complexions appear to be similar in the image, signaling that Lee colored her skin

---

<sup>5</sup> Harris, “Nikki S. Lee,” 44-47.

<sup>6</sup> Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 190.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others*, 209.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, “Nikki S. Lee,” 44-47.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, “Indefinite “Nikkis” in a World of Hyperreality,” 76-93.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others*, 217.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others*, 213.

in an attempt to look like the companions surrounding her.<sup>15</sup> Despite her darkened skin, the group does not appear racially homogenous; instead, her makeup highlights their ethnic differences and brings important subjects into the foreground.<sup>16</sup>

This photograph is a prime example of how Lee makes visible identifying qualities that are otherwise unseen or overlooked in each culture she enters and portrays.<sup>17</sup> Knowing she is an outsider and does not naturally possess any of the qualities she appropriates, the viewer is aware that she has altered herself to resemble her subjects. Because of this, she is able to render these qualities obvious while still representing and assimilating into the group. The significance of photograph then clearly emerges in its exploration of the relationships between racial minorities in the United States, and specifically the relationship between African- and Asian-Americans. These two communities have shared similar experiences of disenfranchisement, oppression, and discrimination.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting then that Lee appears to be playing with the idea of traditional blackface in order to look part of the African- American community. She does this deliberately to draw attention to a history of racism and, while it is clear she is performing blackface, she is also yellow-facing.<sup>19</sup> Her eyeliner is extended far past her eye and she assumes a very Asian persona in an effort to “double up her Asian.”<sup>20</sup> The offensive cultural stereotyping and representation of both groups dates back to the 1960s when the Yellow Panthers and Black Panthers collaborated to create a militant liberation organization to defend against yellow- and blackface.<sup>21</sup> Cultural crossovers are extended further via the consumption of hip- hop by young Asians and the fascination with martial arts by African-Americans.<sup>22</sup> This exchange remains an important part of each subculture, something that Lee clearly hopes to convey with this series of photographs.

The *Tourist Project* has a different tone and brings up significant themes of Asian stereotypes, outward appearance, and relationships within ethnic communities. One representative photograph, titled “The Tourist Project (10),” shows Lee herself on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. She is dressed in a t-shirt, wearing sunglasses and a camera around her neck, and carrying a backpack.<sup>23</sup> This series was one of her initial four that all portrayed typical individuals one would likely come in contact with in lower Manhattan where she lived.<sup>24</sup> Each of the projects relies on “dress code” as a familiar way of categorizing groups of people.<sup>25</sup> In the Empire State Building image, Lee stands centered within a group of people all clearly recognizable as tourists. Other than the fact that she

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Berger, “Picturing Whiteness,” 54.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others*, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 197.

appears to be on an observation deck where she leans on a viewfinder, the image offers almost no context to indicate where exactly she is. She is centered in the image but the picture is cropped fairly far out, showcasing a lot of the crowd around her. Even though some of the people in the frame are also Asian, and we assume that all of the people in the frame are tourists (and thus belong to the same larger community of outsiders), the subjects do not necessarily know each other. Here, Lee suggests that identity and community are not always synonymous. Dress codes, like those shown in *The Tourist Project*, along with ethnicity, separate people from outsiders but also allow for easy recognition of insiders.<sup>26</sup> The image of a tourist has become incredibly stereotyped but because of Lee's surroundings, the stereotype is not unfounded. Lee states in an interview, "When I started the project, typical images of each social group hadn't been formed in me." She explains that she relied on intuition and images she had seen on television.<sup>27</sup> An image such as this demonstrates how Lee uses common stereotypes as important identifying elements. The subject of race is certainly not excluded from this image. The label "tourist" can refer to any race or group, but it is usually restricted to people of a certain class or financial background; a tourist must be able to afford traveling.<sup>28</sup> Some might see Lee dressed as a middle-class Asian-American, while others might assume she's the generic Japanese sight-seer. In this way, Lee challenges the viewer's perception, biases, and concepts of ethnic identity.

"The Hip Hop Project (1)" and "The Tourist Project (10)" show two very different cultures but communicate similar concepts. The latter suggests the actual idea of being an outsider—a cultural tourist—while the former captures the very personal space, expressions, and mood of a subculture *with* an outsider (Lee herself). Lee's presence in both and her ability to appear to belong in each shot ties them together and reinforces the idea that identity is completely fluid. She documents a community, although her very presence there alters the concept of what it means to be a member in that particular group. When one becomes part of a group, one is no longer an individual by definition. Lee's art demonstrates that because one is a part of her surroundings, her surroundings become part of her identity. A person can have his or her own ideals and qualities, but can only ever identify *with*, not as.

Nikki Lee's work in *Hip Hop Project* and *Tourist Project* exemplifies the concept that identity is ever-changing and adaptable. In both, she appears simultaneously as part of a group and as an outsider. She repeatedly embodies characters to fit in with various racial and ethnic groups but, removed from context, can only be seen as stereotyped caricatures. Both images discussed here portray strong stereotypical scenes and imagery in order to critique the negative stigma surrounding stereotypes. Lee's photographs strive to diminish the importance of minority identifications (and the politics associated with them) by playing with and altering the significance of her own ethnicity in her ability to be accepted by and to represent a wide variety of communities.<sup>29</sup> In portraying herself as a range of ethnic characters, the viewer is able to distinguish between particular communities' identifying—and often stereotyped—traits.<sup>30</sup> Throughout her work, Lee seeks to break down the social, racial, and political barriers surrounding identity and leaves the viewer to wonder what identity and community truly mean in terms of his or her own American subculture.

## Bibliography

Berger, Maurice. "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie Project." *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (2001): 54. *Art Source*, EBSCOhost. Accessed 20 November 2015.

Harris, Jane. "Nikki S. Lee: When in Rome." *Artext* no. 77 (2002): 44-47. *Art Source*, EBSCOhost. Accessed 20 November 2015.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>27</sup> Lee, "Indefinite "Nikkis" in a World of Hyperreality, 76-93.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others*, 198.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Enacting Others*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, Louis. *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 190.

Kaplan, Louis. *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Lee, Phil. "Indefinite "Nikkis" in a World of Hyperreality: An Interview with Nikki S. Lee." *Chicago Art Journal* 18 (2008): 76-93. *Art Source*, EBSCOhost. Accessed 20 November 2015.

"Museum of Contemporary Photography." Museum of Contemporary Photography. Accessed December 1, 2015. <http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?t=objects&type=browse&f=maker&s=Lee,NikkiS.&record=1>.

Smith, Cherise. *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011.