

THE DISRUPT PROJECT: NIKKI S. LEE AND TRANSCATEGORICAL IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

In the series *Projects* (1997-2001), Nikki S. Lee defies the globalist demand to present and perform predefined cultural conventions by photographing herself assimilated into multiple American social groups. Demonstrating the body's potential for multiplicity, Lee's integration into varying social and cultural groups resists the boundaries of social containment projected onto bodies due to assumptions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or age. The series questions the social command that the body must represent a naturalisation of a projected identity. Lee's integration into social groups challenged the programme of identity homogenisation that was emanating from America, fuelled by the multiculturalist discourse. The repetition of Lee's self-transformations provokes impassioned responses from the audience, with the photographs creating a reflexive dialogue about the conscious act of seeing as a tool of social containment. However, some early critics branded the series as cultural appropriative, challenging the veracity of Lee's assimilation. Through applying Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry and Judith Butler's assessment of performativity, this article offers a reconsideration of *Projects* as a decolonial work that subverts the global colonial matrix that commands fixed identities.

KEYWORDS Contemporary Korean Art, Korean Photography, Transculturalism, Mimicry, Body Transformation

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Executed between 1997 and 2001, Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* comprises thematically grouped photographs that depict Lee assimilated into, and performing as, a member of fourteen different socialised groups (punks, senior citizens, skateboards, drag queens, and Latinx groups to list a few) in the United States (US) (Fig. 1).¹ This repeated process of assimilation is an act of social disobedience, with Lee's body refusing the hegemonic pressure to display an expected diasporic identity. This refusal is heightened by the repetition of the process to force the audience to confront their own projections and internalisations of constructed identity. Using *Projects* as a case study this paper explores the subversive nature of mimicry, performance, and parody through application of Bhabha's and Butler's theories. Due to the production of the series occurring in the late 1990s there is an examination of the impact that American multiculturalism had on othering communities through enforced visual behaviours.

Lee assimilated into groups that represent a variety of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, and sexuality; each assimilation challenges the systemic limitations of each category of identity classification and whether it can operate with Lee transgressing into an identity that rejects the assumed ethnic Korean identity Lee is automatically assigned. Each image depicts Lee, occasionally alone but often with other members of the entered social group, adopting the style, mannerism, and overall mimetic appearance of the various collectives. Each assimilation of identity lasts for a number of weeks or months, with Lee first observing the social group before gaining access and existing amongst them.² This carefully constructed yet hyperbolic embodiment of identity



Fig. 1: Nikki S. Lee, *The Punk Project* (7), 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1997.

¹ Hyun Joo Lee, "A Passage to the Undercommons: Virtual Formation of Identity in Nikki S. Lee's Self-Transformative Performance." *Cultural Critique* 104 (2019), 72.

² Maurice Berger, "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie Project." *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (2001): 55.

construction is crucial to expose the strategies of regulation that exist within society.³ The vernacular appearance of the photographs, taken on an automatic camera with a flash, increases this hyperbole as the normality of the imagery juxtaposes with Lee's abnormal ability to transform and transgress across the social boundaries visualised within them.

Initially, *Projects* may seem to represent a superficial investigation into identity signifiers, but on closer assessment, we can see that Lee is exploring the body's ability to disrupt enforced multiculturalist boundaries of cultural containment. This article proposes a reconsideration of Lee's work as an early attempt to subvert the oppressive forms of social containment that erased the potential complexity of identities in a globally connected world. By exploring *Projects* through a transcultural lens, which accommodates the complexities contained in a singular subject, the decolonial aspect of the series is unveiled, with Lee's commentary rejecting the enforcement of a singular unchangeable identity. The series reveals the inherent racism, sexism, and classism that dominates the cultural and social boundaries of identity in America.

MULTICULTURISM/TRANSCULTURALISM

As Lee's work questions the rigidity of identity containment it is necessary to explore the dominant ideology of 1990s America that defined bodies: multiculturalism. The 1990s witnessed the promotion of globalised multiculturalism emanating from America, heralded as an ideology that offered social equality to self-contained differing cultures.⁴ However, it acted as a form of cultural colonialism as it installed a matrix of fixing bodies within definitive unshakable boundaries defined by cultural characteristics rather than acquired and flexible identities.⁵ As multiculturalism is a signifier of modern liberal democracy, it became endemic across the globe, ensuring the collective homogenisation of cultural performativity. These imagined group identities are not representative of lived experience but are projected by the

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. (London, UK: Routledge, 1993), 231.

⁴ Mikhail Epstein, "Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 68, no. 1 (2009), 334.

⁵ Epstein, "Transculture: A Broad Way," 346.

dominant discourse of that society, which was often based upon Euro-American capitalism.⁶ Multicultural modernity paradoxically celebrates the individuality of cultures but rejects the individual autonomy of a subject within them. This creates the isolation of individuals within minority groups, magnifying the Othering effect on their body.⁷ Bodies are contained in boundaries that are assigned and policed by their communities, acting as a form of panopticon regulation. A subject is expected to uphold their identity through visual embodiment or performative actions, with disobedience silenced or rejected. The body is expected to naturalise the assumed 'truth' it contains within. The silencing of difference formulates a society of repression that simultaneously reifies and solidifies performative identities.⁸ It is this conceptualisation that contains minorities within assumed, and often exoticized, identities, fuelling the narrative of 'shared experience' that minorities must uphold and, if an artist, represent. Significantly for diasporic artists, the Euro-American art market prioritises immigrant artists that evaluate their homeland through their work, and it often recontextualises the artist or artwork in relation to their homeland regardless of their presented cultural critique.⁹ Consequently, Cameron McCarthy corroborates that multiculturalism is a discourse of control and containment, and not one of equality and freedom.¹⁰

Projects began after Lee moved to the US to complete an MFA at New York University. Lee entered into a US art scene that was internally questioning the boundaries of minority identities. The 1990s New York art scene was rife with racial bias, with minority artists accepted into exhibitions based upon assumed 'shared experiences' and identifications, and often rejected for the same assumptions.¹¹ Simultaneously, the impending 2000 US census instigated debate around the legal recognition of complex racialised identities and

⁶ Zeynep Kiliç and Jennifer Petzen in "The Culture of Multiculturalism and Racialized Art." *German Politics & Society* 31, no. 2 (107) (2013), 54.

⁷ Epstein, "Transculture: A Broad Way," 330

⁸ Murphy, Chad. "Hybrid Identity and the Return of the Repressed: Heidegger's »Silence« in Morimura, Abe, and Haneke." *KulturPoetik* 13, no. 2 (2013): 238.

⁹ This issue is strongly and extensively discussed by Kiliç and Petzen in "The Culture of Multiculturalism and Racialized Art." (2013).

¹⁰ Michelle Bae, and Greg Dimitriadis. "Travelling Home(s): Contemporary Korean Art After the Postcolonial." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 3 (2014), 317.

¹¹ Cherise Smith, "Nikki S. Lee Projects and the Repackaging of the Politics of Identity". In *Enacting Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 203.

diasporic communities, particularly the methodology employed to recognize their hybrid living.¹² This background to *Projects* heightens Lee's investigation into the fixity of the boundaries of identity, as it endorsed hybridity and self-determined identity against the expectation of singularity. The assumption of 'shared experience' defining categorisations extends from the matrix of multiculturalism that dictates that there is a 'natural' culture with an 'origin' that an individual is biologically and biographically predetermined to uphold.¹³ *Projects*, however, articulates what Derrida refers to as the 'transcategorical' nature of human beings, which permits the multiplicity of identities within a singular subject that emerges through experience in relation to history, including the potential for varying historical and social difference.

The rigidity of multiculturalism caused considerable trauma to individuals who could not be situated in singular boundaries. During the 2000s transculturalism developed and critiqued the inflexibility of multiculturalism. Unlike multiculturalism, which demands rigid adherence to a projected identity that a subject must adopt, transculturalism permits an intermingling of cultures and the return of agency to the subject.¹⁴ Transcendence is a key proponent of transculturalism as it enables cultural plurality that encourages subjects to move beyond the defined boundaries.¹⁵ Lee's photographs visualise this transcendence: whenever Lee's body enters into new spaces, we see Lee move beyond the confines of an identity matrix that prioritises monolithic singularity. The constant presence of Lee's body within varying social groups presents the possibilities of noncanonical histories, which, in turn, reveals that unrecognised minority experience is excluded from social discourse.¹⁶ *Projects*, therefore, represents the complexity of existence that diasporic communities face due to the multiplicity of their cultural heritage that society cannot accommodate.¹⁷ By applying a transcultural lens to *Projects*, as this article proposes, Lee's entry into various social groups becomes a rejection of this hegemonic bodily control.

¹² Smith, "Repackaging," 192.

¹³ Epstein, "Transculture: A Broad Way," 334.

¹⁴ Afef Benessaïeh, "Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality." In *Amériques Transculturelles-Transculture Americas*, ed. Afef Benessaïeh (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 11.

¹⁵ Benessaïeh, "Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality," 16.

¹⁶ Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis, "Performing "Planned Authenticity": Diasporic Korean Girls' Self-Photographic Play." *Studies in Art Education* 56, no. 4 (2015), 330.

¹⁷ Lee, "A Passage to the Undercommons," 73.

PARODY AND MIMICRY

Though *Projects* visualises Lee's attempts to transcend the rigid boundaries of identity by entering into differing social groups, the series was subsumed by harsh critiques accusing it of "deception, pathology, and even criminality".¹⁸ Miwon Kwon, Professor of Art History at UCLA, offered particularly scathing criticism, reducing *Projects* to ethnographic "'going native' performances" that transform the entered social groups into props for Lee's objectification.¹⁹ Kwon argues that Lee romanticises minorities through the purposeful othering of the self without acknowledging the issues of identity that affect the specific social group Lee enters into. However, in this critique, Kwon reinforces the expectation of social groups to uphold specific "shared" identities, with the veracity of that performance corrupted by the presence of an outsider; Lee's body is isolated within each photographic series, branded as a perpetrator of cultural engagement. This isolation ignores the subversion of the act of assimilation as a whole and the photographs' reflexive engagement with their audience to expose their internalised assumptions of identity.

Globalism acts as a form of colonialism that commands uniformity by implementing a panoptical framework of homogenised visibility, producing an innate pressure for subjects of globalism to conform to recognisable forms of Otherhood, containing a subject in sanctioned and controllable categories of difference. This framework perpetuates and creates the assumptions that are used in acts of categorisation. However, through consciously constructed mimicry, one can demonstrate the limitations of standardised difference within the colonial matrix. Mimicry appropriates the tool of containment that the dominant structure employs, corrupting the singular authority of the dominant structure to define boundaries of containment. The deliberate nature of Lee's assimilation initiates this aspect of mimicry. *Projects* is not simply engaging in the mutability of social boundaries through the acquisition

¹⁸ Joan Kee, "Visual Reconnaissance." In *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 146.

¹⁹ Miwon Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee." In *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London, UK: Black Dog, 2000), 85.

of cultural paraphernalia but rather is questioning the constructions of those boundaries in the first place, exposing them as tools of oppression and uniformity.

Judith Butler has proposed that seemingly unchangeable categories of identity, such as gender, are in fact mutable, with their assumed fixity extending from the repetition of stylised acts.²⁰ These acts are constituted through time, producing bodies that present acts of identity in a mundane context, incorporating bodily gestures, movements, surroundings, presentation, or any other factor that can further the illusory fulfilment of expected identity. Lee's observation of social groups prior to assimilation, enabled the adoption of mundane social queues within *Projects*. These touches add a veracity to Lee's visuality whilst existing within social groups. With the familiarity of the medium and the presentation of Lee within the social group, the images propose a social normalcy. However, this depicted normalcy is corrupted by the repetition of Lee's social mimicry evidencing the prescriptive confines of accepted cultural difference that demands subjects disavow their independent selfhood to participate in society. Lee's assimilation into multiple subcultures challenges the systemic limitations of each category of identity containment. Butler contends that behavioural disobedience of commanded performativity, through displaying characteristics of a group different to the assumed identity of the subject, questions the legitimacy of the commanded performance of both the subject and those commanding the performance; the conscious subversion of societal expectations unveils the operative containment process of assigned identity signifiers.²¹

The disruption of Lee's social mimicry is enhanced by the repetition of the act of transformation. By repeatedly entering into different social groups, Lee not only shows the construct of immutable identities to be false, but also parodies the formation of accepted social norms. Parody, as Linda Hutcheon describes, has the ability to display difference but not similarity.²² Parody calls attention to the process it seeks to oppose by intensifying the inspection of the very process that it embodies, in Lee's case that of upholding assigned

²⁰ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988):

²¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 122.

²² Kerstin Brandes, "Morimura/Duchamp: Image Recycling and Parody." *Paragraph* 26, no. 1/2 (2003): 53.

identities.²³ A heightened mimetic difference creates a figure of “partial” recognisability that prevents total acknowledgment of the body, revealing the constraints of a global homogeneity that requires bodily certainty.²⁴ The flux of Lee’s bodily image in *Projects* never permits the viewer to observe Lee within a consistent identity, repudiating the process of containment through surveillance. Lee’s partial recognisability within *Projects* refuses subjecthood, and we are forced to wonder who Lee is before or beyond the representation of identity, which further undermines the rigidity of a commanded singularity of identity.

The extremes of Lee’s
visuality and performance
within *Projects* initiates this
parodic mimicry as an act of
social defiance. *The Schoolgirls
Project* and *The Exotic Dancers
Project* can be seen as the
antithesis of each other,
e m b o d y i n g o p p o s i n g
representations of gender and
sexualisation. *The Schoolgirls*



Fig. 2: Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirls Project* (6), 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 2000.

Project (Fig. 2), the only work executed outside of the US, depicts young Korean schoolgirls in modest uniforms holding fans that create an impermeable barrier to the outside. None of the figures seem emotionally connected with the camera or each other despite the unified boundary held up by the collective. Through the structured choreographed pose, this photograph visualises the outcome of South Korean governmental frameworks that continue to promote gender conformity, insisting that women uphold archaic Confucianist notions of being a ‘good wife, wise mother’ requiring visualisations of innocence and obedience as signifiers.²⁵ Many Korean women move abroad to leave these conditions, which are assigned to their bodies by the multicultural hegemony.²⁶ Conversely, *The Exotic Dancers Project* (Fig. 3) sees Lee adopt a persona who controls their sexuality and body, keeping it in shape

²³ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984), 126.

²⁴ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 129.

²⁵ Bae-Dimitriadis, "Performing "Planned Authenticity"," 335.

²⁶ Bae-Dimitriadis, "Performing "Planned Authenticity"," 331.



Fig. 3: Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (6)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999.

and receiving a livelihood through it. *The Exotic Dancers Project* explores the sexualisation of female-presenting bodies in American society. The extreme contrast of Lee's visuality tests the assumption that the body naturalises an internal truth; in producing images of sexuality and innocence that extend from the same body Lee physically rejects the rigidity a binary that defines

sexual morality, questioning whether the process of naturalisation is in fact a form of manufactured institutionalisation. From a Lacanian perspective, these series reveal the quilting point of identity; the quilting point describes the social construction of identity where the signifying elements affirm fixity and uniformity, concealing the complexity of the signified.²⁷ Through presenting detailed contradictory versions of the self in *The Schoolgirls Project* and *The Exotic Dancers Project*, Lee ruptures the fixity of identity by presenting the changeability of the signified within a single subject; the rigid articulation of identity becomes meaningless. When in dialogue with each other, both series ask the audience to consider variations of ethnic bodies, fetishizations of ethnicity, and objectification, particularly within a transnational context as the works propose opposing ideals of womanhood within two countries.

²⁷ Jonathan Kemp demonstrates similar Lacanian application of theory in "Schreber and the Penetrated Male," in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2010), 150-67.



Fig. 4: Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project (6)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999.

Projects shows Lee entering spaces where Koreans are not present or have never been seen. This is exemplified by *The Ohio Project* (Fig. 4), where Lee is surrounded by confederate flags, guns, and mullets.²⁸ The transgression into this space challenges society's assumptions of Lee's body as emblematic of the assumed ethnic Korean immigrant identity that Lee is automatically assigned. As the title of the subseries specifies the location, we must consider the specificity of space. In *The Ohio Project*, Lee is presenting alterity by visually existing beyond the operational reach of cosmopolitan liberalism, challenging the prerequisite that immigrants uphold North American liberalism, as signified through their presence in metropolitan locations.²⁹

Multiculturalism expects bodies to exist within an assigned space; as a liberal construct it privileges global mobility but only a specific mobility between internationally interconnected cities.³⁰ Existing beyond those limits challenges the hegemonic matrix. The images reveal the geopolitical bias that centres cities as sites of hybridity and equality. Lee's assimilated identity disrupts the assumed adoption of economically privileged whiteness and democratic liberal North-Americanism promoted through globalisation; Lee, seen draped over a sports car in front of a mobile home (Fig. 5), is clearly adopting the wrong kind of U.S. liberalism. This is affirmed in another image from the series that sees Lee sitting beside a man stroking a gun that rests partially on Lee's thigh, in contrast with the surrounding crochet blankets and

²⁸ Smith, "Repackaging," 221.

²⁹ Lee, "A Passage to the Undercommons," 97.

³⁰ Julie-Anne Boudreau, "Moving Through Space and Being Moved Emotionally: Embodied Experience of Transculture." In *Amériques Transculturelles - Transcultural Americas*, ed. Benessaieh Afef, (University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 71.



Fig. 5: Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project* (7), 59.7x40cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999.

floral wallpaper. The picture (Fig. 4) presents the man as a conquering male possessing non-liberal notions of gender roles, with Lee's body challenging the assumption that global liberalism is adopted by all bodies that inhabit its reach.³¹ Lee's presence visualises the intersections of minorities and their containment in globalist structures, connecting the racialised body of Lee with the barrier of economic class that the Midwesterners are bound by.

The Ohio Project confronts Kwon's critique of "purposeful Othering" directly, as the expected containment of otherness for Lee and the social group, of ethnicity and class respectively, is used to expose the act of othering existing within Lee's audience, who utilise a marginalising gaze. The hyperbolic image of Lee in the Midwest tests the limits of the viewers' acceptance of Lee's formation of self-determined identity in the Midwest, revealing the internalised judgments that maintain the bodies of Lee and the social group within their prescribed boundaries. The objectification of a viewed body silences the experience contained within that body, with identity judged according to the social context of the viewer, and not the actor/object. The photographs in *Projects* are taken not by Lee but rather by strangers or other members of the subculture. The anonymity of the photographer in *Projects* transfers the notion of colonial ethnographer from Lee to the audience who are observing Lee as the photographer themselves, and subsequently assessing the categorisation of their ethnographic subject, enacting social surveillance. Guy Trebay remarks in a 2004 review for

³¹ Smith, "Repackaging," 221.

The New York Times that “Lee can rely on the viewer to bring [their] own stereotypes [to the works]”, highlighting the importance of the audience’s positionality in the project.³² Indeed, Jennifer Dalton describes viewers within galleries playing a form of ‘Where’s Wally?’, where Lee’s identity is ‘discovered’ by the audience, removing Lee from the assimilated cultural group and returning Lee to the assumptive Korean identity.³³ This conscious operational act of returning Lee to an assigned identity demonstrates the expectation of performed behaviour. Notably, in returning Lee to a single identity based upon an imagined form of “Korean-ness”, the audience ignores the ‘transcategorical’ nature of human beings.

Kwon’s queries regarding Lee’s ability to ‘pass’ as an ‘authentic’ member of the subculture is seen as reductive stereotyping.³⁴ Under transculturalism, notions of “passing” become irrelevant, as to challenge the “authenticity” of a body’s performance is to uphold the matrix of containment within defined identities. The designation of “passing” relies on the decision of the observer as the arbiter of authenticity, erasing the experience and history of the actor and predicating the experience and history of the viewer. “Passing” formalises boundaries of entry into social groups by demanding adherence to physical demonstrations of conformity that are rewarded with acceptance into a group, but it is an acceptance that relies upon subsequently upholding group homogeneity. Assessment of Lee’s assimilation as the competent adoption of visual signifiers is problematic, as it affirms the reification of internal identities. Reification of identity aids the subjugation of the Other; as assumed identities become physicalised, they become commodified and containable by dominant groups.³⁵ Transculturalism accepts the process of cultural transference across boundaries, both real and imagined, and therefore refuses the hierarchy between the marginal and the dominant.³⁶ Transculturalism allows for freedom from one’s own assumed cultural history and identity; as it realises the limits of cultural identity to contain the plurality of an individual, it creates a realm where difference is permitted, and so notions of ‘passing’ and ‘authentic’ are no longer

³² Guy Trebay, “Shadow Play,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, September 19, 2004), <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/magazine/shadow-play.html>.

³³ Smith, “Repackaging,” 226.

³⁴ Kwon, “Experience vs. Interpretation,” 83.

³⁵ Murphy, “Hybrid Identity,” 252.

³⁶ Claire Maria Chambers, “Transcultural Consumption through a “Queer” Narrative: Douglas Maxwell’s “Our Bad Magnet” in Seoul.” *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 2 (2015), 237.

necessary.³⁷ Lee can be seen to transcend formalised boundaries rather than perform total imitation.

Lee's imagery is designed to provoke the audience to reflexively assess their internalised projection of identity construction. The repeated presence of Lee within various subcultures forces the audience to actively construct a projected identity to account for Lee's unexpected presence. Through this process Lee enables the viewer to become aware of subconscious processes, offering them an opportunity to reflect on their application of certain paradigms and questioning whether alternative modes of categorisation or identity could exist beyond those implemented by society. This emancipates the audience from conventional and oppressive modes of viewing the "Other", encouraging a dialogue between the observer and the observed. As Lee stresses, *Projects* is an examination of the discord that exists between internal conceptualisations of the self/other, and the external visualisations of it, which is complicated by the social matrixes upheld by anonymous third parties.³⁸

RACIALISED BOUNDARIES

Projects queries the centrality of race and ethnicity in the operations of identity construction. The globalist matrix extends authority from the U.S to encourage an international hybridity that prefers North-Americanised identities, forcing a linear construction of a monolithic unchangeable history that prioritises the West, thereby erasing localised histories and identities.³⁹ Multiculturalism promises equality within a post-racial society, yet it "masks the centrality of race and racism to neoliberalism".⁴⁰ As sociologist Ruth Frankenburg notes, to assign everyone a place in society based upon their race, even with the pretence of racial equality, is to assign everyone a place in relation to whiteness.⁴¹ *The Yuppie Project* addresses the invisibility of whiteness in identity construction most overtly. Though *The Ohio Project* assessed a version of Whiteness, it is a whiteness that is

³⁷ Epstein, "Transculture: A Broad Way", 336.

³⁸ Lee and Goldberg, *Nikki S. Lee*, 47.

³⁹ Benessaieh, "Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality," 29.

⁴⁰ Kiliç and Petze, "Multiculturalism and Racialized Art," 49.

⁴¹ Maurice Berger, "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie Project." *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (2001): 55.

ostracised from white hegemonic dominance through class containment. *The Yuppie Project* sees Lee assimilated into the world of Wall Street professionals, and shows Lee surrounded by people who do not have to acknowledge the power that their skin colour affords them, nor their complicity in perpetuating globalised norms.⁴² It is this group that the multicultural hegemony favours most and that demands Lee's adherence to their role as a representative of the assumed Other.⁴³ Yuppies are accompanied by access to profits from globalisation and the determinist structures that society implements; this group includes the gallery audience that reasserts Lee's Korean identity without consent. The invisibility of Whiteness, or society's refusal to acknowledge its power, perpetuates its dominance within this identity matrix.⁴⁴ *The Yuppie Project* places the exclusionary impact of whiteness directly on show.



Fig. 6: Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project* (23), 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1998.

One of *The Yuppie Project* images (Fig. 6) shows Lee at lunch with an Asian who is also participating in the white dominated financial scene. Lee and the diner appear emotionally opposite; Lee is engaged, smiling and confident, like many of the white yuppies whom Lee is embodying, whilst the diner appears

remote and disconnected from the surroundings. Though none of the white bodies are overtly racist towards Lee and Lee's dining partner, the isolation depicted heightens the underlying racial tensions.⁴⁵ Both are demonstrating the visual social signifiers of the Yuppie group, yet they are isolated due to their difference of ethnicity. This image displays the multicultural trap: though globalisation requires Americanisation, attempts by non-white bodies to hold the

⁴² Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 55.

⁴³ Grace MyHyun Kim, "Transcultural Digital Literacies: Cross-Border Connections and Self-Representations in an Online Forum." *Reading Research Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2016): 200

⁴⁴ Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 55.

⁴⁵ Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 56.

power of whiteness through adopting social conventions are denied; divergence from the expected identity of the Other results in nonrecognition.⁴⁶ It is one of Lee's most powerful photographs, uncovering the fractured inequalities that contemporary neoliberalism attempts to obscure. The refusal to acknowledge whiteness in every individual's identity construction is to prevent white people witnessing their own complicity in effecting the rigidity of social conventions that oppress.⁴⁷ Lee's imagery of isolated ethnicity clearly displays the system that assigns racial hierarchy in relation to whiteness. This image's resonance is compounded by the existence of the term 'Buppie', created to describe black urban professionals, which displays the existence of invisible racialised boundaries within a sector defined by a supposed inclusive multicultural ideology.⁴⁸ It highlights the invisibility of whiteness contained in the word 'Yuppie' that displays no racial terminology, yet its application is to predominantly, if not exclusively without predators, white bodies.



Fig. 7: Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (30)*, 67.8x51cm, Fujiflex Print, 1998.

The ostracization that Lee and the diner receive in *The Yuppie Project* visually reminds the viewer of the continuous isolation racialised bodies experience through the control of difference. Othered bodies are restricted from embodying difference; instead, the dominant ideology transforms their body into a specimen, removing choice from the object's construction of its own self.⁴⁹ This contradicts the hybrid living of multiculturalism that supposedly celebrates the diversity of cultures. Chad Murphy asserts that this hybridity contradictorily ensures the repression of alterity in the name of

⁴⁶ Kiliç and Petze, "Multiculturalism and Racialized Art," 60.

⁴⁷ Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 55

⁴⁸ Smith, "Repackaging," 208.

⁴⁹ Epstein, "Transculture: A Broad Way", 329.

globalisation as it prevents difference within categorised groupings.⁵⁰ Lee potentially proposes a ‘Third Space’ that can accommodate heterogeneity in another image from *The Yuppie Project* (Fig. 7). The photograph shows Lee holding Peter J. D’adamo’s book ‘*Eat Right 4 Your Type*’, which proposes that blood type, rather than race, ethnicity, or gender, has greater relevance to one’s health. This points to an alternative grouping of internal structure,



Fig. 8 (Top): Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip-Hop Project* (2), 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 2001.
 Fig. 9 (Bottom): Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project* (25), 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1998.

one that is based on aspects beyond the visible social signifiers that currently politicise populations into a hegemonic hierarchy. Furthermore, blood type plays a part in social structures in Korea, and Lee could be demonstrating the hegemonic power of Euro-American multiculturalism to recontextualise “foreign” constructs within its sanctioned framework, which prefers white bodies and ideological construction.

Importantly, the social characteristics that Lee adopts each speak to elements of expectations that immigrant and racialised bodies receive. By entering into multiple spaces Lee reveals the “contradictory

feelings, behaviours, and beliefs about selected North American cultures and the presence of an ethnically marked body within them”.⁵¹ However, *Projects* occasionally undermines itself and these pertinent observations when Lee adopts blackface and brownface, in *The Hip-Hop Project* (Fig. 8) and *The Hispanic Project* (Fig. 9) respectively, as physiological signifiers. These transformations move beyond Lee adopting and engaging in the cultural identity of minority groups, but rather perpetuate the physiological associations of certain cultures. Instead of demonstrating that cultural identity is produced and manufactured beyond the

⁵⁰ Murphy, “Hybrid Identity,” 238.

⁵¹ Lee, “A Passage to the Undercommons,” 84.

natural body, Lee fuses the two together and contains the cultural identities within racialised boundaries. When these boundaries are rearticulated through these visualisations, they reinforce the racial hegemony and the privileges of normativity.⁵² These projects challenge the resonance of the other works in the series that problematise the construction and limitations of projected group identity. Rather this questions Lee's motivations and asks whether subversive assimilation is enough to displace the dominant norms of self-identification and representation.⁵³

Furthermore, in *The Seniors Project* (Fig. 10), Lee used professional prosthetics and make-up to adopt an elderly persona, the only instance of Lee employing a make-up professional to aid the transformation.⁵⁴ This adoption of faux physicality creates a caricature rather than transcending the age barrier to reveal the mechanics of the social group. These acts of physical



Fig. 10: Nikki S. Lee, *The Seniors Project* (26), 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999.

body change problematise the series as they question Lee's own theoretical comprehension of ethnicity, age, and race identities. Likewise, it fuels critiques concerning whether Lee is striving to "pass authentically", which, as discussed, becomes problematic, as it destabilizes the "transcategorical" nature of Lee's other transformations. In these problematic series, it is Lee, and not the viewer, who is reifying and reinforcing assumptions of skin colour and physical abilities, thereby undermining the overall series' proposal of accepting difference and unexpected bodies within social groups.

⁵² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 133.

⁵³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 125.

⁵⁴ *Photographer Nikki S. Lee Can Turn Into Anyone*, YouTube (TheCreatorsProject, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oI8xpJItPVI>.

CONCLUSION

Projects, though occasionally flawed by the practice of conflating physiognomy and cultural signifiers, represents a competent early challenge to disrupt the multicultural matrix that homogenises bodies and is unable to accommodate individual lived experiences. Lee attempts to test the limits of difference their body can accommodate beyond the expected identity of a Korean immigrant, which was ascribed to Lee's body upon arrival in 1990s New York. Lee's varying performativity demonstrates the futility of "pass" as an "authentic" member of an assimilated group, as the complexity of an individual can accommodate identities that are monumental rather than singular. Through heightened and repeated mimicry, Lee is challenging the prejudice and complicity present within observers who maintain rigid projected identity formation. The power of *Projects* lies in its exposure of the act of observation as an act of identity containment. It demonstrates the potential erasure of a subject's experience in acquiring social acceptance that prefers familiar homogenous identity construction; identity is shown predicating on the contextual imaginings of the viewer, who themselves are required to uphold strict multicultural boundaries, ignoring the subject's formation of the self beyond the observable. Lee's assimilations force the audience to comprehend an unexpected presence in social groups, making the process of containment tangible in the conscious response of the observer. Lee's entry into multiple social groups reveals the variety of categories of containment that can be applied as an individual, particularly in relation to economically privileged whiteness. As multiculturalism's international adoption continues, *Projects* demonstrates the limitation of the ideology and acts as a warning of its uncritical adoption. Lee's complex introspection of identity, and the acceptance of an unexpected body within varying social groups, asks the audience to contemplate a "Third Space" where alterity is permissible and allows true hybrid identities to exist freely. Through a transcultural lens this aspect of *Projects* gains greater significance for a world that is increasingly encountering difference and simultaneously oppressing it.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: Nikki S. Lee, *The Punk Project (7)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1997. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 2: Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirls Project (6)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 2000. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 3: Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (6)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 4: Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project (6)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 5: Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project (7)*, 59.7x40cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 6: Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (23)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1998. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 7: Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (30)*, 67.8x51cm, Fujiflex Print, 1998. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 8: Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip-Hop Project (2)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 2001. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Fig. 9: Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project (25)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1998. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Fig. 10: Nikki S. Lee, *The Seniors Project (26)*, 51x67.8cm, Fujiflex Print, 1999. Copyright Nikki S. Lee. Courtesy of Leslie Tokonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

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