

MIS-TAKEN IDENTITIES: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC CONCEPTUALIZATION OF
IDENTITY IN NIKKI S. LEE'S *PROJECTS* (1997-2001)

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ABSTRACT

MIS-TAKEN IDENTITIES: The Photographic Conceptualization of Identity in Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997-2001)
(Under the direction of Carol Magee)

This thesis examines artist Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* photographs taken from 1997 to 2001 and their entanglement with discourses of culture and identity. In this series, a collection of snapshots captures Lee in different guises as she engages with members of several cultural communities after whom she models her appearance. Through her peculiar use of the snapshot vernacular, Lee challenges subject-object binaries fixed to the glossy surface of the photograph, thus making questionable the verity of the *Projects* photographs. *Projects* urges the viewer to reconstruct narratives to reconcile the indeterminate relationships between Lee and her hosts and more significantly between the viewer and members of each depicted culture. These ambiguities elicit and address questions about the complex and often problematic visual expressions of identity and the subtle ways that such representations both promote and challenge dominant visual paradigms of society.

To the three Carols and the boys.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.)¹

Roland Barthes, lamenting his mother’s death in his text, *Camera Lucida*, rediscovers her in a singular photograph, the only “just image” that can proffer his truth of his mother’s being. His refusal to publish the photograph reflects the private subjectivity he holds over the impression of his mother, and the impossibility of the indiscriminate reader to replicate that same particularity. This intimacy that distinguishes Barthes’s relationship with the Winter Garden photograph underscores the underlying premise of his text in which he attempts to know the operation of photography (to him, with-a-capital-p).

For Barthes, encounters with the Photograph are dictated by either the *studium* or the *punctum*; the former he defines as an engagement with the image as it is established by culture (societal rules), the latter a connection experienced as an involuntary instance of subjective apprehension like the infliction of a “wound”. It is the *punctum* that compels Barthes to surrender to the image, which he insists must be preserved in such moments of ecstasy, rather than become absolute in a society of universalized, banalized images.²

¹Parentheses are included in the text. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 73.

²Barthes, 118.

When generalized, [the image] completely de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it. What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more ‘false’ (less ‘authentic’)—something we translate, in ordinary consciousness, by the avowal of an impression of nauseated boredom, as if the universalized image were producing a world that is without difference (indifferent), from which we can rise, here and there, only the cry of anarchisms, marginalisms, and individualisms: let us abolish the images, let us save immediate Desire (desire without mediation).³

Indeed, Barthes’s admonition written in 1980 accurately reflects the state of twenty-first century society. While the digital age grants direct access to a plenitude of information in the form of perpetually streaming imagery, it also threatens to hold captive and transform the masses into compliant receptacles of cultural ideology. Images are readily accepted as truth; their omnipresence works to stand in the way of material existence, thereby working to an-(a)esthetize subjectivity; the individual never locates herself at Barthes’s crossroads where the choice is presented: “to subject [the image’s] spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.”⁴

No longer conscious of this dilemma, society finds itself comfortably alienated from its own reality. Residue from America’s embittered past manifests itself in a picture of institutional stability, which is apathetic or oblivious to the disconcerting truth of inequalities governed by hierarchical binaries between dominant and subordinate cultures. Stagnated images of the Land of Opportunity repress the “intractable reality” of racially-motivated income disparities, xenophobic immigration policies, and misogynistic glass ceilings. Where images feed the institution’s marginalization of minority populations, Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* (1997-2001) exhibits members of various subcultures in a manner that irreverently renders

³Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 118-19.

⁴Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 119.

the universalized image impotent, affording agency to the subjugated masses and reinstating Barthes's "immediate Desire (desire without mediation)."

Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* confounds the hegemonic nature of photography by re-establishing the intersection of seeing and knowing, subject and object, self and other. Lee makes perceptible the disembodying enterprise of the photographic medium that foremost scholars have studied—the death which Roland Barthes eulogizes in *Camera Lucida* and the demise of the aura that Walter Benjamin presages in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Among the postmodern casualties of photography, Lee's *Projects* offers a chance for survival by reifying, magnifying, and manipulating the overlooked space between subject and image-object. She subverts the authority of the photograph by generating a constellation of interrogations elicited from the inversion of subjectivity and objectification that belies identity and identification. For all of the assumptions underlying our understanding of Photography, Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* disrupts notions of the mortal and the counterfeit in a disinterested process of embodying and apprehending identity.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETING NIKKI S. LEE'S *PROJECTS*

Nikki S. Lee is well-versed in the texts of Roland Barthes. In fact, she claims that she and Barthes “share the same sensibility.”⁵ It is this sensibility that seems to inform her artistic expression, one in which her photographs are the products of her understanding of Photography. Like Barthes, Lee seems to comprehend the consequence of images becoming universalized, which produces “a world without difference.” This thesis examines the way in which Lee embodies the visual markers of class, race, culture, age, and sexuality that are de rigueur in a society constructed of hierarchies, and how she renders them in the self-effacing aesthetic of the snapshot photograph. In doing so, Lee presents a curious juxtaposition of the generalized images that Barthes objects to and the personalized intimacy and specificity of the snapshot that he insists must be sustained.

In *Projects*, Nikki S. Lee adopts different personae by way of clothing, makeup, and mannerisms, taking her cues from a three- to four-month visual study of various social groups. Once the metamorphosis is complete, Lee approaches the group and asks to be included in their daily activities. Lee's inclusion in each community is documented by a collection of enlarged snapshots taken by her new friends or random passers-by with an inexpensive point-and-shoot camera. Each community is represented in its own series, which is accompanied by an undemanding title that makes apparent the intended cultural

⁵Carol Kino, “Now in Moving Pictures: The Multitudes of Nikki S. Lee,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2006, Arts section, Late Edition.

representation: *The Punk Project*, *The Tourist Project*, *the Young Japanese (East Village) Project*, *The Lesbian Project*, *The Hispanic Project*, *The Yuppie Project*, *The Swingers Project*, *The Seniors Project*, *The Ohio Project*, *The Exotic Dancers Project*, *The Skateboarders Project*, *The Schoolgirls Project*, *The Hip Hop Project*, and *The Drag Queens Project*. The resulting photographs, along with their respective titles, are visual manifestations of familiar stereotypes. As an inhabitant of a mid-western trailer park in *The Ohio Project* (8), Lee dons a disheveled blonde wig and cutoff jean shorts (fig. 1). *The Punk Project* (6) recasts her as a rebellious street kid complete with leather, chains, and torn fishnet tights (fig. 2). In another ensemble, her hunched shoulders, plastic-rimmed glasses, and wool cardigan sweater complement her aged skin in *The Seniors Project* (26) (fig. 3).

Lee's work follows a tradition of artists, most notably Cindy Sherman and the late Tseng Kwong Chi, who have experimented with modes of self-portrait photography. In Cindy Sherman's film still photographs, Sherman casts herself as "Hollywood doyennes,"⁶ using her body to replicate clichéd female representations in popular films in order to explore ideas of gender and the fetishized gaze (fig. 4).⁷ Tseng Kwong Chi is known for the Mao suit he wore standing next to tourist sites in self-portraits, which caricatures Western stereotypes of Asians (fig. 5).⁸ What is distinctive about Lee's work among that of her contemporaries is that the product of Lee's work is the process itself, rather than the final prints.

The title of her body of work, *Projects*, is itself an indicator of Lee's diverging enterprise when considering both the nominative and predicative form of the word. The term

⁶Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 957.

⁷Jones, 953.

⁸Grady T. Turner, "The Accidental Ambassador," *Art in America* 85, no. 3 (March 1997): 82.

may simply refer to Lee's work, in the former sense. A "project," rather than a product, infers ongoing activity, work that has yet to reach completion. Also, "the projects" is a name given to neighborhoods characterized by its underprivileged residents. Each of the *Projects* series identifies specific communities—not only subcultural or marginal, but also transitory—that are relegated to its own category and marked by an imposing title that further defines its separation from the other series or mainstream society. In its predicative form, "to project" is to unconsciously ascribe onto another person particular notions of his or her character. In each of its meanings, "project" is a term that reflects an active process, which characterizes and distinguishes Lee's work. Therefore, unlike the images of Sherman and Tseng, which present the final outcome of their artistic process, Lee's work encourages the viewer to reconstruct narratives beyond the image: Does Lee really belong to the group? How much time did she spend with them? Do the people actually accept her as one of them? Were they offended by her attempt to replicate their appearance? Were they aware that she was using them to produce art? And in fact, these interrogations are an integral part of Lee's artistic expression.

Each so-called project begins with her close scrutiny of the individuals of each culture. She studies their dress, observes their daily activities, and scrutinizes their gesticulations—all of the elements she determines figure their identity. Fully committed to each project, she does not hesitate to subject herself to radical gestures in the name of her art. She plumps her body or sheds pounds, she puts on layers of garments or disrobes almost completely, she rids her face of makeup or withstands hours underneath bright lights of the tanning bed to deepen her skin color. Where she finds and assembles her façade of clothing and makeup has as much to do with the habits of the people who inspire her as it does with

what she deems is an instinctual knowledge of other cultures. She reveals that she conducts little research beyond her own field observations:

I think I have good instincts when it comes to different lifestyles. I just go to the shops that those people go to and check them out...Like, if there's a store that Hispanic people normally go to, I go there. It's just part of the process. And I love shopping. You need an eye for it. When you go to a thrift store, you have to find things that other people are wearing. So you have to know about their culture. The funny thing is, I shopped for the Ohio Project in the East Village; half of it from the thrift stores here. You have to start with some knowledge of what you want to get, otherwise it isn't really going to work.⁹

As soon as she is made over (or under), her status as an artist is in full disclosure when she asks the group for permission to join them for a predetermined stint in their world. Though this part of her work is anthropological in nature as she observes and makes note of the appearance and behavior of her subjects, her tendency is to defer knowledge to preconceptions of the said group that inform the manufacture of each of her projects.¹⁰ Her reinvention remains within the parameters of her external recognition of each culture, of “what she wants to get”; once she is admitted, her “fieldwork” is put into practice and tested in snapshots.

Any analysis of the *Projects* series would be negligent if it did not address the political implications of the work. As most reviews of this series have thoroughly noted, Lee's work is fundamentally entangled with discourses of identity and culture. Critics conclude that, in the act of reinventing her image and gaining acceptance into disparate communities, Lee pronounces the fluidity of identity and the arbitrariness of signifiers that erect cultural boundaries. She seems to be equally at home in a trailer park where the

⁹Nikki S. Lee, *Projects*, Interview by Gilbert Vicario (New York: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 106-7.

¹⁰For further information on anthropological discourses, see James, Allison, Jenny Hockey, and Andrew Dawson, eds. *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Confederate flag is a customary signpost, on inner-city sidewalks loitering among a mohawked mob of rebellious kids, and in a courtyard garden where weathered seniors spend their final days. Jennifer Dalton's academic analysis of *Projects* in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* makes this assertion:

The fact that a young Korean-American artist can be equally convincing as a Japanese hipster, yuppie stockbroker, Hispanic teenager, or Ohio trailer-park dweller suggests that social identity has at least as much to do with conscious choices about clothing and hairstyle as with facial features and skin color. Lee has an uncanny ability to affect a pose with both her face and body: her Asian features are clearly visible in a group of whiter-than-white Ohio beer drinkers or Hispanic teenagers, but her posture and the look on her face say she belongs there, and we buy it. Her work argues that even the subcultures one is apparently born into, such as ethnic groups, are more socially fluid and self-subscribing than conventionally believed.¹¹

On the contrary, Lee herself makes explicit that her work specifically addresses nothing more than her experimentation with different personae as they are created in a social context. She even goes as far as to refute any association of her work with culture¹²:

All the critics want to pick up on something unique. First they bring up the academic issues of postcolonialism or Asian cultural studies. I understand that's the first level, so I just let it be. If I find someone who finds the second level, I'm more interested in reacting to them. People analyze art in all sorts of ways but I don't think artists always set out to make "culture" with their work.¹³

When describing her work, Lee insists that the credibility of each of her "identities" is owed less to her clothing and makeup than it is to her documented participation in activities with the members of each community. *Projects* dispenses the notion of a socially ascribed identity by authenticating each of Lee's personae through direct interactions with group members. As

¹¹Jennifer Dalton, "Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography after Cindy Sherman," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 3 (September 2000): 49.

¹²However we understand the particular use of the term, culture, it is not of paramount concern here; rather, this is to illustrate her resistance to the idea that the work does not deal with political matters.

¹³Lee, *Projects*, 100.

Lee explains, her work conveys her interest in a notion of identity formation in which individuals define their identities in relation to those around them:

That's the underlying concept: other people make me a certain kind of person. It's about inner relationships and how those really address the idea of identity. People are interested in how I can alter my attitude or appearance from one project to the other. Each [project] brings out those certain characteristics...In my work, I take pictures with a group and with other people of the group. So I describe like-people and their cultures, and then it goes back to my identity: I describe myself.¹⁴

Her work, therefore, is not necessarily a demonstration of the degree to which she is able to transform her appearance as a defiant act against the fixities of cultural categories; instead, Lee insists that each project exemplifies the way in which the company we keep mediates perceptions of self, boundaries aside. In other words, her work illustrates the structural process of identity-making through binaries between the self and others. For example, *The Hip Hop Project* demonstrates that it is not enough that she darkens her skin, plaits her hair, and draws dark lip liner around her mouth to become "Hip Hop" (fig. 6). It is when she places herself within the context of the culture that she "becomes" a member of the group (fig. 7). In the first example, she is an affected imitation of a hip-hop music video girl. In the next, she is 'down'. The main difference is the presence of the other figures in the photograph who presumably are authentically hip-hop, which serves as a reference point in the evaluation of the authenticity of Lee's appearance.

But even when critics do take into account the artist's statement, their interpretations invariably draw more attention to the end product of Lee's artistic endeavor, rather than the concepts that she claims are framing the work. Critics seem to prefer to highlight the final product of her artistic process: the spectacle of her "shape-shifting" appearance. In an article published in *Art in America*, Sarah Valdez acknowledges that Lee subscribes to the idea that

¹⁴Lee, *Projects*, 100-2.

identity is contingent on social interactions. However, her analysis shifts to what she calls “a vivid theatricality.” Valdez notes:

All of the people she pretends to be appear to be the real Lee. . . In the context of art, Lee positions herself as a shape-shifting prankster. . . It’s clear Lee has affection for all the incidental identity cues that surround us. But looking at the snapshots that document her masquerade, one can’t help but feel a little frisson, wondering what, in fact, is left after all the studied camouflage is stripped away.¹⁵

In the end, Valdez’s response to the *Nikki S. Lee* exhibition at Leslie Tonkonow Gallery uncovers the author’s ultimate interest in what she unnervingly calls the “masquerade” as if to infer that Lee’s subjectivity is bound by her appearance. Similarly, Barry Schwabsky, writing for *Artforum International*, begins to investigate the “multi-leveled visual structure” of *Projects*, but promptly settles his reading on Lee’s presentation of her different guises:

To crack the codes governing the various sub-cultural details of clothing and other accoutrements takes some effort; but where a certain genius is said to operate is in. . . going beyond donning an identity to assuming it in one’s very body. . . Dressing like a working-class Latino teenager, a Wall Street broker, or (with the addition of suitable makeup) a bedraggled senior citizen requires some ability, but to mime, say, the very different facial expressions that subliminally give stereotypes their recognizability takes real talent.¹⁶

Perhaps Valdez, Schwabsky, and other critics tend to gloss over Lee’s interpretation of her work due to the critics’ own perfunctory acceptance of the cultural types that Lee exhibits, which in turn eclipses a critical investigation of their own personal relationships with and perceptions of each stereotyped group. But in doing so, these interpretations beg for an alternative reading that contends more judiciously with the political aspects of her work that are couched in her process, which neither her critics nor Lee herself can attempt to evade.

¹⁵Sarah Valdez, “Nikki S. Lee,” *Art in America* 90, no. 4 (April 2002): 150.

¹⁶Barry Schwabsky, “Nikki S. Lee,” *Artforum International* 38, no. 1 (September 1999): 158.

Supposing for a moment that Lee's concept of a socially-determined identity is the mainstay of her work, professions of authenticity or sincerity in the relationships she displays are tentative at best. It remains impossible to determine whether Lee is mimicking or mocking, or if her subjects are fraternizing or patronizing. In order to substantiate the alleged ease at which she traverses social and cultural boundaries, Lee concretizes superficial visual codes of identity by exhibiting contrived courtships with members of each of the communities represented in *Projects*. This particular notion of identity formation that is contingent on relationships follows that of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of psychosexual development, which proposes a structuralist model of identity that is contingent on social interaction. According to Lacan, an individual's perception of self is based on relationships with others who affirm the individual's desired identity through their projection of an idealized picture of the individual's self, or the Ideal-I.¹⁷

However, pictures, as Lacan attests, generate misrecognitions (*méconnaissances*) that provide little corroboration of actual lived experiences.¹⁸ In accordance with Lacan's theory, what Lee essentially places at the center of her artistic process is a principal factor in identity construction—that is, vision. (In Barthes's terms, too, Lee's photographs seem to portray Desire *with* mediation.) She scrutinizes the subculture, the group receives her in her metamorphosed state, and the camera fixes the image of the interaction, which she later uses as visual evidence of her manifold identity. The photograph alone by virtue of its static, atemporal nature does not capture the flurry of physical and psychological activity through time and space, which is what governs 'being'. In short, when critics (and Lee for that

¹⁷Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," In *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 2.

¹⁸Lacan, 6.

matter) use the *Projects* photographs to make buoyant conjectures on the authenticity of Lee's identity in each of her series, they effectively perpetuate the essentializing praxis of the stereotype. If the viewer is to recognize Lee's various guises as bona fide evidence of her collective identity, then her work has successfully stabilized the slippages of arbitrary cultural significations. Consequently, each project, along with their reductive titles, is a representation of stereotypes made convincing by the exposition of consummated relationships with others in pursuit of the Lacanian Ideal-I.

That being stated, it is more appropriate to suggest an interpretation of Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* that focuses on the paramount role of the image in the *process* of determining identity rather than examining the identity-product alone. The ubiquity of the photograph in society consigns individuals to a ritualistic practice of acquiring knowledge through photographic seeing, or the condition in which vision is the authoritative sensing mechanism with which we interface with and understand the world.¹⁹ Conceptions of our own identity and the identity of others are mediated through the image-construction. An acceptable interpretation of *Projects* would concede that Lee's so-called shape-shifting is indeed laudable, but only when this faculty refers not to her assortment of guises that allows her to blend seamlessly into each social group, but more significantly to the multiple perspectives she makes transparent in her images: that of the photographer, the photographed, and the spectator, the triad of subject-object positions that comprise the photographic enterprise itself and other forms of image-making, as in the stereotype. It is the process by which Lee

¹⁹Susan Sontag introduces the term "photographic seeing" in her text Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 97. "Photographic seeing, when one examines its claims, turns out to be mainly the practice of a kind of dissociative seeing, a subjective habit which is reinforced by the objective discrepancies between the way the camera and the human eye focus and judge perspective..."

articulates each of these perspectives that her work approaches the realm of the political. More specifically, *Projects* takes on the subject-object complexities of visual representations of identity.

By relinquishing control of the camera's shutter and placing her own body within the viewfinder, Lee's position is dubious. Remarkably, Lee has denied that she is a photographer, and rightly so as she does not actually take the photographs for this particular body of work; but, it is still appropriate to designate her as the photographer since she is the person who envisions and anticipates each "candid" scene.²⁰ At the same time, Lee sacrifices her own subjectivity when she likens her body to a mannequin by applying the stereotypical markers of identity to her body and displaying it in each scene alongside her subjects, who likewise become lifeless objects on the glossy surface of the photograph. Yet, the agency of Lee's unnamed acquaintances remain intact to some degree. Though they, as representatives of their cultural type, are frozen in each photograph, it is in their image that Lee reinvents herself, and it is often one of them who frames the scenes and snaps the photographs. Just as they influence the final output of Lee's appearances, they also have some control over the end products of each photo shoot. One can also assume that they are Lee's accomplices, striking their poses and smiling at the camera in order to project their predetermined, collaborative image of their representative culture.

Still, another agent in Lee's multifarious construction of subjects and objects is that of the spectator who, in her recognition of each category of Lee's cultural typologies, brings to the tableau her own "knowledge" of each community, and who is another object in the

²⁰In an interview, Lee states: "People always see me as a photographer because I'm using the medium of photography. I'm not talking about a hierarchy between photography and the artist. I can be a photographer, artist, whatever. I just mention this because I don't consider myself a photographer, because...I don't have a camera." Shane Waltener, "The Real Nikki," *Modern Painters* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 68.

construction of such classifications through her personal process of conceiving the self as it is projected by others. In the *Projects* photographs, Lee makes apparent the complicit participation of each subject-position in acts of photographic seeing by complicating each of their specific contributions to the mechanism of photography. This complexity parallels the shifts in subjectivity in the determination of identity and in the identification of others, both of which are mediated by the image-object.

Thus, a reading of the photographs should maintain that Lee's *Projects* illustrates and subverts the crisis of subjectivity inherent in the stereotype, a preordained mechanism of photographic seeing. By confounding the roles commonly attributed to each operator in the image-making process, the photographs urge the viewer to reconstruct narratives to resolve the indeterminate relationships between Lee and her hosts, and more significantly the questionable relationships between the viewer and members of each depicted culture. The futile attempts to reconcile these liaisons also reveal the artifice of the photographic medium, thus challenging the verity of the image-object. The ambiguity of subject-object positions elicits and addresses questions about the complex and often problematic visual expressions of identity and the subtle ways that such representations both promote and challenge dominant visual paradigms of society.

CHAPTER 3

SEEING PHOTOGRAPHICALLY

The reason critics read *Projects* as if it were a forensic investigation of cultural types is certainly understandable. Considering the entire body of the *Projects* work, which includes depictions of several vastly different cultures, such as alternative youth culture (*The Punk Project*), mid-western trailer park culture (*The Ohio Project*), and retirement culture (*The Seniors Project*), it is easy to conclude that the photographs demonstrate the malleability of cultural boundaries. However, as stated earlier, any analysis that supports the photographs' claims of validating identity through visual cues is problematic because it ultimately promotes the re-inscription of stereotypes.

The stereotype functions to objectify any individual who visibly bears the edited characteristics of the predetermined, oversimplified model of a superficial category of cultural identity by superimposing the image of the model over the individual's lived experience.²¹ As a result, the individual suffers a loss of agency when she no longer can influence others' perception of her identity. Nevertheless, even the interpretations of *Projects* that are problematic create a pathway towards the root cause of such acts of subjugation, which are intimately connected to a distinct brand of observation that is characteristic of a postmodern sensibility: photographic seeing. To subvert the hierarchical nature of social structures, it is important to understand this apparatus by which the stereotype becomes

²¹More in-depth study on the stereotype can be found in Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

instituted and espoused in society.

According to the long-standing media analyses of Walter Benjamin, whose ideas have informed theories of photography, the mechanism of vision has been reconfigured since the advent of photography in the nineteenth century. He warns against the fatalistic confluence of the artistic medium and reality, the sum of which equates to a murderous estrangement of subjectivity. The hand of the artist is replaced by the technical and chemical genius of photography, and the subjective interpretation of the viewer is replaced by the ready acceptance of information. The photograph enjoys a disinterested viewership that readily consumes an affected reality judiciously choreographed through the covert masking of its artificial machination. According to Benjamin, with the photograph being omnipresent, society is under the seductive spell of images that present unwavering impressions of reality: what we know is what we see—in pictures.

In his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin notes that photography gave the eye, for the first time, the primary role in artistic production: “Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand to draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech.”²² The ability of photography to create instantaneous representations of its subjects modified the reception of images in significant ways, most notably by extinguishing what Benjamin terms “aura,” or the uniqueness or cult value of artwork that furnishes its specificity to the time and place in which it was produced. The production of the photograph is thus freed of the dependence on aura for its authenticity. This, Benjamin concludes, is what causes “the whole social function of art [to be] revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is

²²Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, 1st Schocken pbk. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 219.

based on a different practice: politics.”²³ Thus, the photograph makes way for a process of knowledge acquisition in which vision is primary. In this modern way of seeing, there exists a tendency to subsume an understanding of the real into a subconscious process of image-making. Consider the peculiarity of describing tragic events in such terms as “it was like a movie” or “it was as if it was happening in slow-motion.” Also, in the past decade or so, the increasing popularity of allegedly unscripted “reality” television programs has forced competing television networks to scramble for novel ways to transform everyday life into spectacular productions. In each instance, the images are reality-by-proxy. As a result, an understanding of reality is contingent on the image regardless of its tendency to deviate from the truth; constructions obscure themselves as such.

The most compelling rationale for the phenomenon of photographic seeing is the idea that the photograph inherently purports truth. Since Atget documented the deserted streets of Paris in 1900, the photographic medium has possessed a privileged position among all other forms of artistic expression, which has placed photography beyond representation and into the political realm as evidence; “free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to [photographs].”²⁴ Putting aside for a moment the issue of formal composition and certainly the fancies of modern digital technology, the license to assert truth by virtue of its technical process is critical to the photographic enterprise. The photograph is precisely the consequence of light striking the chemical surface of the film as if to create a physical impression of reality. As such, the photograph follows the definition of the Peircian indexical

²³Benjamin, 257.

²⁴Benjamin, 226.

sign—“a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by the Object.”²⁵ When Charles Peirce established his semiotic lexicon, he further deduced that,

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the fact that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.²⁶

It is the actual existence of the subject before the camera lens on which the production of the photograph is contingent. Therefore, what endows the photograph with power is the fact of the subject’s existence that can scarcely be refuted in the photograph.

Indeed, perhaps no other source of information is considered as reliable as the photograph to provide substantiation of foregone events. Traces of DNA material presented as proof of guilt is refutable in courts of law, whereas the photograph rarely fails to stand beyond a reasonable doubt. Similarly for Lee, *Projects* is a collection of evidence: “I always feel like I have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things. I wanted to see some sort of *evidence* that I could be all those different things.”²⁷ The “characters” that Lee suspects lay within her are dependent on the photograph to corroborate her claim. In every case, the physical connection between the photograph and the subject elides the mechanical process of photography altogether, uniting artifice and reality into a potent alliance that generates socially-constructed ideologies.

²⁵Charles Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” In *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 102.

²⁶Peirce, 106.

²⁷My italics. Lee, *Projects*, 100.

However, the photograph cannot disavow its artifice. Camera angles, artificial lighting, zoom lenses, and more recent digital manipulation techniques all work to mediate the viewer's visual experience—that is to say, knowledge acquisition—whether it be limiting or expanding information, creating aesthetic effects, or eliciting a specific affect. The function of photography had been disputed since the early twentieth century. Amateur photographers regarded photography as a modern medium whose new techniques granted possibilities for novel forms of artistic expression. On the contrary, commercial photographers believed that the primary function of photography should be documentary.²⁸ Regardless of the debate, the principles of amateur and professional photographers remain far less distinct in their final products; the same techniques employed in art photography bear little difference in photos produced for the purpose of reportage. Though press photography is purported to be documentation of actual events, published images are edited in order to augment or limit information transmission or to produce a particular affect (as in the case of tabloid or biased journalism). Conversely, the art photograph portrays abstract expression, yet the artist furnishes the image with a realistic tangibility to create a visceral effect in the viewer.

Just as New Objectivity photographers transformed the shapes of familiar objects into sharply angled and magnified abstractions, so too has National Geographic magazine with its color-saturated photojournalistic prints of nameless, exoticized brown beauties and lush green, eternally pre-industrial lands altered our understanding of continents geographically (and now conceptually) distant from our own.²⁹ In each case, the final image is the tailored

²⁸Patricia D. Leighton, "Critical Attitudes toward Overtly Manipulated Photography in the 20th Century," *Art Journal* 37, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 314.

²⁹Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, "The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes," From *Reading National Geographic*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 213.

output of the photographic mechanism that retains a physical relationship to the real. From its technical production emerges the reassuring clarity and alluring formal beauty of the photograph's reenactments of truth. Thus, in spite of its mechanical (re)construction, the alliance of the aesthetic and the real in photography generates ideologies, which subsumes our understanding of the world under a blanket of social constructs rather than individual experience. The obvious fabrication of Lee's *Projects* snapshots is no exception.

In the case of *Projects*, Lee distinguishes her work from that of other fine art photographers by creating photographs that she regards as "boring":

I just want to have really boring snapshots—people just standing in front of a camera taking pictures with a smile...If people think it's boring, that's fine. I adopted the boring quality of snapshots, which is interesting in my work. But there's definitely a moment behind each image. I had a party with the punks at my house, and I have very different snapshots taken at my house. But I don't use them, because somehow they're too personal. People think deeper means better. But it can ruin my projects and it would be a totally different story. It would seem more like a fantasy, somehow, and romantic.³⁰

In other words, Lee makes a deliberate attempt to create for the viewer a sense of reality into her admittedly constructed shots. It gives one pause that she forbids access to the photographs that to her are the most personal—much in the same way that Barthes refuses to publish his Winter Garden photograph. Ironically, the greater the degree to which she feels the photographs are specifically representative of her actual experiences with her new friends, the less confidence she has in the outside observer to believe that the "moments behind each image" really took place. She prefers rather to display the photographs that impart the highest degree of banality so as to prevent the viewer from accusing the pictures of being precious. On one hand, it is as if her censorship of the images she deems to be more "real" contribute to the generalization of the image that Barthes criticized in *Camera Lucida*;

³⁰Lee, *Projects*, 103-104.

more convincingly, the display of the pictures that she admits are indicative of the manufacture of the snapshots perhaps work to resurrect Benjamin's aura.

It becomes clear that the poorly composed shot is part of Lee's strategy of aesthetic appropriation. In both *The Hip Hop Project (36)* (fig. 7) and *The Hip Hop Project (1)* (fig. 8), figures are cut off by the frame, the women who do not look at the camera appear to not have been ready for the camera's flash; and, in the latter example, the grey leather car seat that imposes on the shot is given more prominence than the male figure relegated to a narrow space at the left hand side of the picture plane. These compositional flaws are an attempt to not only replicate the happenstance look of the "real" snapshots that fill boxes and photo albums in our own homes, but also a constructed reality distinct from the calculated compositions of fine art photography. Even more, the conspicuous red-orange numerical date stamp that appears in most of the photographs brands the picture as a vernacular rather than erudite artistic expression. The date stamp places the historical moment into the realm of the present, connecting viewers to the picture through their memory of said date. Evidently, it was on the fourth of July, 2001 that Lee rode in the crowded back seat of a car with her friends instead of attending an Independence Day parade or an obligatory backyard barbeque. Bearing the date stamp, each picture becomes part of a documentary chronicle of actual events and not carefully composed group portraiture. Accustomed to the proverbial snapshot, viewers can more readily accept Lee's testimony of her sincere engagement with each social community, as the images create temporal and spatial associations between the viewer's lived experiences and Lee's fabricated images.

Despite the appropriation of the snapshot aesthetic, however, *Projects* is not as successful in uniting truth and fiction, a quality of photographs that Benjamin claims is

inherent to the medium. As mentioned earlier, Lee admits that those photographs she deems are most personal (or in my interpretation, the most representative of her punctum), appear less credible than the pictures that assume the banal trappings of the snapshot. In several ways, the snapshot aesthetic that Lee has chosen for *Projects* have the quality of a weird, campy b-movie with its exaggerated details, the incongruous synthesis of a disinterested vernacular aesthetic and premeditated high art, and the puzzling dialogue among the different *Projects* series, which elicits feelings of indignation, admiration, confusion, and/or skepticism. In doing so, *Projects* disrupts the fatalistic authority of photographic seeing.

Although taken in the same car, and with many of the same people, *The Hip Hop Project (36)* and *The Hip Hop Project (1)* are not equally convincing of Lee's assimilation. Whereas the first can be more closely tied to the "boring" snapshot, or a replication of reality, the second bears a careful formal composition and details that approach hyperbole, which make inaccurate the fragmented narratives attributed to the figures in the picture. In *(36)*, the placement of the figures into the frame of the shot does not seem to be orchestrated. Receiving an equal amount of attention, each figure, caught in mid-action, is crammed into a car. No one person looks particularly exceptional; each appears to be part of a cohesive group of brown-skinned urban-styled youth. Though Lee is identifiable, she is not, nor is anyone else for that matter, the main focus of the picture. Lee's body leans away from the center to the right hand side of the frame. Even though the frame cuts off the figures on the right and left limits of the picture, their presence is no more abbreviated than the other three figures, whose bodies are also obscured by one another or the lower border of the frame. Moreover, Lee's appearance melds harmoniously with the other people she accompanies. The color of her golden brown skin deviates little from the man beside her on her right. There is nothing

outlandish about her clothing; her headscarf echoes the white do rag that the man on the left hand side of the picture wears on his head. Her stoic facial expression is not extraordinary among the various smiles, grins, and serious pursed lips of the other figures. All of their bodies touch the person next to and in front of them, conveying a sense of their comfort with the close physical proximity of bodies. The crowded frame and shared physical features and clothing all contribute to a sense of camaraderie captured in the group snapshot. It is a picture that does seem to offer evidence of “moments behind the image.” However, the solidarity of the group and the elements that comprise this group snapshot quickly disintegrate in the following example, reversing Benjamin’s contention by separating the camera apparatus from truth, inviting the viewer’s doubtful criticism.

In *The Hip Hop Project (I)*, Lee takes her position in the foreground where she is the distinct focus of the shot. Unlike the other figures, whose heads are cut off by the upper limit of the picture, Lee’s body is intact, presenting her hip-hop makeover. Though she is off-center, the figures seated behind and next to her, as well as the driver’s seat, which is closest to the foreground in front of her, act as framing devices that draw the eye towards her affected bravado. As she leans her head to her left, the gesturing hand of the young man behind her reaches past her right shoulder to confront the viewer’s gaze as it settles on the overt presence of Lee. Bright artificial light of the camera’s flash highlights the golden yellow undertones of Lee’s unnaturally tanned skin. The light also produces a shimmering effect that emanates from Lee’s shiny left cheek and frosted eye shadow painted below the thin arcs of her penciled-in eyebrows. Her hair takes on an unnatural brassy sheen that approximates the pigment of her skin. Around her waist is a belt that produces a harsh, reflective glare. In contrast, the figures who presumably belong to this particular cultural

group are dressed casually in their nondescript tee shirts, plaid shorts, and blue jeans. Lee looks passively towards the viewer, with her expressionless mouth slightly open and her eyelids heavy and relaxed, a lackluster facial expression that seems disconnected from the activity around her. In the midst of their pointing, lip biting, subtle smiling, and blunt rolling, Lee is focused and frozen in the center like a picture within the picture. The formal composition is too premeditated, her attempt at hip-hop too explicit.

The effect is that of kitsch; Lee's calculated attempt at replicating the lived experience of the people according to whom she models herself is made transparent, if not absurd. The vernacular language of the snapshot no longer conveys reality from its surface, and the knowing viewer no longer readily accepts the sincerity or the authenticity of Lee's engagement with the various cultures she represents. Whatever narratives we may attempt to reconstruct from the image—about who the figures are, the relationships among them, or their psychological state—they remain fragmented. The stereotypes associated with hip-hop no longer hold true. Her pictures show the tenuousness of the visual construction of lived experiences that underlie stereotypes, and in doing so impart subjectivity to the figures objectified, frozen, and silenced by the photographic image. No matter how closely the pictures capture Lee dressing like Them, changing her skin to look like Them, and acting like Them, the visual cues that mark her metamorphosis cannot substantiate that she truly is one of Them. As soon as the viewer realizes his/her awareness of the artifice of the image (and now the stereotype), no longer does photographic seeing subsume lived experience. Now, image and truth are separate and distinct and photographic seeing is deconstructed.

CHAPTER 4

MIS-TAKING IDENTITY

Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* is a precursor to recent innovations in media technology that waken our consciousness of the distinction between spectacularly presented information and lived reality, and which Benjamin perhaps did not predict in 1936. As high-definition (HD) technology enlarges and magnifies human imperfection marking the blemished and wrinkled faces of celebrities spanning 61-inch television screens, it becomes apparent that the utopic images of the snapshot that we hold to be accurate representations of past events, identities, and relationships is a part of a process of mis-taken identification. Lee's collection of photographs tests our allegiance to the image-construction, inviting critical observation and skepticism. Surmounting Walter Benjamin's assertion of the hegemonic camera apparatus, the critical eye is no longer bound to visual significations of identity established by photography; the objectified subject recoups his sovereignty over his material existence. While *Projects* demonstrates the insidiousness of photographic seeing to obscure truth through the indexicality and reassuring stability of the picture, the collection of snapshots also reveals the way in which photographic seeing relegates self-identity and identification of others to the image-object.

As suggested previously, critics' interpretations of Lee's work as a demonstration of the fluidity of cultural boundaries perpetuate this suppression of subjectivity by affirming visual cues as the only suitable markers of identity. To rely solely on images to understand

the lived experience of people belonging to cultural groups other than our own, and then to attempt to situate ourselves spatially and politically within the social framework, is to risk (re)organizing and (re)classifying the world based on deceptive data. The data are collected and stockpiled by dominant cultures, which then publish inaccurate reports of the Orient, the third world, and the young, urban African American brought up in the projects and depicted in Lee's *Projects*.

The images in their ubiquitous medium become part of the archive of, "...experiences that belong to the realm of ideas and myths culled from texts, not empirical knowledge," as Edward Said describes in his seminal text, *Orientalism* (a point that coincidentally is introduced in a section entitled "Projects").³¹ Said points to the use of textual materials as references for comprehending alien cultures—in lieu of live encounters—as a fundamental element that sustains social hierarchies. These abstract references make cultures stagnant, disavowing the lived experiences of their subjects. Such static images collude with a societal structure functioning under the directives of the dominant culture that maintains its authoritarian control through the institution of difference. *Projects*, however, razes the hierarchical binary construct between dominant and subordinate cultures by bringing into consciousness the disruption that occurs when the camera apparatus loses its authoritative power as a result of the failure of the photograph to correspond to material existence—a consequence of technology's aggressive attempt to vivify the flat, lifeless surface of the photograph.

In order to demonstrate the entrenched connection between vision and identity, it is necessary to outline the process of forging identity and acts of identification. The correlation between identity and identification with vision (of being and seeing) is a matter that has been

³¹Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 80.

thoroughly investigated in the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, which informed Roland Barthes's writings. Lacan alludes to the mechanism of the gaze in his 1949 lecture, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in which he established the notion of a reflexive identity that first develops during the latter phase of infancy, or the mirror stage. In this lecture, Lacan illustrates the awareness and development of the self, or I, as detached and individual through the reflection of her image in a mirror. Once the infant becomes part of the social framework, she forms relationships with others who act as the mirror that reflects the image of the I. This narcissistic reflection, however, is inconsistent with the subject's real physical and emotional experiences (i.e., material existence). Lacan concludes that throughout life, the subject is driven by the desire to embody the projected image of the mirror—an imaginary, inverted, and exterior image that is unachievable and in conflict with physical and emotional chaos:

The fact that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as Gestalt...symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion.³²

Photographic seeing relegates identity and identification to the image-object because we look to pictures to attest to a desired material existence for the self and others. As long as the mirror, or the ongoing association with others, satisfactorily projects the desired picture of reassuring stability, the individual perceives mastery over her place in the world. This corresponds to what Lee explains about her artistic endeavor: "In my work, I take pictures with a group and with other people of the group. So I describe like-people and their cultures,

³²Lacan, 3.

and then it goes back to my identity: I describe myself.”³³ For Lee, each project is “a world of her own making” in which she defines her identity according to her identification of the people that surround her.

However, this is a risky enterprise, according to Lacan, who alleges that the determination of the world is based on a process of “mediatization” that can have catastrophic outcomes because “[i]t is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of others.”³⁴ Lacan illustrates the fallacy of human knowledge when the desire of the image functions as the principal arbiter. This creates hierarchical binaries between the self and others because stable and whole identity that the subject desires is contingent on the identification of others as also stable and whole. If the mirror reflection projects an image of fragmented bodies, the Ideal-I becomes a disenchanting image of the self. Therefore, the subject renounces the physical and emotional chaos of others by engaging in a process that situates the self opposite and apart from others by manufacturing and superimposing onto them resolute images, or stereotypes, in a process quite similar to the practice of photography. Since the photograph purports truth, the photographic enterprise organizes the world into permanent, static images that are however cropped, enlarged, and rearranged into a constructed montage of the world taken to be true.

On the other hand, *Projects* challenges photographic seeing by calling attention to the impotence of the image-object and restores the subjectivity of the figures in her photographs (and all people who have been defined and silenced by her labels). Unlike the spontaneity and candidness of snapshots, Lee’s creative license is apparent in her photographs. In *Projects*, pictures of her imitations of individuals belonging to various cultural groups are

³³Lee, *Projects*, 100-2.

³⁴Lacan, *Ecrits*, 6.

overstated. The snapshot format, more conventional in its one-hour photomat form in three-by-five-inch portability, is enlarged to 21¼ by 28¼ inch C-prints that are far more appropriate for museum display. In their exploitation of technology and elevation to fine art, the photographs lose the intimacy and credibility of the snapshot because they encourage the viewer to inspect the details of the images more closely and with a critical eye.

If the reader has become skeptical of the characterization of hip-hop culture in Lee's *The Hip Hop Project*, it might be interesting to note that at least two figures that appear in *The Hip Hop Project (1)* and *The Hip Hop Project (36)*, are not simply young African-American men cast in the stereotypical role of hip-hop. In fact, the man wearing the multicolored striped shirt is Albert Johnson, and the man with the bandana tied around his forehead is Kejuan Muchita. Together onstage, they are Prodigy and Havoc respectively, the hard core rap duo Mobb Deep whose lyrics attest to their encounters with gang violence, drug deals, new money, and a misogynistic attitude associated with hip hop culture.³⁵ This is not to say that this realization should either affirm or deny this stereotype.³⁶ More precisely,

³⁵Thanks to Krystal Moore who recognized the figures. Specific information regarding Mobb Deep is from Mobb Deep, "The Infamous Mobb Deep," (2006), <http://www.mobbdeep.net> (accessed January 12, 2007).

³⁶For in-depth study of the particular circumstances of African Americans and their representation in the media, see Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 4. Hill writes: "At the same time that Black American youth experience these social problems [racism, marginalization, isolation, poverty, and shorter life expectancy], their mass-media images tell a different story. In the 1990s, images of poor and working-class Black American youth as athletes and entertainers flooded global popular culture. The actual ghettoization of poor and working-class African Americans may render them virtually invisible within suburban malls, on soccer fields, and in good public schools, yet mass media created a seemingly authentic Black American culture that glamorized poverty, drugs, violence, and hypersexuality. As a result, representations of these same Black youth became hypervisible throughout far expanses of the globe. The music, fashion, dance, styles, and post-soul aesthetic of [Mark Anthony Neal's] soul babies seemingly catalyzed a multibillion-dollar hip-hop industry. 'To buy cars, Jeeps, trucks,' in the words of Sister Souljah's Winter Santiago, 'to sport the flyest shit made by top designers everyday' appealed to huge audiences that were hungry for these images of

it reinforces the assertion that that the stereotype can never wholly act as a surrogate for the material existence of individuals. Furthermore, one cannot always assume that the stereotype is inherently a hegemonic apparatus in itself. Identity and identification places the image foremost in the determination of the position of the self and others in the social framework. The obvious aggrandizement of Lee's *Projects* reveals the subversive attempt of the photographic enterprise to re-produce material existence and shows the fallacy of taking the image-object as absolute and reliable source material for knowledge. Thus, all pictures must be called into question.

The degree to which technology produces magnified images of the vulnerable flesh of actors, high definition and high resolution pictures of sagging skin and permanently furrowed brows correlate to the degree to which viewers are becoming increasingly disenchanted with the image-object. Technological advances no longer permit images to imitate life; they only make images larger than life (or in miniature) to the point that their artificiality is all too clear. As a result, the viewer is able to look at images with a skeptical eye. The snapshot that once attested to the real makes recognizable its utopic quality, while the work of the camera apparatus becomes obvious, if not distracting. Whereas Benjamin accused photography of obscuring the work of the mechanical operation of the camera, current developments in technology broadcast its impressive faculties in a self-congratulatory manner that is out of sync with reality. The viewer no longer confuses the spectacular with the real, which is downright banal and "boring" in comparison. And thus, the objectified subjects of the photograph are now afforded their subjectivity. Viewers easily make the distinction between the image-object and the people who play them on T.V.: photographic seeing no longer

Blackness. Apparently, singing and dancing about Black pain and wearing the latest styles while doing it could generate cold, hard cash."

controls knowledge acquisition. Accordingly, visual markers of identity also lose authority over subjectivity. Image-objects lose their efficacy leaving them powerless to subjugate and marginalize social and cultural groups.

Perhaps Roland Barthes can be rest-assured that modern society is beginning to feel the sickness of “nauseated boredom” that the proliferation of universalized, HD images have espoused. Winter Garden photographs may be the antidote.

Figure 1. Nikki S. Lee. *The Ohio Project* (8), 1999



Figure 2. Nikki S. Lee. *The Punk Project (6)*, 1997



Figure 3. Nikki S. Lee. *The Seniors Project* (26), 1999



Figure 4. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #6*, 1977



Figure 5. Tseng Kwong Chi. *Washington D.C.*, 1982

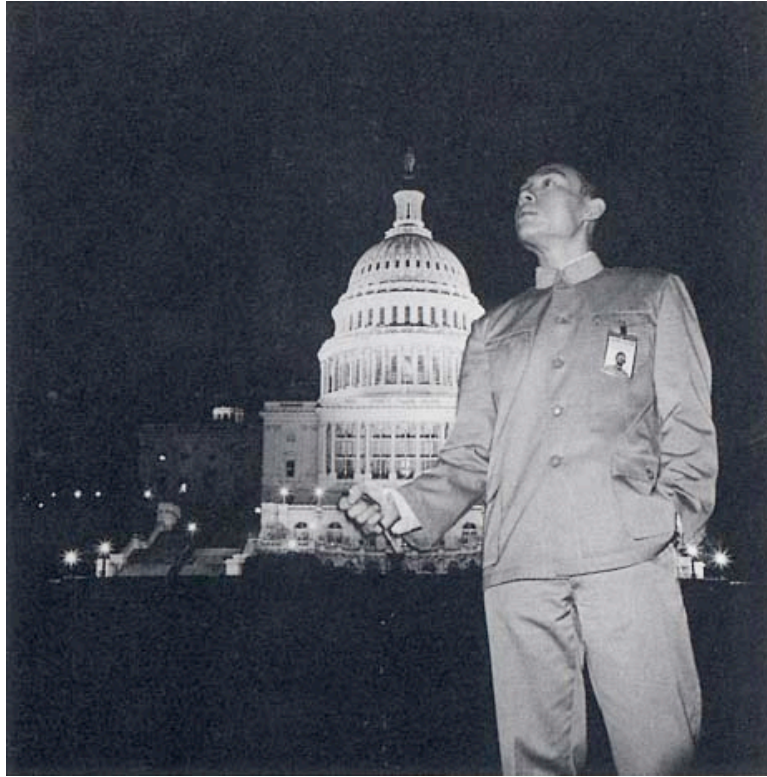


Figure 6. Nikki S. Lee. *The Hip Hop Project (14)*, 2001



Figure 7. Nikki S. Lee. *The Hip Hop Project* (36), 2001



Figure 8. Nikki S. Lee. *The Hip Hop Project (1)*, 2001



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