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## Serialization, Ethnographic Drag, and the Ineffable Authenticity of Nikki S. Lee

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• *Articles* •

## Serialization, Ethnographic Drag, and the Ineffable Authenticity of Nikki S. Lee

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**Abstract:** *This essay reads the photographer Nikki S Lee's [Projects](#), a series of pictures in which the artist poses as a member of various subcultures and folk groups from an ethnographic perspective. Focusing on how folklore scholars might employ Lee's representational strategies, the essay suggests that two aspects of Projects are especially instructive for folkloristic ethnography. First, Lee's use of drag as camp highlights the performative aspects of identity, showing how individuals express themselves both through and against shared expressive standards. Second, the serialized presentation of the photographs provides a model for the ethnographic representation of multiple folk identities performed by individuals who belong to a variety of folk groups. In these ways, Lee's Projects can assist folklorists looking to represent the fugitive aspects of folk identity that resist or are resisted by folk processes, those individual aspects of folk performances which the folk and their folklore cannot efface.*

It is seriality itself, a topic dear to the heart of folklorists, that must be rethought in light of the electronic vernacular. It is here, in the heat of a nascent technology, that we can contemplate what folklore's contemporary subject might be.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Folklore's Crisis" (1998, 320)

Identifying what Nikki S. Lee does is difficult. Even though she has a Master's degree in photography from New York University, is best known for her photographic exhibitions *Projects* and *Parts*, and is one of the most compelling photographers currently working, Lee insists she is not a photographer. "I don't own a camera," she explains (Waltener 2004, 68). Much like the over-conformist answers that Andy Warhol consistently offered his interviewers, Lee's articulation of the obvious is both a playful put-on and a koan-esque puzzle: if a photographer has no camera, is she still a photographer? Complicating matters, identifying Nikki S. Lee can be equally, perhaps even more difficult, than identifying what she does. For example, in

*Projects*, her most celebrated work to date and the focus of this essay, Lee exhibits snapshots of herself posing as a member of various folk groups.<sup>1</sup> Each individual transformation is identified as a separate “project” (for example, “**The Hispanic Project**” or “**The Seniors Project**”), a term that highlights the labor that goes into each of Lee’s performances, which is often considerable: Lee does not simply don the costume of a folk group and pose alongside them; she transforms her manner and dress so that she appears to be an insider, transformations that require an extraordinary amount of time, effort and resources.<sup>2</sup>

Each individual project begins with Nikki S. Lee introducing herself to a folk group as “an artist working on a project.” Audiences often express surprise upon learning that Lee discloses her agenda to the people with whom she is photographed (Robinson 2006), but she does make her intentions known to the groups within which she lives for anywhere from a few days to a month.<sup>3</sup> She insists that she never spends more than a month on any one project because at that point the experience becomes “too real” (Robinson 2006). Lee depicts her experiences living within these different folk groups with snapshots she does not take herself; someone else, either from within the group or a close-by stranger, takes a photograph at the request of Lee, who supplies them with a disposable camera. The resulting snapshots are exhibited in a serialized manner (i.e. the different projects are exhibited next to one another, not independently), enlarged but otherwise unaltered as *Projects*.

At first, Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* appears to be an exercise in passing, that she is trying to blend into various groups by mimicking their aesthetics and behaviors, yet *Projects* is much more challenging than a simple series of identity stunts. Lee’s work is certainly remarkable for the manner in which it highlights what is necessarily an invisible artistry—after all, to draw attention to one’s passing undermines the success of the act—and, in a sense, Lee does make an ironic spectacle of passing by exhibiting instances of it. Yet the most crucial aspect of *Projects* is the manner of its exhibition, that the various projects are shown alongside one another, a serialization that changes *Projects* from a collection of isolated performances into a complex

assessment of the relationship between community and individuality. By putting these various projects alongside one another, Lee encourages viewers to make connections between the different performances, to track what is and is not consistent within the myriad instances of Nikki S. Lee. The discussions engendered by this serialized presentation, while thought-provoking within the worlds of photography and fine art, are keenly relevant to the field of folklore, a discipline that deals with many of the issues her work raises. Indeed, *Projects* employs methods, in particular drag and serialization as representational strategies, that can invigorate and possibly transform ethnographic practice with folklore studies, offering a way to represent those aspects of folk identity that resist or are resisted by folk processes.

The existing criticism on Nikki S. Lee fixates on her lack of definition, a state evident in the titles listed in her artist's bibliography—"Identity Crises," "Camera Chameleon," and "Who's that Girl?" (the latter of which has been used multiple times)—yet the ambiguity professed in all these article titles belies a remarkable consensus about who and what Lee is not: Nikki S. Lee is *not* Cindy Sherman. Looking through the literature on Lee, it often feels as if every article addressing her work employs the same rhetorical maneuver, an invocation and immediate revocation of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), a series in which the celebrated photographer pictured herself as a variety of B-movie archetypal figures, offering a savvy commentary on the conflicting roles women are encouraged to play in a mediatized culture.

The comparison with Sherman is apt as both artists make themselves the subject of work which is expressed photographically, yet critics are quick to delineate the ways in which they see Lee's work as distinct. For instance, after describing "self-camouflage artist" Lee as "necessarily working in the long shadow cast by Cindy Sherman," Jennifer Dalton distinguishes Lee as more of a conceptualist than her alleged photographic progenitor (2000, 47). Similarly, Ken Johnson, noting Lee's work's affinity with Sherman's, proceeds to argue "while Ms. Sherman has

based her roles and images on commercial genres [...] Ms. Lee favors the look of amateur snapshots,” as he believes that Lee’s photographs more closely resemble “real-life” than Sherman’s (2003, 44). Lee herself acknowledges certain affinities between her photographs and Sherman’s, yet she believes their work is fundamentally different: “People are always talking about Cindy Sherman and me because we are women, using our bodies, doing portraits and changing ourselves. But I don’t think there is a real connection. She’s just using herself, changing herself on her own, but I’m more into identity within a relationship, identity change within the context of others. It’s a different concept” (Waltener 2003, 68). Lee’s explanation is crucial as it draws a clear distinction between the two artists’ concepts that, in turn, also provides a clear differentiation of their subjects: Cindy Sherman portrays an individual, whereas Lee portrays groups, groups within which she has deliberately ingratiated herself.

Lee’s focus on the relationship between group and identity is what makes her work highly relevant to folklore studies and folkloristic ethnography. And as much as I would like to step in and unravel the aforementioned conundrums regarding her unclear status as an artist and photographer, I cannot explain what Nikki S. Lee does or who she is; all I can do is complicate the issue further by sharing a reading of *Projects*, one that is necessarily informed by my disciplinary affiliation: as a folklorist I am appalled by Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* because Lee reduces people’s folk identities to performances, treating them as costumes she can put on or take off at whim. Although she is not conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the common sense of the phrase, she does create ethnographic representations informed by sustained participant observation, the same procedure folklorists use, and if a folklorist approached informants in the same manner as Lee, if he or she treated other people’s traditions as little more than costumes, that folklorist would be rightly excoriated for disciplinary malfeasance.

Yet, as a folklorist, I am enthralled by Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* precisely because she exposes folk identities as performances, treating them as costumes she can put on or take off at whim. Better than any traditional folkloristic ethnography I have

ever encountered, *Projects* articulates the complex nature of folk identity, in particular the ways in which an individual generates a sense of self by simultaneously deferring to and differing from their communities. In this way, *Projects* offers an unorthodox response to Richard Bauman's (1971) too-often-unheeded call for a better account by folklorists of those aspects and participants of the folk performance which defy homogenization, for a deeper consideration of how some figures resist or are resisted by folk processes and performances. *Projects*, in my estimation, functions as a possible model for just such a consideration in that it shows how an ethnographic portrait might use serialization to trace those aspects of folk performances which the folk and their folklore cannot efface.<sup>4</sup>

Using Nikki S. Lee's performances as a model for ethnography, specifically folkloristic ethnography, may be unorthodox, but is not so far-fetched when one considers the disciplinary turn toward performance that has shaped North American folklore studies for the last forty years. Within this context, the strategy simply makes performance both the content and form of ethnographic representation. To put it another way, she employs drag ethnographically, drag being a representation of culture that is performed rather than written, which makes her strategy akin to other forms of performance ethnography that have emerged within anthropology and sociology (Alexander 2005; Finley 2005; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Indeed, performance ethnography has made recent headway in the field of folklore studies via the work of Elaine Lawless and Heather Carver (2010). More to the point, it is not so much that drag *looks* like ethnography; it is, rather, that drag *acts* like ethnography which, James Clifford suggests "is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion" (1986, 2-3). Consequently, when Nikki S. Lee is photographed performing folk identities, she is not so much representing the folk group for which the project is named; she is, instead, decoding and recoding the performance of folk belonging.

*Projects* might not constitute traditional ethnography, but it is nevertheless ethnographically compelling, offering a model for ethnographic methods better suited for the representation of postmodern experience than the standard approach of expressing field data via thick description. The ways in which, as Clifford puts it, “collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion” are negotiated in postmodernity too often elude representation in traditional ethnographic methodologies (1986, 2-3). The folk groups to which people belong are both too numerous and insulated to be captured by ethnography in its present institutional codification.<sup>5</sup> Frankly, the fieldwork strategy of participant-observation of groups, fixated as it is on shared meaning-making, does not work well with folk who perform a multitude of identities in a variety of contexts every day, and in order to articulate these negotiations, new methodologies must be devised.

In each of her projects, Nikki S. Lee engages in drag as camp, offering hyper-stylized portraits of folk identity. Lee freely admits that she does not study or research a group she selects for a project; asked by the art historian Phil Lee if she fears she is promoting stereotypes, Nikki S. Lee responded “I didn’t think about it all. When I started the project, typical images of each social group hadn’t been formed in me. I didn’t try to analyze or study, I rather relied on my intuition, probably based on the images from movies that I had watched” (2008, 87). Lee is, in true camp fashion, eschewing “authenticity” in favor of artificiality, opting to exhibit representations of representations rather than “the real thing.” This is not to say drag, particularly ethnic drag of this sort, is intrinsically campy; as theatre scholar Katherine Sieg points out, the mechanisms and effects of drag performances cannot be accounted for solely through queer theory, arguing that “cultural transactions” like ethnic drag “are framed by, and reproduce unequal power relations” (2007, 259). Yet Sieg focuses on expressions and reworkings of racial sensibilities that contributed to (and persist after) the Holocaust in Germany—a more somber topic is scarcely imaginable. Nikki S. Lee, on the other hand, consciously deconstructs the absurdity of essentialism within hybrid contexts; her focus is on the possibilities of

intersubjective identity formation more than it is the domination of groups through constructed essences.<sup>6</sup>

The camp nature of Lee's *Projects* is most apparent, fittingly, in her "[Drag Queen Project](#)," which also happens to be the first project she embarked upon ([The Creators Project](#) 2012). Even though she is hypothetically the best equipped of the drag queens pictured in the project to play the role of a glamorous woman because she is biologically a female, her failure to fit in is nothing short of spectacular. Lee's cartoonish stance looks downright goofy in contrast with the natural, glamorous poses adopted by the other queens, and it is apparent that Lee, a full-foot shorter than the other queens, simply is not up to their level. Yet, regardless of her inability to blend in, the photographs manage to be deeply challenging due to the recursive relationship between her and the other queens—she is attempting to mimic them as they are, in a sense, mimicking her as a woman, yet she is no match for their much more genuine fraudulence.

That Nikki S. Lee little resembles the other queens is ultimately irrelevant, however, as successful drag is not synonymous with successful impersonation. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, anthropologist Esther Newton argues that dressing in drag is not about creating a convincing illusion as much as it is about illusion itself, that drag is a costume, not a disguise. "The distinguishing characteristic of drag, as opposed to heterosexual transvestism," Newton writes, "is its group character; all drag, whether formal, informal or professional, has a theatrical structure and style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience, and there is no drag without drama (or theatricality)" (1972, 37). Echoing Newton, Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,

As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' (what critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the



performance is the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (1990, 175)

For both Newton and Butler, drag is a method for exposing gender as a social construct, a way of showing that one's gender identity is never natural as it is a negotiation between actor and audience, self and society. For these reasons, Lee's turn as a drag queen does not need to be convincing, at least in the conventional sense, to be compelling.

Or, more precisely, Lee's performances are convincing and compelling insofar as they showcase theatricality. In this manner, a drag queen's performance often generates power from the subtle but always perceptible elements which betray the overall illusion, the tells which highlight the distance between the actor and his role (e.g. a gruff voice, a five o'clock shadow or the outline of an Adam's apple). Within this framework, "seeing the strings" does not constitute a failure of theatricality as much as it makes the audience aware of theatricality itself, a key element of drag in that "the double stance toward role, putting on a good show while indicating distance," as Newton insists, "is the heart of drag as camp" (1972, 109). Fundamentally, the best camp drag queens express their artistry by controlling the limits of their performance, by calculating in what ways the illusion will come up short—the goal of drag as camp, after all, is not to become someone else; it is, instead, to demonstrate that being is, itself, performance.

Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* employs the same logic as drag as camp in that the artist is not so much endeavoring to pass as a member of the folk group with which she is posing; she is, rather, highlighting the theatricality of folk belonging itself; in particular, the extent to which identity is an ensemble performance in both its construction and reception. She contends, "I want to show how personal identity is

affected by other people, different relationships. Your character changes depending on who you are with" (Waltener 2003, 68). Lee identifies this as "the Asian aspect of her work" insisting that in Asian cultures, identity is seen as a collective expression, not an individual one. It is an aspect of her work critics frequently emphasize. One such critic, Jane Harris, argues that what "Lee describes as a very Asian notion of identity [...] drives her work," adding, "Her ability to explore this sensibility as it intersects with American ideals of individualism gives her work its peculiar frisson. Her resulting personas enact a kind of representational mobility that is nothing more than a contemporary guide for the human impulse to belong" (2002, 44). Returning again to the long shadow cast by Cindy Sherman, this is where Lee's work emerges as its own by showcasing the extent to which a person can never really stand alone. Lee employs drag to suggest that the idea of an individual self is illusory, that we are constantly performing ourselves in a variety of ways for, and in unison with, a multiplicity of folk groups and audiences.

The social nature of identity, which both Lee and her critics associate with Asian cultures, is a foundational notion within folklore studies and is why her work works so well as a model for folkloristic ethnography. Richard Bauman points out that whether folklorists identify their subject from the folk outward, as Alan Dundes does with his definition of the folk as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" (1977, 22); or from the lore inward, as Jan Brunvand does when he designates a group after first identifying "their distinctive folk speech and other traditions" (1978, 50), the field of folklore has traditionally emphasized "shared identity," specifically how "the sharing of identity paves the way for the presence of a body of shared folklore" (Bauman 1971, 32). Simply put, folklore studies focuses on groups—a fact clearly shown by the most commonly cited articulation of the folklorist's subject, Dan Ben-Amos' definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups" (1971, 14)—and, insofar as Lee is adopting shared identities in the performances documented in *Projects*, she is at or near the core of folkloristic inquiry.

Bauman goes on to argue, however, that the importance that folklorists place upon shared identity effaces difference, subsuming individuals within a collective identity. It is in regards to this problem that the serialized presentation of Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* can be especially provocative (if not instructive) for folkloristic ethnography: serialization offers an alternate conceptualization of the age-old folkloristic bugbear of authenticity. Through serialization, folklorists can cease trying to capture authenticity in the field or on the page—fool's errands that folklorists have too long performed—and begin generating it via the juxtaposition of supposed sameness. While serialization has been an essential element of folkloristic study for quite some time—Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (1955) is perhaps the most famous example—it has been used traditionally to uncover and arrange archetypes according to the historic-geographic method. Lee's use of serialization is different, however, in that she invokes no pure forms or archetypes; there is no "real" Nikki S. Lee. She uses serialization not to identify authenticity, but to conjure its spirit by tracing its absence.

Nikki S. Lee might be able to disappear into any single photograph, but viewing *Projects* as a series, the artist becomes easier and easier to identify as an ineradicable "Lee-ness" emerges, one which consistently betrays her anonymity. The distinctiveness of Lee that runs throughout the series is frequently attributed to her ethnicity. "[Lee's] Asian features are clearly visible in a group of whiter-than-white Ohio beer drinkers or Hispanic teenagers," writes artist Jennifer Dalton, "but her posture and the look on her face say she belongs there as we buy it" (2000, 51). Dalton's assessment is accurate, particularly as it relates to the North American context behind most of Lee's projects, a context in which normativity is gauged in terms of whiteness and maleness and which renders Lee doubly marked, both Korean and female.<sup>7</sup> However, there is something other than Lee's racialized countenance that prevents her from disappearing into the various crowds. This element might be *hauntological*, the philosopher Jacques Derrida's word for phenomena that are simultaneously present and absent (*Specters of Marx* 1993), or the quality might be better identified as *infra-thin*, artist Marcel Duchamp's word for

the imperceptible differences between identical objects, but I will leave it at *the ineffable authenticity of Nikki S. Lee*, indiscernible in any single photograph, but traceable throughout the series. What emerges throughout *Projects* is that part of the individual which resists absorption in the folk, the unlocatable locus through which folk dynamics run, which is, I believe, what Lee is talking about when she says: "I feel that the experiences provide me with opportunities to find the aspects of Nikki Lee that originally existed in me but that I had not realized" (Lee 2003, 87). Serialized ethnography, I believe, can accomplish something similar, that it can help identify that part of individual folk that defies absorption with "the folk."

Serialization, however, is not without its perils. Discussing serialized collections of folklore, Kim Lau argues that "published collections are often little more than essentialist metonymic representations of the given culture or group, which is assumed to be an integrated identifiable whole" (2000, 77). Her assessment which seems to identify in serialization exactly what Bauman warns against, a lumping of "the folk" into an undifferentiated mass. Moreover, Lau rightly points out that fitting folk expressions into preordained categories too often means reading folk expressions in a way in which "all distance is measured from the values and position of a mainstream, predominantly white, American readership" (78). Constructed in the manner that Lau outlines, serialization is little more than a euphemism for hierarchization, a strategy used to reaffirm existing relationships and their corresponding inequalities. Yet *Projects* resists this tendency because Lee never establishes a fixed point of comparison: there is no photo of the "authentic" Nikki S. Lee. Instead of presenting the snapshots as multiple variations of one essential Nikki S. Lee, *Projects* offers a field in which Lee-ness is perpetually recreated without ever being realized. *Projects* does not fix authenticity—at best it suggests a haunting, infra-thin, unlocatable Lee-ness, as discussed above. *Projects* instead generates infinite authenticities.

By resisting any fixed notions of authenticity, *Projects* provides a model for the ethnographic representation of multiple folk identities. Every person is a member of numerous folk groups, which means we are all constantly navigating

various folk identities and worldviews, yet folkloristic ethnography overwhelmingly focuses on the folk as a shared identity, not on how folk belonging is constantly, multiply renegotiated. Perhaps instead of centralizing ethnographic portraits on singular folk groups, folkloristic ethnography should follow Nikki S. Lee's model by representing the negotiation of multiple folk identities. Such ethnographies would resist the temptation of easy homogenization. Indeed, it often feels as if folklorists are working from out-dated models as even if we grant that our subject is dynamic and fluid, we resist adopting methods to match. For example, an ethnographer could opt to focus on the various folk identities a single person negotiates in his or her day-to-day life, paying attention to how familial, occupational, ethnic, regional and generational worldviews (a by-no-means exhaustive list) all compete for expression in that person's performance of self, an investigation that could be represented via photography, like Lee's *Projects*, or in writing or film or whatever medium is deemed most appropriate by the ethnographer. Such a representation would discourage the absorption of individuality into group identity, the effacement of the person by the folk discussed previously, because no identity would be presented as static, each expressed in differing degrees depending on context.<sup>8</sup> And this is but one way in which a folklorist might ethnographically represent the varieties of folk belonging—the opportunities for serialized representations provided by digital technologies are mind-boggling. I leave it to more intrepid and imaginative folklorists than myself to re-imagine serialization within folklore studies and the ways in which it might be used to represent the folk as individuals, as well as their always changing relationships with both their communities and themselves.

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### Notes

1. In the literature addressing Lee's work, the groups with which Lee poses are commonly identified as subcultures, yet I call them folk groups. Although the distinction between "subculture" and "folk group" is largely a matter of disciplinary preference, I believe folk group is a more applicable term when discussing Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* as she focuses primarily on the expressive forms of these groups (i.e. their folklore).
2. For "The Seniors Project" Lee enlisted a professional make-up artist to construct an "old mask" for her (The Creators Project 2012).
3. While I have been unable to find reports of the reactions of the people with whom Lee ingratiate herself, she insists that their responses have been positive and that she often stays in contact with them (Robinson 2006). Lee insists that she discloses her agenda by introducing herself as an artist working on a project. She points out, however, that she does not try to convince the group if they do not believe her.
4. Although I do not directly refer to the spirited, informative discussion of the role of identity in folklore studies between Elliot Oring, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Henry Glassie [1994] its influence is present throughout, in particular Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's provocative questions "In whose interest is it to fix identity? To speak in terms of identity? And to what end the discourse of difference?" (1994, 237).
5. In "On Ethnographic Surrealism," a chapter in *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford discusses the emergence of ethnography as a codified discipline, pointing out that the practice had initially developed in conjunction with Surrealism. Clifford contends that ethnography, through its institutionalization by academics, lost much of its original, experimental spirit in the process.
6. Susan Sontag writes, "To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (1964, 277). While it is hard to argue that Nikki S. Lee is disengaged in *Projects*, she frequently insists that the work is apolitical (Lee, 2008, 87).
7. It is important to point out that Lee's doubly marked subjectivity makes her infiltrations seem playful, but if the "infiltrator" were a White male, *Projects* would almost certainly take on a much more ominous character.
8. Such a project would resemble biography, insofar as the focus would be on one person, yet, conducted by an ethnographer, the work would necessarily emphasize

the role of group on one's individuality. Moreover, given the unorthodox, some might say intrusive fieldwork such a project would demand, an autoethnographic/autobiographical approach might be the best way to conduct such an endeavor. Not only does the ethnographer have easier access to his or her own experience, the analysis of one's own folk identities would be particularly productive in the effort to see one's self as other.

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