Nikki S. Lee, a Korean-born artist who lives in New York, has made it her project to infiltrate and mimic the subcultures of American life. For weeks or even months she immerses herself in a community or cultural milieu—lesbians, drag queens, Ohio trailer-park dwellers, skateboarders, senior citizens, Hispanic or Japanese street kids—meticulously adopting its codes of dress and behavior and its living habits. Throughout a self-defined residency in which she lives and interacts with these people, Lee has herself photographed—by a friend who accompanies her, by a member of her adopted social group, or even by a passing stranger to whom she hands her point-and-shoot camera. The photographs documenting Lee’s effort to blend into these communities at first appear to be crude snapshots, replete with date stamp and flash-triggered red eye. Closer scrutiny reveals their visual and intellectual sophistication, their raw, uncanny ability to represent the complexity and fluidity of human identity.

Of all of the series to emerge from Lee’s enterprise, *The Yuppie Project* is arguably the most significant. For several months in 1998, Lee navigated through a world of young Wall Street professionals. While these photographs play on certain stereotypes—they depict a preppy, moneyed world peopled with fresh-faced, all-American WASPs—the clichés Lee tries to inhabit also make visible a racial category that has, for the most part, remained invisible in American culture: whiteness. It is rare for any work of art to represent whiteness per se, for we live in a culture in which whiteness is so much the norm that it does not have to be named.¹ In *The Yuppie Project*, Lee captures the dress, the gestures, and the eating, work, and leisure-time habits of people who do not have to think about their skin color or the power it affords them. They work for the top stock brokerage houses and banks. They lunch at the chic World Financial Center. They work out at the upscale Equinox gym. They pamper themselves with pedicures, massages, and shopping trips to expensive clothing stores. They go out drinking with other traders, financial analysts, and money managers. And, in almost every shot, they wear their power and privilege as comfortably as their smartly tailored clothes.

Lee’s ability to make whiteness visible represents an important strategy in contemporary American culture. While people of color routinely evaluate the status of their skin color in relation to the prejudice they experience, white people are under no obligation or constraint to acknowledge, let alone examine, their whiteness. It is precisely this refusal to name whiteness, to assign it meaning, that frees white people from seeing their complicity in the social, cultural, and historical economy of racism. The sociologist Ruth Frankenberg has suggested that the first step in getting white people to think about racism is for them to recognize their whiteness. “It may be more difficult for white people to say, ‘Whiteness has nothing to do with me—I’m not white’ than to say, ‘Race has nothing to do with me—I’m not a racist,’” she observes. “To speak of whiteness is . . . to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism.”²

*The Yuppie Project* assigns its white subjects a place in the relations of racism by presenting whiteness in two significant ways. On one level, these images of light-skinned, straight-haired Wall Streeters resonate with the signs of affluence and exclusivity. Their body language is assured and cocky; they wear expensive...
clothes; they display the rituals and camaraderie of the country-club. And people of color are nearly absent from the scenes. On another, more disturbing level, whiteness is represented through the alienation or displacement that it sometimes causes in others. Lee does not depict her white subjects as overtly bigoted or malevolent, but the underlying racial tensions of her Wall Street experience slip into almost every frame of The Yuppie Project. In most of her other series, it is difficult to distinguish Lee from her newly adopted friends and colleagues, so extraordinary is her talent for blending in and the willingness of communities to indulge her. But she never quite fits into the yuppie milieu. Though she masquerades in the fashions, make-up, and body language of white yuppies, her Asianness and her visceral discomfort read as distinctly as their whiteness. Her face is especially revealing, registering the unmistakable signs of sorrow and even despair. In a scene that underscores the sense of isolation that some people of color feel in this environment, Lee escapes the whiteness of Wall Street to dine with another Asian financial drone in The Yuppie Project (18). Unlike the self-assured, camera-ready white people she photographs for the series, her companion neither smiles nor looks at the camera. Instead, he looks down at his plate.

In the end, however, whiteness is no more monolithic or immutable for Lee than any other identity. In the series’ final image, The Yuppie Project (30), the artist, dressed in a dark-blue suit and pearls, is seen in a bookstore, holding a copy of Peter J. D’Adamo’s bestselling diet book, Eat Right 4 Your Type. Perhaps more than any other book in recent years, Eat Right 4 Your Type has popularized the idea that race, ethnicity, and gender may not be the best predictors of emotional or physical health. D’Adamo concludes that blood type—which crosses the traditional boundaries of identity, testifying to centuries of migration and miscegenation—is the most important indicator of how we tolerate certain foods and avoid illnesses. In D’Adamo’s thinking, blood—and by extension whiteness itself—are as fluid as water. This idea serves as a subtle, ironic coda to Lee’s disquieting journey into the heart of white privilege, a world in which whiteness is fiercely protected but is always blissfully, expediently invisible.

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