

From Identity Politics to Identification Studies

Kelly A. Gates, **Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance**, New York: NYU Press, 2010, 261 pp., \$24.00 (paperback).

Evelyn Fox Keller, **The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 107 pp., \$14.96 (paperback).

Jackie Stacey, **The Cinematic Life of the Gene**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 326 pp., \$23.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
D. Travers Scott
Clemson University

Today, identity politics seems almost quaint. Faded into memory are NEA funding battles and culture wars over representations of identities, dismantling of identity-based social programs such as college admissions and affirmative action, and the spawning of an all-purpose, anti-progressive code phrase, “politically incorrect.” Moreover, scholars, particularly those working in critical/cultural areas, have theorized identity away in a multitude of ways: combining categories into hybrids and cyborgs, challenging its liberal humanist assumptions, critiquing its biases, tracing its processes of discursive constitution, queering its dualisms, and envisioning its aftermath in a post-identity world. Identity—at least insofar as an authentic expression of some aspect of inner self from which to build coalitions—seems to have had its moment in the sun, now safely tucked into a thematic week or two on syllabi or a chapter in a textbook: a familiar, but not terribly new or exciting topic.

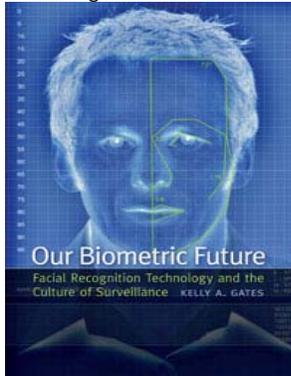
While identity proclamations of “I am/we are” may seem passé, consider their contemporary significance when reconceived as “you are.” In the killing of Osama bin Laden, visual identification was the “moment of triumph” in the near decade-long War on Terror (Sherer, 2011, headline). News coverage detailed how his photograph was taken and uploaded for computerized facial recognition analysis, biological samples were taken for DNA identification, and one of his wives identified his body. An ensuing debate questioned the release of gory postmortem photographs that might assure the world of the accuracy of these identifications (Mazzetti, Cooper, & Baker, 2011). Identity is still the key component in processes of identification, and they are more relevant than ever. The National Institutes of Mental Health recently shifted funding priorities to genetics research, and Lady Gaga pleads that her little monsters were simply “Born This Way.”

Identification—through genetics, faces, networks, and other attributes—is central to many current areas of scholarly concern, particularly for communication scholars: surveillance, citizenship, race, gender, and sexuality, consumerism, new media, and social movements. Three new books in cultural studies of science and technology offer productive insights by examining the conceptual and material tools of identification processes, rather than the familiar focus on a particular identity. For, as with bin Laden, identification must be convincing. These scholars explore how technologies of identification are made

Copyright © 2011 (D. Travers Scott, dscott3@g.clemson.edu). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

convincing, from the varied approaches of documenting their social construction, deconstructing their popular imaginary, and unearthing a historical genealogy. Together, they demonstrate that identity studies—the scholarly version of identity politics—are alive and well, reconceptualized as identification studies.

Kelly Gates, assistant professor in the Department of Communication and the Science Studies Program at the University of California at San Diego, offers in her first book a critical historiography of



facial recognition and expression analysis technologies. The book is somewhat misleadingly titled, as it is, aside from a few brief speculative moments, not about “our biometric future” but the process of constructing our biometric present. Thoroughly researched and theoretically informed, Gates’ book documents the development of her technologies of interest and the ideologies supporting them. Gates frames her book with the airport surveillance video of two of the 9/11 hijackers, purportedly a missed opportunity for identification used to support further development of facial recognition technologies. Yet, Gates clearly documents that these technologies have never really worked as well as claimed. It is the building and sustaining of this belief, however, that is the focus of her book. She also demystifies the technologies themselves through clear explanation of their many complex components. Gates outlines the rise of

computer networking in the latter twentieth century within the contexts of globalization and neoliberalism, creating needs for identification of disembodied users, citizens, and others acting and transacting on these networks. After describing foundational and prototypical experiments in computer research, she moves into commercial development and marketing, with a particularly strong chapter on the first municipal deployment of facial recognition technology, across a police closed-circuit television network in the Ybor City neighborhood of Tampa, Florida. The effort is abandoned after a controversial two-year trial netting not a single identification. Yet, through analysis of its public debates and the vendor’s marketing campaign, Gates clearly demonstrates the effort put into understanding and applying this technology. This, in turn, reveals the strongest argument of her book: that technologies are never natural or inevitable, and therefore open to change.

Gates examines more recent developments, such as the emphasis on facial recognition and related technologies in the War on Terror and the racial dimensions of database construction. Consumer applications, such as the Faces feature in Apple’s iPhoto or photo tagging on Facebook, she argues, trade rewards of personal identity management for the free labor of building visual databases. Such processes help constitute users as “tech-savvy citizens” and habituate them to these processes. In a chapter on the automated recognition of facial expressions, Gates builds a provocative case for considering how the reconceptualizations of emotional expression necessary for such technologies to work (standardization, indexicality, mobility, disembodiment) could, once widely adopted, impact conceptualizations of other social relations. As she and the other authors here demonstrate, identification’s fundamental distinctions of sameness and difference are unstable and dynamic concepts requiring great effort to render neat, tidy, simple, and natural. Moreover, as Gates makes clear, in their application to concepts of freedom and security, they become entangled with hierarchies of exclusion.

Throughout, Gates avoids determinism (technological, biological, or cultural) and hyperbole. Her work is engaged with excellent scholarship in technology and media studies, such as Jonathan Sterne, Lisa Nakamura, Mark Andrejevic, Donna Haraway, and John Durham Peters, networking her analysis to historic and contemporary conversations. However, while *Our Biometric Future* is theoretically informed, it represents more of an application than an advancement. Gates offers facial recognition and related technologies as a new topic to which theorizations of neoliberalism, affect, surveillance, labor, interactivity, visibility, and other phenomena are aptly applied. The book does not, however, advance major new thinking about these theories, or the technologies under review, unlike, for example, John E. McGrath's (2004) work on the progressive and transgressive uses of surveillance. Ultimately, it is still an excellent example of the demystifying and denaturalizing work done by studies documenting the social construction of technology.

Jackie Stacey's book on cinematic representations of genetics takes a sympathetic but reverse approach by deconstructing popular beliefs. In her dissection of the "genetic imaginary," this noted feminist film scholar, professor of Mass Media and Cultural Studies at England's University of Manchester, builds upon her previous cultural study of cancer (1997) with another biomedical topic, cloning. Here, the examination of identification deals less with specific categories (criminals, terrorists, friends) and more with broader distinctions of sameness and difference, self and other. Particularly when viewed through the Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective she often employs, such distinctions are the fundamental unit of identification. Through close readings of six films, augmented by theoretical chapters, Stacey deconstructs anxieties and fantasies underpinning the "decade of the clone," beginning in 1995 with the first successful cloning of a major mammal, Dolly the sheep.



The Cinematic Life of the Gene argues that the films demonstrate recent crises of identification spurred by the concept and practice of cloning, as well as related genetic technologies, such as DNA analysis and embryonic genetic engineering. Representing Hollywood, independents, and artists, it offers a cross-section of cultural texts from a medium that she argues fundamentally parallels the ontological anxieties that cloning provokes. Cinema's destabilizations of self/other, stillness/motion, presence/absence, individual/collective, original/copy, and reality/image, are so powerful due to how they resonate, ultimately, with life and death—as does the genetic imaginary. "No other medium or practice [besides cinema] shares the animating project of genetic science that, in promising to generate life, endlessly reminds us of the prospect of death" (p. 270).

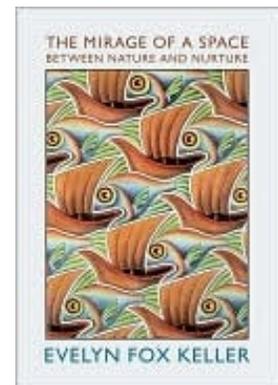
Stacey argues persuasively for the primacy of cinema in understanding genetic anxieties. This is a cinema studies book, relying exclusively on textual analysis and theoretical argument. It should be appreciated on those terms and is not recommended to those uncomfortable with them. Stacey's book engages deeply with feminist, film, and social theorists, such as Butler, Baudrillard, de Lauretis, and Lacan, applying and advancing their work in intriguing ways. For example, she advances Walter Benjamin's famous loss of aura for art in the age of mechanical reproduction to a loss of "bio-aura" in the age of cloning, providing a rare, stimulating, precise, and potentially productive engagement with a somewhat ubiquitous and overworked theoretical concept.

Stacey's eye for detail in reading these films is precise and illuminating, richly enhancing appreciation of them and spurring a desire to see them again. There are, however, a few surprising missed opportunities: If describing queer visions of kinship in *Gattaca*, why no mention of the casting and performance of queer icon Gore Vidal as the murderous father-figure? Also, if investigating sameness and difference, the central role those concepts play in musical experience would seem to beg for more engagement with soundtracks and filmic sound studies. Also, some substantial comparison to cloning-related films from earlier decades, such as *Parts: The Clonus Horror*, *The Boys From Brazil*, *The Creator*, and *The Resurrection of Zachary Wheeler*, would have been interesting.

While provocative and intellectually satisfying, *The Cinematic Life of the Gene* seems to lack a larger argument. The tensions and ambivalences Stacey describes are insightful, but they ultimately do not offer a new way of thinking about the book's subject matter. Unlike other film scholarship, such as Susan Jeffords' (1994) connection of 1980s action movies to Reagan-era masculinity, Carol Clover's (1992) feminist reassessment of slasher films through her "Final Girl" heroine, or Linda Williams' (1989) groundbreaking analysis of pornography, Stacey's book did not leave me thinking differently about cloning, genetics, or cinema, or their connections to other social phenomena. That cloning unsettles our subjective experience of self and other(s) is not particularly surprising, but her book does provide a very rich and deep survey of this unsettled state.

Stacey suggests that language fails to capture the profound disturbances of the genetic imaginary. Perhaps, then, language is another route for investigating identification, as in Evelyn Fox Keller's linguistic historiography, *The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture*. A foundational writer in feminist science and technology studies, Keller is now professor emerita of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at MIT. This brief volume examines and ultimately dismisses a conceptual flaw driving so many identity conflicts.

Although all three books take note of Donna Haraway's concept of "gene fetishism," Gates and Stacey would have been enriched by Keller's fundamental insights from genetic history and contemporary science. Stacey's analysis of life and death in genetic cinema, and the power of the genetic imaginary, would only have been enriched by addressing that the gene itself is dying, as a concept. As Keller explains, recent science has demonstrated that the processes by which traits are passed on are so complexly entangled with interacting phenomena that the concept of a single discrete unit that solely carries a specific trait—a gene—is being abandoned. Gates' robust historical grounding of an indexical relationship between face, facial image, and innate characteristics, whether debunked in physiognomy or resuscitated in facial recognition technologies, would have been all the more denaturalized with Keller's research. Keller shows that a distinction between nature and nurture—the bridging of which motivates Gates' objects of study—is a relatively recent phenomenon, one Keller dates to the development of particulate genetic theories by Francis Galton in the 1870s. My point is not to argue for the superiority of Keller's approach, but to point out the entangled and mutually informative approaches possible to explore complex and important research topics, such as identification.



In addition to tracing the origins of this cleavage between nature and nurture, Keller clarifies several ways of thinking about them. Drawing on Ned Hall's work, she deftly demonstrates how to think of biology and culture not as separate contributors to identity, but mutually entangled sources that are inseparable. She clarifies fundamental conflations and ambiguities in the language and literature of genetics, such as the difference between traits and trait differences—the conflated presumption that a gene is responsible for not only a trait (e.g., height) but also a difference in that trait among people (e.g., a family or racial group being distinctively tall or short). In other words, the gene was mistakenly understood as determining both an attribute and its degree of variation. The same gene that tells your body to grow tall or grow hair is conflated with the process of growing more or less taller than others or growing hair of a particular shade. Similarly confused have been the two definitions of heritability: a popular meaning as the ability of something to be passed down through generations of individuals, and a technical meaning of statistical measurements of variance across populations. Keller traces linguistic slippages and resultant conceptual confusions through popular and scientific literature, arguing that such imprecision lies at the heart of nature/nurture misunderstandings and debates. It is a convincing argument, thoroughly researched and well argued, and appealing in its simplicity. (It is also perhaps questionable whether this offers a historical, material corrective to or a path back toward poststructuralist philosophies' potentially paralyzing emphases on language.)

Keller's own prose is, as always, direct and lucid. Of the three books, this one could be most widely and productively applied in undergraduate and graduate classes, from cultural studies and science and technology studies, to gender studies and the history of science. However, given how much her topic pertains directly to contemporary social issues—gay marriage, racial profiling and incarceration, surveillance—it is surprising how little she addresses specific political issues and struggles. Perhaps this was an intentional strategy to make the book more widely applicable, although that seems a strange choice from a feminist scholar. Ultimately, it does not undermine the book, and definitely provides a ripe starting point for classroom discussion.

Cumulatively, the discourses, texts, and technologies of identification explored in these books evoke the work of another science and technology scholar, Karen Barad. A trained physicist and now a professor of feminist studies and history of consciousness and philosophy at the University of California Santa Cruz, Barad proposes (2007) a theoretical and philosophical worldview she calls "agential realism." Among its many provocations, too numerous to detail here, the most relevant would be reconceiving the world as a universe of entangled processes and practices, not separate objects and things. Such a deceptively simple shift—from a world of nouns to one of verbs—reframes many of the tensions, conflicts, and confusions that the authors discussed here tackle. Indeed, it makes separations such as nature/nurture and self/other untenable.

While not explicitly cited, this is the shift effected by these three authors: from the thing of presumed stable and fixed identity to the mobile and interacting processes of identification. As the War on Terror shifts into a new, unknown phase, marked again by a momentous act of identification burned into the national psyche, such work remains more urgent than ever.

References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Clover, C. (1992). *Men, women, and chain saws: Gender in the modern horror film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jeffords, S. (1994). *Hard bodies: Hollywood masculinity in the Reagan era*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Mazzetti, M., Cooper, H., & Baker, P. (2011, May 2). Behind the hunt for bin Laden. *The New York Times*. Retrieved May 2, 2011, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/03/world/asia/03intel.html?hp>
- McGrath, J. E. (2004). *Loving Big Brother: Performance, privacy and surveillance space*. New York: Routledge.
- Sherer, M. (2011, May 2). Moment of triumph: 'Visual on Geronimo.' *Time.com*. Retrieved May 3, 2011, from <http://swampland.time.com/2011/05/02/inside-the-situation-room-weve-idd-geronimo>
- Stacey, J. (1997). *Teratologies: A cultural study of cancer*. New York: Routledge.
- Williams, L. (1989). *Hard core: Power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible."* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.