



Review

Who Are Us Anyway? Dr. Strange Gets Weird

Book Review: *Beyond Identities: Human Becomings in Weirding Worlds, Volume 7*, SpringerNature

Book Author: Jim Dator

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(The title of this review is something of an inside joke, which will now be ruined by having to explain it. The faculty offices at the University of Hawai'i where Jim Dator taught, like many elsewhere, would have various bits of usually humorous print matter stuck on their doors. Jim's featured a sticker of an early Marvel comic depiction of Dr. Strange, which was seen as apt, given his exotic specialization and unique look. It remained there, as far as I know, for his entire residence in that office. I don't know who stuck it there, but I assume that if he didn't do it himself, he didn't mind it being there at all.)

This reviewer has found that many who engage in this form unwittingly or wittingly frame the commentary within their own world views, even to the point of making their review more about them than about the piece they're supposed to be reviewing. Of course, any review should come those with authority on, familiarity with the topic being discussed. This review is challenging because Dr. Dator was my dissertation chair, and much of his early experience in Japan, recounted in his first chapter, paralleled mine in all aspects save the times spent there. This reviewer will resist turning this into an asynchronous dialogue over our personal experiences in a genuinely wide world, and focus on the actual topic of identity which I can claim expertise from a developmental psychology perspective. Ultimately, there are the foresight/futures studies communities to speak to through this review and how this book might be useful for them from a seminal figure in our field.

Between Eric Erickson's "Identify Crisis", and Joseph Campbell's "Heroic Journey", are innumerable narratives of questing leading to personal transformation. Dator recounts his own confrontation with identity in the first chapter, in which his experiences as a "gaijin" (literally outside person) in 1960s Japan. While there he would learn what every foreigner would confront there and to some lesser extent everywhere, that no matter how long one resides in Japan, and how fluent one becomes in language and ways, one will always be treated as a young child, often asked if they knew how to use chopsticks. One will often hear the phrase, "我々に" translated as, "we Japanese"; the speaker assuming the role of mouthpiece for the entire culture when speaking about its ways. The experience there probably influenced his quirks in apparel and hairstyle that would later become his brand. These personal habits such as never wearing a tie and his signature "Beatle"-style hair were not a calculated blow against the empire of conformity to the academic role, but a self-aware lifestyle choice. Keeping a look over several decades as being noteworthy underscores how fluid our identifies otherwise tend to be over our respective stages of life, facelifts notwithstanding. Even the Beatles left the Beatle cut behind.

In the second chapter Dator moves from the individual to the social where the dialectical tensions between comfortable and fixed stereotypes and their various contradictions that ultimately drive dynamic social change are brought into relief. It is here in the nexus of cognition and sense-making that we are subject to an illusion of a reified reality in which we tend to anchor ourselves. As philosopher Alan Watts observed, and Dator restates, any given noun can be treated as a verb. A tree is "treeing", and the world is "worlding", thus reframing perceptions of

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an environment of hard stuff into fluid process. Crucially, for this book, its core thesis addresses how we are always “personing” in which perceptions of oneself shifts over time with roles, and appearances in style signifying who one is at any given time. It addresses the paradox of socially ascribed identities and those to which an individual may come to assert as their own. These often contradictory identities confound conventional social science, which is devoted to tracking norms, exemplified by its principal methodological approach being regression to the mean, in sharp contrast to psychology, especially abnormal psychology, which is enthralled by deviation and thus embraces analysis of variance (two sides of the same differential calculus coin). Both methods are consumed by categorization, which, like mythmaking, is a way to simplify the world and thus make it comprehensible. Dator challenges these conventions exemplified by the chapter title: “Identities Don’t Identify”.

This fluidity shows up in the clash of norms between cultures, where Dator writes that such assumed principles around social relations such as “the golden rule” may operate just fine in proximate homogeneous communities with more or less common values. However, this breaks down where value priorities may differ widely. While in Korea in the late 1970s, this reviewer asked his graduate students (96 percent male and as culturally homogeneous as they come) if there were any homosexual Koreans. The response was a uniform, and forceful “no” with a tone of indignance at the very thought of such a thing. This despite there being a flamboyant celebrity fashion designer and high-profile media darling, Andre Kim, flaunting a look that approached that of Liberace. Fast-forward 30 years and the entertainment district of Itaewon (recent scene of a Halloween night tragedy, a holiday introduced by the Americans), had not one but two trans bars on its main street. The point is that notions of cultural self-identity are also fluid as is any artificial construct even when previous beliefs of homogeneity were fiercely held.

Scholars should maintain an acute awareness that scientific theory, like literary myths, are, at heart, simplifications of the world and that skepticism is a foundational principle of the philosophy of science. One need not look any further than the embrace of eugenics by intellectuals, medical professionals, and policymakers at the turn of the twentieth century, an extension of that other perversion, social Darwinism. Our paradigms are shaped by the worlds we are immersed in. As Jeremy Rifkin noted in his book *Algeny, Darwin*, while never an advocate of eugenics, or social Darwinism generally, still framed evolution as the survival of the fittest. Too many subsequently interpreted this phrase as implying that there is a standard for viability that somehow rationalizes laissez-faire social policies personified by the Charles Dickens Ebenezer Scrooge character. Darwin, for his part, transposed the sooty streets of industrial England and the struggles of its poor as conforming to the desolate black cindered hellscape that he witnessed on the volcanic Galapagos Islands. It gave license to the rising British middle classes to dismiss the plight of the impoverished as being obvious flaws in their ability to compete effectively manifested in their physical sicknesses, ignorance, weakness for drink, or perceived overall indolence. Dickens’ Ebenezer Scrooge initial attitudes were broadly held in industrial England. As historians well know, there is a thin line between explanation and justification. In that vein, Dator’s book should be read as one himself immersed in a world he came to express in its pages with brilliant perspective.

Futures studies scholars and foresight professionals may have particular exposure to expanded notions of human identity plasticity with so many of their ranks coming from different cultures with many-varied value systems unconsciously insinuated into their practices. Their respective professions have also been informed by shifts from what used to be well-known and long-held attitudes around gender identification, once formally categorized as perversions and psychological illnesses by no less an authority as the American Psychological Association. This reorientation is now applied to certain disabled communities, once deemed sufficiently inferior as to be sterilized out of the belief that this would lead to progression of the species. This eugenicist ideology was again, a profound perversion of Darwinism that actually confirmed that the natural world is marked by diversification of life forms. It is hard for medical professionals to resist the impulse to treat the disabled as carrying a debilitating condition and reel them back into near-normality to the extent that they can. Don’t for a second think that futurists are immune from similar impulses to confuse their preferred futures as best for the rest.

The latter half of the book is vintage Dator. There are chapters that deal with all manner of “weak signals” portending species transformation. While these are not of immediate concern, the likelihood of post-human futures is worth assessing in the here-and-now. This, of course, includes genetic manipulation, already underway, at least for now, in service to nutrition, medicine and criminal forensics. What Dator, ever the provocateur, dwells on at some length, is how this will eventually, but sooner than we think, lead to outfitting our species for extraterrestrial

habitation. This portends the ultimate shift in human identity to something although “sooner than we think”, is still well over a generation away.

More down to earth anticipations that are clearly trending involve artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithm-driven decision making generally, now ubiquitous in everything from self-driving cars to sports refereeing. Dator notes there are natural areas for automated decision-making impeded by economic and political forces. Judiciaries are an obvious example of systems that could be algorithm driven. The vast majority of rulings are routine and with sentencing guidelines making the system already semi-automated. Given that the equal application of the law is so distorted by inequities that loss of confidence in the judiciary as an institution might necessarily come to see full automation to effectively function at all. Automated medical decision making may not be far behind for much the same reasons. Again, diagnoses and treatment for many conditions in most instances, is already semi-automated with numerous tracking apps already available with more in the queue that read and interpret findings that are automatically delivered to patients. Our most recent pandemic experience has only intensified with virtual physician “office visits” becoming a norm even now. Thus, the relationship between the doctor as physical being to a collective algorithm. Given that most interactions with medical professionals are usually with nurses and on-line medical sites, the distance between healer and patient is closer than ever, while, at the same time, the distance between physician and patient is more distant than ever.

Dator’s take on “family” as a source of identity is ambivalent; written through the lens of contemporary America where powerful extended kinship networks, found in many if not most non-Western cultures, is virtually non-existent. It is true that emigration from places where these traditional bonds remain, tend to dissolve, supplanted by the Euro-American values of their new homes. The first-generation immigrants may cling to tradition, but their sons and daughters often straddle the worlds of their parents and those of the communities in which they seek assimilation. This is particularly true with the flight of young, mostly male migrants, whose movement from hearth and home have become a new rite of passage. The American middle-class equivalent has been the infinitely less hazardous, but equally transformative marked by going to college, where the friendships forged there often rise to the level of surrogate family. Other, non-college pathways to alternative family include joining gangs, cults, or the military where each can have such powerful influences that devotees of each might sacrifice their own lives in service to their new brothers and sisters. At the end of the day, “family” is still with us. It is just far less likely to be defined by blood.

To be clear, this book is a memoir; a compilation of pieces loosely organized around identity formation, proliferation, disintegration and reinvention. Its contribution to the foresight/futures studies communities comes in articulating the dynamics of who we are becoming as a species and in urging anticipation of transforming and hopefully transcending forms. It is consistent with Dator’s second law of futures studies that states; “Any credible idea of the future must appear ridiculous. This takes us to the threshold of transhumanism, a familiar subfield within the foresight/futures studies communities that few others, save for a few science fiction writers, speculate about. The pathways are well beyond the pop notions of androids, cyborgs or pharmaceutically enhanced, though that latter prospect is already on the horizon and recognized as a bioethical concern. For all of us the questions are less about their suppression (a practice indulged by sports bodies all the time with mixed results), but rather around equitable distribution. Certainly, the enhancement confined to an elite few or used to endow “super-soldiers” is problematic, yet real, and may have to come under similar international treaty-level controls established for biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. Similarly, we should anticipate that a significant number of people to opt out; a scenario already being played out among anti-vaxers.

By surveying the breadth and depth of transformations, cultural, legal, social and technological; framed by his own rich life experiences, Dator provokes us all to think about and ultimately rethink our assumed notions of identity and ever shifting senses of self. As the peaking digital and rising biotech revolutions continue to unfold, this process of assessment and reassessment among bioethicists becomes ever more salient. Any mature reader will find resonance in the radical changes that have come to pass in the space of a single generation even as we have come to normalize them. Dator forces us to gaze upon our assumptions and allegedly fixed values, making a compelling case for considering and preparing for the even weirder transformations to come.