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2013

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Recommended Citation

This article was originally published as Castner, J. (2013). A cosmic journey from English Lit to Big History. *Metanexus: Big History, Big Problems, Big Question* under a Creative Commons 3.0 United States License

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An English Major's Revelation: Dominican's Big History Summer Institute

By Jaime Castner

Perhaps English majors are predisposed to appreciate Big History. After all, the epic of our universe is just that: an epic. The longest story ever told. My introduction to Big History came in my last year as an undergraduate at Dominican University of California, when I was given the unique opportunity to provide staff support for the world's first general education program with Big History as its content. The program director, Dr. Mojgan Behmand, was a former literature professor of mine. She was enthused about this new General Education overhaul and I was curious—and trepidatious. I had never heard the term “Big History” and the idea of history getting any larger admittedly terrified me. (I have never been handy at remembering dates and capitals.) The first step Dr. Behmand took in actualizing the First Year Experience “Big History” program was to organize the first Big History Summer Institute to ever take place on planet Earth, the solar system, the Milky Way Galaxy, the Universe. You get the idea: it was a novel concept. The Big History Summer Institute at Dominican is a five-day intensive seminar for college faculty that spans the 13.7 billion years of our collective history with sample lectures and engaged learning exercises delivered by a range of experts. It is five blissful days of being a student again. The fourth annual Institute is upcoming June 17th to 21st, 2013, on our campus in sunny San Rafael, California. (Visit <http://www.dominican.edu/academics/big-history/summer-institute> to learn more and submit an application.) In my second week of work for Dr. Behmand I attended the Institute, and my life as an English major would never be the same.

As a college senior nearing her final semester, what I did not realize at the time but have ascertained through reflection is that I was effectively the first Dominican student to take the Big History course; thus, I was the first Dominican student to experience its potential for support of contingent, critical, transdisciplinary thinking, and its unique ability to situate a young person in the physical and conceptual “now.” Supporting the Big History Summer Institute and Dominican’s core faculty has become more to me than a job; it has become a guiding force in my formal education and development as an active citizen. Now, as I pursue a graduate degree in the Humanities, the influences of Big History on my field of study continue to crystallize. Allow me to explain how this is so.

For the twenty-first century college student, fragmentation of knowledge and hyper-specialization are educational traps, but the Big History Summer Institute has required me to step back from my field and explore its contingencies. In fact, discovering Big History at the close of my undergraduate education was not ideal and the Big History program at Dominican is a First Year Experience for good reason. In addition to its purpose of developing key skills and offering our freshmen a collective intellectual journey, the establishment of what Dr. Behmand has referred to as a “scaffold for future knowledge” is a key function of the program. In a perfect world, like all current Dominican students, I would have met Big History as a freshman.

Still, learning Big History content through the Summer Institute, even at this juncture in my education, was a revelation. As a student of literature I have always been drawn to

very old stories, stories that have evolved like life forms over the millennia and still influence how humans understand their humanness. In response to Big History, for my undergraduate thesis I traced the journey of Shakespeare's Henry V, loosely based on Plutarch's Alexander, through his countless iterations and up to the present day. This scrappy, under-aged, surprisingly mutable persona has been presented strategically through the ages to inspire the dejected masses. Did you know that Churchill enlisted Laurence Olivier to put Henry V on the silver screen "to prepare the nation psychologically for the D-Day landings in Normandy?"ⁱ

Indeed, the emergence of language and symbolic thinking on the Big History timeline has led me to consider an unconventional set of questions in my field: How has language—the ability to communicate symbolically—shaped or even skewed the human reality? Is storytelling what makes our species unique? How will language continue to evolve in the near, middle, and remote futures? Big History inspires me to explore my passion in a larger context. It encourages me to trace contingencies and observe my subject on a broader timeline. If we can do just that as a global community, might we find ourselves closer to overcoming our common threats?

The challenge with viewing things in a large context is reconciling opposing truths and missing knowledge. In Big History, we learn there are thousands of competing creation stories describing the origin of our universe, and each of them falls short of answering questions like "what was there before there was everything?" or "why did life emerge?"—especially the scientific narrative. Big History demands critical thinking and

asks us to become comfortable with ambiguity. And while this is frustrating, it is a valuable lesson. In my graduate work I have become increasingly disturbed by other students conflating author and speaker, or allowing an author's biography to inform a reading of his text. Bear with me; this does come to a point. When we become satisfied with an easy answer based on available information—say, that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a simple allegory of loss of innocence stemming from the death of the author's own son, Hamnet—we miss out on themes of corruptive power, inescapable fate, madness, sex, and vengeance, among others. This is a simplistic English major's example, but it serves to underscore how the skill of critical investigation acquired in Big History is transferable to a variety of disciplines. With all we have yet to learn about the origin of life, deep space, genetics, (even Richard III!), we cannot afford to stop questioning. Big History asks us to question the accepted, and we do best to concede.

This brings me to another aspect of the Big History Summer Institute that for me has been particularly impactful: when instructors actually walk the walk of transdisciplinarity, when they actively demonstrate collaboration with peers, they model the very spirit they seek in their students. Dominican's core Big History faculty includes instructors from a broad range of disciplines, including art history, biology, philosophy, literature, studio art, religion, and health sciences, to name a few. As a student struggling to synthesize four years of disjointed coursework, the collegiality displayed at the Institutes has been remarkably satisfying for me.

In my graduate work, I am now more inclined to explore topics fluidly across the disciplines, and make constant efforts to place my studies in a Big History framework. For example, in a recent reading of Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, I was struck by an outwardly cosmic perspective from a text so old. After all, I know from the Big History Summer Institute that Copernicus and Galileo would not be on the scene for some 1500 years. But Lady Philosophy's poetic allegories are bold reflections on the universe, keen observations of the movements of the Sun, Moon, and stars. Despite Boethius' primitive understanding of our solar system, his speaker feels something I recognize when he catches a glimpse of "the Evening Star...rise cold and clear in early night" through the bars of his dungeon cell: a sense of awe and possibility.ⁱⁱ When we consider this in an archaeoastronomical context, how relevant the cosmos has been to human communities through time—from Ancient Greeks to Native Americans—perhaps this perspective is not so surprising. In the Summer of 2012, Dominican's Institute further expanded to include faculty not just from internal departments but external faculty with diverse interests from as far as Mumbai and Seoul. Thus, the possibilities for cross-pollination of transdisciplinary ideas and perspectives increased tenfold.

This year the First Year Experience "Big History" program collected feedback from its students with a new survey designed by Macquarie University PhD candidate Rich Blundell. The results of this survey were encouraging to our program coordinators, including myself; as a student, they shocked me. In the free-written reflections submitted by our first-semester freshmen I recognized my own experience with the Big History Summer Institute. For example, in response to the question "has Big History changed

your perspective on aspects of the world?”—a statement with which 72% of the surveyed students agreed—one student further remarked: “Before Big History, I was afraid to look up at the night sky because it made me feel small and insignificant. But now, it reminds me that we all have a place in this universe that is linked to everything else.” Yes, indeed! What possibility the skyscape holds for me now that I have Big History on my mind!

And this interconnectedness, this awareness of a network of lateral contingency, is an analogy for all things. The bacterium is a microscopic entity, but its impact can be great. The first fish to leave water changed the course of terrestrial life. And six monosyllabic words—“to be or not to be”—would make a lasting mark on one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Even when we humans feel small, our actions are meaningful. What better way to situate students in the here and now?

In response to the question “has Big History changed the way you see your role in the world,” another surveyed student commented: “I know that I can and should make a difference.” Not just *should*, but *can*. Because the kind of critical, expansive mindset and skills set acquired in the Big History classroom make change possible. I, too, felt this call to arms at the close of Dominican’s 2012 Big History Summer Institute. Our resident Big Historian, Dr. Cynthia Brown, author of *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* and co-author of our textbook *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*, was leading us all in a closing activity called the “Opinion Snake.” Participants arranged themselves physically on a spectrum from “most pessimistic” to “most optimistic” about our

collective future. We stretched across the floor, chatting with neighbors to determine our place in line.

Once in position, each of us shared his or her feelings about impending doom or encouraging upward trends. Most commented on the fear of climate change, human inclinations toward violence and greed, poor access to education, famine, and epidemic illness. But, above all, one sentiment echoed down the line: the Big History Summer Institute had nudged all of us—including this English major—closer to guarded optimism and appreciation of our respective disciplines.

ⁱ Juliet Barker, *Agincourt: Henry V and the Battle that Made England*. (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2005), 362.

ⁱⁱ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. Victor Watts. (London: Penguin, 1999), I:V