

# From Story-Telling to Story-Exchange: A Shared Map to Navigate into the Future

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People who read history books – be it fact or fiction – try to identify and relate their own personal time-frame to the story. This allows them to personally locate themselves in a narrative. A story has the power to help us find connections to the past and find meaning in our present lives. But it is not powerful enough to simply encourage us to collectively act for the distant future, for such action needs exceptional imagination, critical thinking, and a sense of responsibility. Humans understand the world as a story, but we do not often experience our own lives in that large cohesive a narrative. Rather, we create it when we look back on our experiences later. So, our own story is an afterthought

Presently, the impact of human activities on the global environment has become apparent, even leading to the identification of a new time-frame – the ‘Anthropocene.’ So people have to consider the impact of their actions over a more extended duration than their own lives, as well as on a global and even cosmic scale. This issue might be one of the reasons why Big History, which shows humanity’s location in a cosmic context, has been well received by society. But are big-history stories effective in influencing people’s actions?

I studied bioinformatics and systems biology in graduate school. As a researcher, I wondered why we could collectively create various concepts, structure that knowledge, and invent technologies that change the way we see the world and the way we live. After several years of my research career, I am currently involved in a leadership education program for science and technology majors at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. The program is open to students from all majors, and I have noticed that we sometimes have conversations without realizing that we stand on very different assumptions and values.

I am interested in learning about Big History since it provides a common ground for discussing current social and technological issues. Big History attempts to create a narrative based on scientific facts obtained by various disciplines. On the other hand, the ‘interdisciplinary’ departments in academia are often nothing more than a collection of people with different and incompatible views and ideas. My interest in Big History is how efforts to combine multidisciplinary perspectives can lead to meaningful results.

## ***The Shifting Perspectives of Cynthia Brown***

Taking her cue from historian David Christian’s book, *Maps of Time* (2004), historian Cynthia Brown refers to her big-history story a ‘map’ in her last text, *Big History, Small World* (2016). She provides readers with a metaphor of Big History as a map created with the best available and correct information.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Christian, though, she takes her assessment in a different direction and encourages readers to explore possible connections between themselves and a cosmic context. Brown explained why she moved in this direction:

I wanted to write another account of big history  
... I wanted to re-think the story once more, after becoming familiar with the various versions of it and the issues involved in how it is structured and presented.<sup>2</sup>

What issues did Brown see in the various big-history stories, and how did she tackle them in her new book? Unlike her previous work, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (2007), the first noticeable difference is its balance. Both books tell of the ever-changing universe, but human beings emerged early in her narrative in 2007 – in Chapter 3. Humanity appears much later in her 2016 work – in Chapter 8. What happened?! As she wrote, she wanted:

... to put humans in their proper context ... .  
Humans have been around only the tiniest fraction of universe time, and modern life is only a tiny fraction of human life. That is how it looks in a cosmic context.<sup>3</sup>

By being made aware of cosmic time and humanity’s place in it, we can better understand the enormity of how our actions can lead to Earthwide effects and influence our future actions.

Her book also includes two new chapters, sandwiched before and after the familiar big-history narrative. In the first chapter, Brown describes how the scientific narrative

is open to change when new insights and knowledge are discovered.<sup>4</sup> The final chapter shows how science can serve as a shared base across the globe, despite humanity's many divides. In an article published in the IBHA newsletter, *Origins*, she wrote:

The old origin stories that we have inherited culturally are not working productively anymore. To the extent that they are still believed, they separate people and cause social tensions and even warfare. We need a new orienting story that belongs to all human groups around the world.<sup>5</sup>

She accepts multiple narratives, and, compared to other big-history scholars, Brown does not propose replacing religious stories with a big-history narrative.<sup>6</sup> Instead, she encourages readers to talk about it with people around them:

What can you do if you already have a different framework of knowledge, say, from a religious background, which conflicts with this naturalistic, scientific one? ... you can discuss these issues with your teacher and classmates. If you are reading this book by yourself, you can discuss them with your parents, friends, pastor or clergy. Many people find it possible to combine both scientific and religious frameworks.<sup>7</sup>

The results of such dialogues have no simple outcomes. They can, for example, develop other controversies, as in a doubt of the ability to converge natural history and human history<sup>8</sup> Also, many people around the world might have little urge to combine stories into a unified whole, since they are already used to living with multiple narratives. Nonetheless, her open attitude makes Brown's vision more accessible for future developments and discussions.

Scientific discoveries and a body of knowledge in each discipline can potentially change the worldview of the general public. But some concepts are counterintuitive and incorporating them into one's worldview is not straightforward. For this reason, people read popular science books, hoping they can find insights from authors who understand the frontiers of knowledge. However, making sense of the world is different from constructing scientific theories.

Being the best scientist does not mean one is also good at making sense of the world. Popular science can be good at presenting humans in a biological context, but it rarely can do so in a social context. The most potent form for people to make sense of the world is in a story. One of Big

History's potential roles might be in mapping the current social situation in relation to the cosmic context. But some big-historians hesitate to take on this role.

Sociologist Fred Spier 'wants to keep the academic account of big history as free as possible from personal or collective worldviews.'<sup>9</sup> This is reasonable in two ways:

- 1) Only by **not** detailing what Big History should mean in people's lives can we allow it to serve as common ground for many human beings.
- 2) It is difficult, even unwise perhaps, to plant meaning in people's minds from outside. Everyone has their own web of meaning, and to connect it to new knowledge is their job.

Brown adopts Spier's abstentious attitude, but she suggests ways to extract meanings, values, and ethics from Big History, while she shares the meaning she herself has found in it.

Brown's chapter discussions often include: 1) How a group of experts work together to generate knowledge, 2) Questions about the topic's frontier of knowledge, 3) How new understandings relate to general people, and 4) Life stories of people who contributed to significant discoveries. These examples provide a voice for openness and clarify concepts.

For example, descriptions of how a group of experts work together illustrates how a big-history narrative is ever-developing. The life stories of the people who contributed discoveries are colourful and varied, but weave together into one story called Big History. It even serves as an invitation for readers to become actors in the story themselves. In this way, examples clarify concepts through interesting stories.

### **Connectivity: Is Big History a Moving Story?**

Brown shares a fundamental standpoint with other big-historians by carefully keeping to empirical knowledge. It leaves the role of interpreting meaning, values and ethics up to the individual reader. This attitude gives Big History a down-to-earth reality. But, at the same time, it has less power for influencing peoples' lives than traditional mythology or religious stories.

Religious stories and mythologies offer powerful narratives that connect with emotions and supply cultural recognition, models of the world, and day-to-day sensibility. Many have passed through generations and have been edited by society to meet social needs. In a process similar to evolution, they are subject to change and selection. In contrast, the new big-history narrative has not gone through this process. Another reason for its lack of social effective-

ness is that the big-history narrative does not directly speak to peoples' inner experiences. Traditional stories give individuals the strength to live their lives.

Conflict of narratives also can lead to divides between people, with some finding different meanings in the same story. Big History tells of several goldilocks conditions that enabled the transition from threshold to threshold, and, while some find deep meaning in this, others feel that humanity is meaningless in the universe's perspective, because everything is made possible by just a series of coincidences. In some ways, Big History can be seen as too big to be lived.

If Big History is to become a notable story passed down from generation to generation, what form would it take? It would not replace ancient stories by simply grafting itself onto them. And seeking a single over-arching story is also not realistic, or necessary, because people already live with many, sometimes contradictory, stories. Sometimes strong narratives have the power to attract and bond many people, but they can also at the same time create a divide between friends and enemies. We will have to figure out how to link Big History – a story created through the lenses of human perception, from microscopes to telescopes – with other narratives ... in some kind of a web of stories.

It is challenging for a story to create strong enough emotions to motivate people to act for their descendants' benefit in the distant future. The same applies to catastrophes that we cannot plan for, such as nuclear plant accidents, whose probability is estimated very low. We need to admit our limitations and discover a way to imagine the future with more vivid actuality. We humans do not have an answer for this issue yet. For example, climate change has long been raised as a severe planetary issue that calls for global action, but humanity still faces difficulties sharing an awareness of the problem.

### **Conclusion: The Limits of Individual Effort**

For Big History to be a sustainable and powerful story for people around the globe, the encouragement of personal engagement needs to be extended to a more diverse group of people – to the point where we collaboratively exchange and create stories that give the strength to live our lives. It is not easy to feel connected in today's individualized society if we attribute our search for meaning in Big History to just individual efforts.

Current big-history narratives do not penetrate people's inner lives. They lack a community that passes them down from generation to generation. Big History needs to be a collaborative effort, not just the work of individuals trying to figure out what meaning people are trying to find. Therefore, the meanings and wonder we perceive should be expressed to other people and fed back into an individual

story-making process. It will help people being aware of diverse interpretations and future possibilities.

I see an opportunity to do Big History not just for educational programs but also for creating a public space where the stories of multiple individuals can be placed and exchanged. For example, we can try picturing various futures from various cultural and disciplinary perspectives together. Once the various patterns of the future are imagined, people will be able to work backwards to construct a story toward some desired futures, and acquire the motivation to act toward better futures.

### **References**

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### **Endnotes**

1. Brown 2016: 249.
2. Brown 2016-a: xvi
3. Brown 2016-b: xvi, 18.
4. Brown 2016-b: 5.
5. Brown 2016-a.
6. See, for example, Christian 2018.
7. Brown 2016-b: 15–16.
8. See, for example, Hesketh 2014.
9. Brown 2016-b: 246.

