

Origins

Volume IV Number 10

2014 and 2016
IBHA Conferences:
Images and Responses
BH Talking Points



International
Big History
Association

July 15 - 17, 2016

IBHA Conference University of Amsterdam

In 2012 the IBHA convened its first ever conference at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, USA. Over 200 delegates attended a tremendously successful inaugural event, and enjoyed panels, roundtables, keynotes and other presentations on various aspects and



interpretations of Big History. As the images in this edition of *Origins* remind us, the second biennial IBHA conference was held in August 2014 on the beautiful campus of the Dominican University of California, in San Rafael. This time almost 250 delegates attended and enjoyed another outstanding smorgasbord of Big History presentations, including dramatic interpretations and film showings. With a tradition of high quality biennial conferences now firmly established, the Board of the IBHA is delighted to announce that our third conference will be held in the beautiful and historic European city of Amsterdam from July 15 - 17, 2016. This will be the first IBHA conference held outside of the United States, and we are looking forward to working with our colleagues at the University of Amsterdam to stage another unforgettable event. The Conference Planning Committee is already hard at work investigating suitable University of Amsterdam buildings, nearby hotels and hostels (at a range of prices), walking and other pre-conference tours of the city, and a post-conference tour that will visit many of the leading scientific facilities in Europe. Members with an interest in world history might also consider attending the annual conference of the World History Association, which will be held in the Belgian city of Ghent from July 2 to 5, 2016. We will keep all members fully informed as plans for the third IBHA conference evolve, but for now please mark the dates of July 15 - 17 on your calendars, and start planning to join us in Amsterdam in 2016!

2014
IBHA
Conference:
President's
Reception







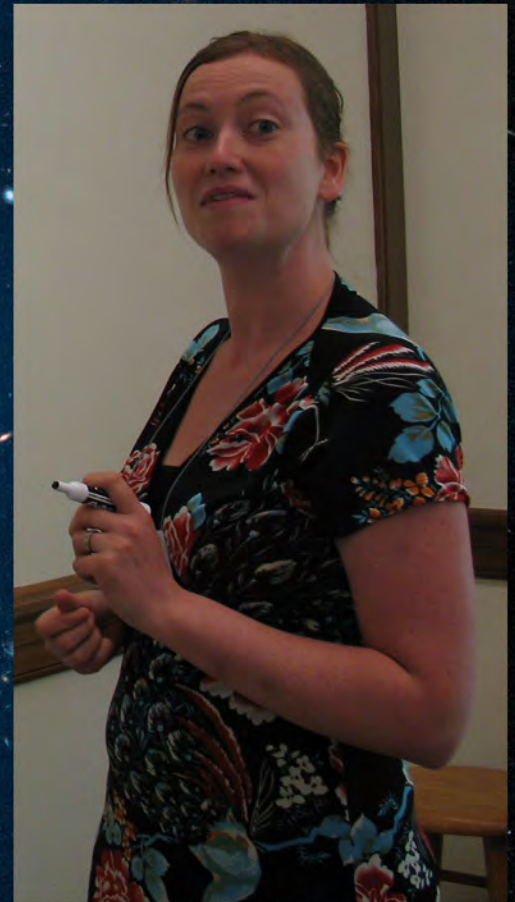




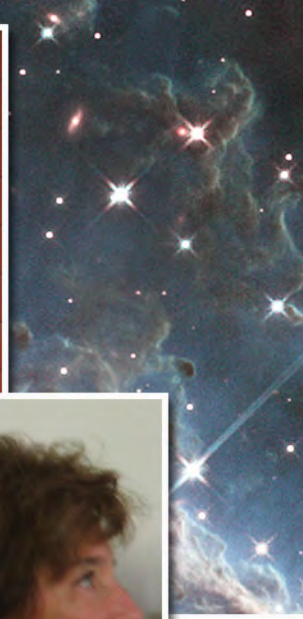


Please click here for video
of David Christian
Plenary Session







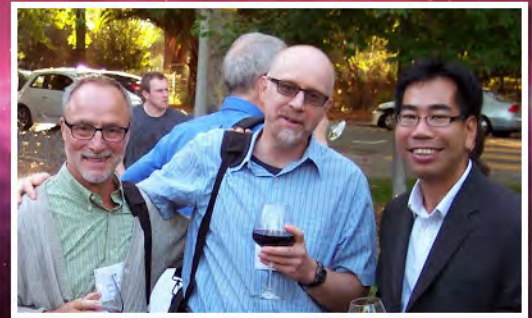


Please click here
for video of Fred
Spier Plenary
Session

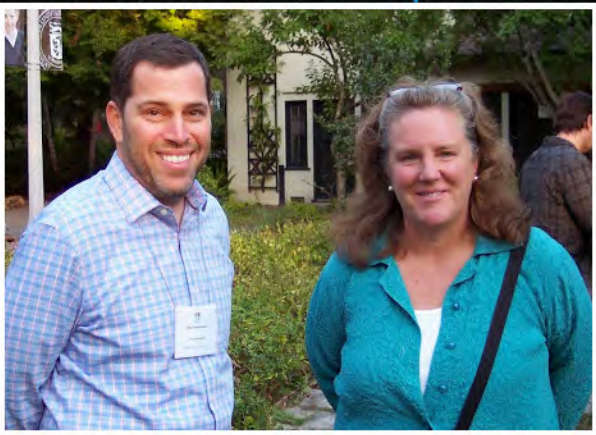














Please pencil in July 15 - 17 as the tentative dates for the 2016 IBtA conference in Amsterdam!



2014 IBHA Conference

Is the IBHA at a Crossroads?

by **Laura Rahm** *Université Paris Descartes*
Gus Lyn-Piluso *Seneca College*

Steve Sisney *Independent Scholar*
and **J. Daniel May** *Dominican University of California*

Dear Prof. Spier, President of the International Big History Association (IBHA), Board members and Associate members,

First and foremost, we would like to thank you for this year's wonderful IBHA conference held on 6-10 August in San Rafael, California on *Teaching and Researching Big History: Big Picture, Big Questions*. The conference was a success thanks to the outstanding organization, powerful presentations, in-depth discussions, and the stunning setting of the Dominican University of California.

During the final session, [board members were asked](#) what they considered doing about conference panels that appear to be using Big History as a platform to promote personal "spiritual" agendas. The initial response was inconclusive. After some clarification, it appeared that the board was not prepared to answer at that time. When the session closed, a small group formed who wanted to pursue a more satisfying response. This letter is the result of the group's discussion.

The IBHA provides a unique platform for interdisciplinary research. It is a novel association, operating in a novel and emerging academic discipline. Its purpose -- as stated in its mission statement -- is to "promote, support and sponsor the diffusion and improvement of the academic and scholarly knowledge of the scientific field of endeavor, commonly known as 'Big History' by means of teaching, researching and engaging in activities related to it." The idea is not only to raise a deeper awareness of our past, but also to help shape the future of our fragile planet.

Interesting times lie ahead as the association and related research expands into a frontier where modern technology -- never before imagined -- enables us to see further and dig deeper into our 13.8 billion-year history.

Big History, by its nature, attracts researchers and scholars from all disciplines as diverse as the natural sciences to the humanities. Such diversity was evident at the conference, particularly during the panel discussion, which followed the screening of *Journey of the Universe*. Reactions to

the movie were ambivalent. For some, it expressed the anthropic notion that the universe has a larger purpose; and tells a "story." For others, the narrative seemed to express a "naive, romantic view" with a "spiritual" interpretation.

The different perceptions were attributed to nuances in the use of language. However, plenary discussions revealed that the divergence had a more profound basis. Viewers seemed to silently split into two camps: scientists and spiritualists (with sympathizers on each side).

As the conference progressed and more panel discussions were held, an increasing number of participants observed that the scientific and scholarly quality of presentations varied significantly. There was confusion, in some presentations, between science and their own personal metaphysical beliefs. In a few cases, presenters used Big History as a format to instrumentalize their own personal agendas. Sub-standard levels of reference, evidence, and supportive data were offered to support unprovable claims. In such cases, the line between science and interpretation was not adequately maintained. Despite the fact that Board members gave a reminder that Big History was not a new religion or spirituality, some participants argued for greater 'meaning'.

As Joseph Voros eloquently stated in the closing discussion, "Big History is a scientific, research-based discipline with core points that are not discussable. Religion and spirituality are not part of the core; however, they are, in and of themselves, legitimate." He argued that although 'meaning' is an important aspect of human experience, we have yet to find evidence of it in the wider universe.

We include here the words of the American politician and sociologist, Daniel P. Moynihan, who said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinions, but not his own facts."

The IBHA is at a crossroads. We have to decide which path to pursue: should it be inclusive and exploratory or more exclusive and rigorous? Each position has positive and negative aspects. An inclusive approach would offer a wide variety of insights and the creativity necessary for a

young organization and discipline to grow. The downside, however, is that the lack of scholarly rigor is likely to dissuade scientific researchers from participating and would undermine the credibility of the association *and* the discipline. Exclusion, on the other hand, implies the risk of creating an isolated, homogenous, and a somewhat detached research environment that may suffer from confirmation bias and inbred development.

This, fortunately, is not an “either/or” situation. With some effort, we may strike a balance between inclusion and innovation, on the one hand, and maintaining a scholarly research focus on the other. In other words, how might we win rigorous hearts *and* adventurous minds?

The following suggestions have been elaborated which may help to resolve this-dilemma:

I. Introduce various formats of participation:¹

In addition to academic research paper submissions, future IBHA conferences could call for: work in progress/posters; PhD research submissions to colloquiums; case study submissions (Little Big Histories); interpretive, speculative, experiential and/or non-academic contributions (see IV below); round table proposals; and exhibitor opportunities.

II. Define requirements in the call for proposals:

- A. Papers should be original and unpublished, and they should be on topics, which are linked, but not limited, to current research foci.
- B. Submissions should include:
 - A one-page research summary.
 - Methodology and expected research results.
 - Empirical evidence, tested, or rational conclusions.²
 - Up to 5 bibliographical references.
 - Author’s CV.

1 For a detailed description of these different formats, visit Academic Conferences and Publishing International at <http://academic-conferences.org/pdfs/submission-types.pdf>.

2 Reference to David Christian’s keynote speech in which he asks: “How do you know something is true? Did your professor tell you? Did you conclude through rational thinking and by excluding other options? Or, did you collect evidence?”

III: Improve selection process through peer review as elaborated by ACPI:³

- “The selection panel of the conference committee will consider all abstracts received by the published deadline to ensure that the proposed submission is relevant to the conference.
- Abstract selection notifications will then be sent out to relevant authors.
- All full papers will be double-blind reviewed by members of the conference committee to ensure an adequate standard, that the proposed subject of their abstract has been followed, that the paper is of a suitable length, the standard of English is adequate, and the paper is appropriately referenced.”

IV. Offer a separate track for interpretation:

- State explicitly that the conference will include rigorous scientific research and spiritual interpretation; and that it will offer some means for attendees to make informed decisions based on the content of the presentations and panel discussions.

Who is writing Big History, is ultimately the key question? For it to have global legitimacy, it needs to be inclusive and scientific. The strength of science is that it can be tested and then retested by other scientists.

To grow Big History, it also needs to be inclusive. Intrinsically, Big History embraces a vast spectrum of disciplines and points of view. There is fertile ground for expansion, but we need greater participation.

It is the board’s task to guide IBHA activities. Board members will decide on academic standards and communicate these. Nonetheless, all IBHA members must help to shape this young organization by enriching it with academic rigor and curiosity to address big questions. The next two years will define us as an organization. This early period holds tremendous opportunities to offer our ideas and work together so that we may take pride in “outing” ourselves as Big Historians!

3 Points III. A. – III. C. are direct quotes from Academic Conferences and Publishing International (ACPI) 2014. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://academic-conferences.org/pdfs/submission-types.pdf>. [Accessed 21 August 2014].

Reply to: Is the IBHA at a Crossroads?

by Fred Spier
President, IBHA

Thank you so very much for openly sharing your concerns about the San Rafael conference as well as your suggestions for future conferences. I very much appreciate that all of you, as young, intelligent, and energetic scholars, have taken up this task.

Your points are well taken, and we would be honored if you would want to participate within the IBHA in the future in turning these suggestions into reality, for instance by joining committees that will be tasked to do these things.

I have a few remarks. Because not all *Origins* readers may have participated in the final session of the conference, here is my very short summary of what happened. The session consisted of a group of big historians, all of them board members or ex-board members, seated up front on the stage in the large Guzman hall, answering questions from the audience. These big historians were: Walter Alvarez, Craig Benjamin, Cynthia Brown, David Christian, Lowell Gustafson, Barry Rodrigue, Fred Spier, and Joe Voros. Almost all of us had been intensively involved in preparing the conference, while most of us had founded the IBHA in Coldigioco, Italy, in 2010.

Ever since we started organizing our 2012 conference, there has been an ongoing discussion among members of the board and the program committees about the question of how inclusive we should be. While considering our response to Laura's pertinent question during the final session, all of us wondered, I think, whether it would be a good idea to start this complicated discussion in public while the conference was about to be wrapped up. But later that night in the hotel lobby we had a more detailed discussion about these things with some of the participants, because I felt that in this situation, the time and place were right.

I very much hope that your letter as well as the discussion that will hopefully follow will contribute to IBHA further pursuing our mission statement with great success, and that, with your help, we will be able to increase our membership with a great many scientists and academics from all the disciplines that have so much contributed to shaping our big history accounts.

Thank you so much again for your excellent contribution, very much appreciated.

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Edgehill  
Mansion,  
Dominican  
University of  
California



# A Visionary, Transformative, Diverse IBHA

Imogene Drummond, M.S.W., M.F.A.

<http://www.imogenedrummond.com/>, <http://www.divinesparks.com/>

Dear IBHA Board and Conference Committee Members,

Thank you for the recent International Big History Association conference. It was extraordinary! I'm delighted to have attended such a stimulating, informative, and thought-provoking event. The IBHA is clearly doing important work. Kudos also to David Christian and company on *The New York Times* feature article "Everything is Illuminated."

In response to Fred Spier's request for feedback at the Closing Plenary Session, I'm sending some thoughts in hopes they may be helpful. I write this drawing upon my experiences as a painter, filmmaker, artist/educator, futurist, author of articles on cultural transformation, and former psychotherapist. While serving on the Alumni Council of the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) for the past 20 years, I worked in an advisory role on several projects, including developing a mission statement, improving logos, and strengthening MICA's brand identity. During that time, under the far-sighted leadership of President Fred Lazarus, MICA grew into one of the country's premier art schools.

What I find compelling about Big History (BH) is that it asks relevant questions using a macro, interconnected lens — thus offering the potential to transform education, make the 21st century more navigable, and the world in which we live more meaningful. The big questions addressed at the conference fascinated me. Also exciting were the presentations' depth and breadth. Although not overtly apparent, I became aware of the existence of "two camps," which I think of as employing scientific and meta-scientific perspectives, and of the possibility of the two camps splitting into separate organizations. I see this situation as an identity issue, not an ideological or scholarly one. I'm writing with the hope that my ideas will aid in resolving this.

Essentially, I think it may be useful to expand IBHA's identity or mission statement to include three core concepts: Macro, Transformative, Visionary.

## I. Macro

Big History utilizes, indeed requires, a macro lens to discern the cosmos' immense diversity. Earth's ecosystems are dependent on nature's complexity for their health. Likewise, universities are built upon a wide range of academic courses, departments, and schools. I believe that the IBHA will be further enriched and strengthened by encompassing a broad spectrum of viewpoints. Clearly, fields like mythology, the humanities, and futurology, among others, belong in the BH framework. As David Christian says in his Threshold One YouTube video lecture, the universe was originally only two things: matter and energy. Like matter *and* energy, I believe the IBHA will benefit by encompassing both scientific *and* meta-scientific perspectives.

In his opening remarks, David Christian noted that the world is in an unbalanced symbiosis. I completely agree. In my articles on cultural transformation, I explore how we can facilitate a macro cultural paradigm shift, and discuss what that cultural metamorphosis would look like. In short, I describe our current matrix as functioning like parasitic symbiosis. I propose the need for new ways of thinking in order to survive and thrive, and envision evolving toward a cooperative matrix based on mutual symbiosis. I've become increasingly aware that others, including some BH scholars, are similarly investigating and promoting the value of cooperation and cooperative systems. (See "[Options for the Future](#)," the closing piece in the thought-provoking anthology "The Rule of Mars" [KIT, 2006], which was endorsed by Pulitzer Prize-winning scientist and author Jared Diamond; and "Vision of Change," published in 1993.)



## II. Transformative

For me, one of the most exciting things about BH is that it is helping to transform education. Andrew Cook in the BH Project Plenary Session, as well as others throughout the conference, quoted numerous students stating how BH curriculum has transformed their lives and learning.

Knighted for his work championing educational transformation, best-selling author Sir Ken Robinson states:

*In the 21st century, humanity faces some of its most daunting challenges. Our best resource is to cultivate our singular abilities of imagination, creativity and innovation. Our greatest peril would be to face the future without investing fully in those abilities.*  
--Out of Our Minds. Capstone, 2011.

Interest in transforming education is huge, as evidenced by the 28+ million views of [Robinson's profound TED talk](#)! Clearly, BH is innovative, imaginative, and creative — exactly what Robinson advocates.

BH also has the potential to transform culture. For example, BH scholar Rich Blundell's [Cosmosis app](#) delivers paradigm-shifting realizations. With his app, one can experience how a landscape looks to both the human eye and to lenses interacting with other wavelengths of light: X- ray, ultraviolet, infrared, and microwave or Cosmic Background Radiation (CBR). Experiencing how differently a human and a bee see the same landscape, stretches our awareness so radically that we are able to move beyond an anthropocentric point of view. Plus, observing CBR in real-time, one can detect actual evidence of the Big Bang! These kinds of revelatory encounters have significant transformative ramifications.

As a visual artist, I have long been attached to my sense of the world being the way I see it. To learn that color doesn't exist the way humans perceive it was disturbing to me. Yet, to personally experience how the same landscape appears differently to different

eyes/lens, with the Cosmosis app, was transformative. I became aware that disparate viewpoints *co-exist simultaneously* in reality, not just abstractly. The inclusion of diverse perspectives allows us to understand the planet/cosmos more accurately than we can through a single point of view. For me, this cogently illustrates the transformative aspect of BH: by considering a multiplicity of perceptions as valid, something synergistic occurs, igniting new knowledge and learning.

Along with clarifying IBHA's identity, designing a symbol that visually expresses BH's macro, transformative, multi-perceptual aspects will be most useful. One example is a graphic showing various co-existent views via the Cosmosis app.

## III. Visionary

Clearly, IBHA is, and aims to be, visionary. In the conference's Opening Plenary Session, "Big History: A Personal Voyage," David Christian stated that Big History is engaged in an exploratory process. It is: 1) looking for and finding new connections, 2) searching for a coherent vocabulary that links new concepts across disciplines, and 3) seeking and promoting new ways of thinking. He concluded, saying: "By connecting disciplines, Big History is pointing us towards the insights future generations will need to cope with the global challenges of the 21st century."

In my opinion, by defining itself as aiming to do visionary work, the IBHA will distinguish itself from organizations that focus on homogeneity and exclusivity. An inclusive IBHA identity will lessen the emphasis on dualistic "either/or" suppositions, and offer ways to make connections and bridge gaps among divergent approaches.

In conclusion, I propose that a visionary, transformative IBHA identity embracing diversity and cooperation will facilitate ways for the IBHA to move forward with both camps becoming more comfortable with each other. For IBHA to split into two separate organizations, would, in my opinion, be a great loss. I agree whole-heartedly with David Christian that new vocabulary and new ways of thinking are necessary



— and that Big History offers a way to seek, find, and create such tools for the 21st century.

I hope my ideas will provide some food for thought

and help nurture IBHA's growth. Kudos to you and your colleagues for an extraordinary conference. Your work is truly exciting and important!

Drummond's work is what painting is all about: It has a painterly quality and a primitive energy that is not conventional. Paintings must flow internally from the artist. Drummond's work does this.

*Leonard Freed, Magnum Photographer*



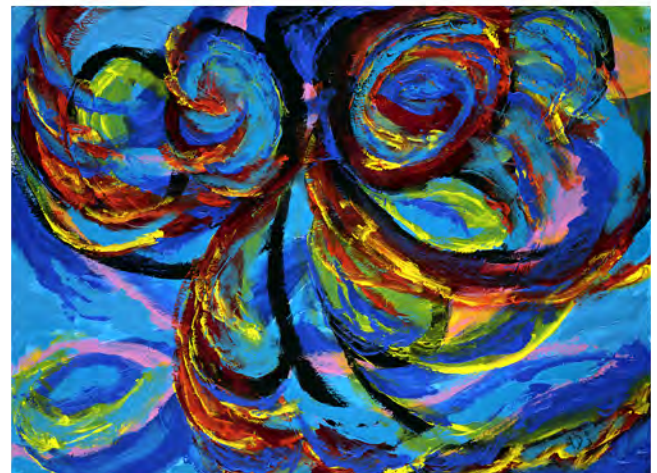
**Arawak Ardor**  
Purchased by a prominent New York collector, it now hangs with Motherwell and Jackson Pollack paintings, among others.



**Petroglyph #5**  
Purchased by a collector whose collection The Phillips Collection recently called "one of the most important collections of contemporary art in the United States."



**Detail of Jazz!**  
An 8 paneled painting adapted for Beekman Street Banner Project  
Also featured in *Divine Sparks* film



**Sea Dancer**  
One of six paintings purchased by a New York collector  
Also featured in *Divine Sparks* film

DRUMMOND  
IMOGENE



# +14 Talking Points About Big History

Cynthia Stokes Brown and Robert H. Moore

When [Andrew Ross Sorkin wrote, “So Bill Gates Has This Idea for a History Class ...” for the September 5, 2014 New York Times](#), Cynthia and Robert wrote their *Big History Talking Points*, intending it for those not previously familiar with the field and looking for a brief, accessible understanding of what the field entails. These are the authors’ points, not an official statement by the IBHA.

- Big History consists of various accounts of the story from the big bang to the present. It is based on empirical evidence and logical reasoning commonly accepted by the sciences and the humanities, which it unites into an engaging and memorable narrative. It seeks to provide an integrated history of the Cosmos, Earth, Life and Humanity, based on an emerging understanding of the sequences of events that have led to us.

- Our modern life, based on the industrial revolution and burning fossil fuel, is only 250 years old. During this short time we have increased our population from about 800,000 to 7 billion, and we now dominate the Earth and its systems.

- Beginning about 10,000 years ago humans began to domesticate certain plants and animals, making it possible to store surplus food. This enabled us to live in dense cities and to develop specialized occupations, states, hierarchies, writing and monumental art --- characteristics of civilization.

- Modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) emerged about 200,000 years ago. We have lived for 95 percent of our history as hunter/gatherers with a relatively stable population and in harmony with Earth and its systems.

- Modern humans evolved over about 6 million years, when their line split from their common ancestor with chimpanzees and bonobos. The main fossils showing this 6-million-year evolution are called *Australopithecus*, *Homo habilis*, and *Homo erectus*. Since at least 12 to 18 different species

appeared on the line to modern humans, there is no exact progression shown by the fossils that have been uncovered. The oldest known fossils in the human line date about 4.4 million years old.

- Life appeared less than a billion years after the Earth’s formation, which occurred about 4.56 billion years ago. The oldest fossilized cells are estimated to be 3.8 billion years old.

- Single-cellular life, meaning bacteria, evolved for 3.2 billion years before multi-cellular organisms began to emerge about .6 billion years (600 million years) ago. Photosynthesizing bacteria emitted oxygen into the atmosphere, which eventually formed the ozone layer that protects life from ultra-violet rays.

- Our Sun is an average-sized star. It formed 4.56 billion years ago in our galaxy, the Milky Way Galaxy. There are over 100 billion stars in our galaxy, and most stars have planets. Our Milky Way is one of the universe’s hundreds of billions of galaxies.

- When the gravity of our Sun sucked in clouds of gases and began to burn, material left over stuck together to form the eight planets of our solar system. Earth is a rocky planet, third out, just the right distance from the Sun to be partly solid and partly molten, with a hot center.

- Hydrogen is the simplest atom, with one proton and one electron. Stars and galaxies began forming from clouds of hydrogen gas about 13.5 billion years ago, a few hundred million years after the appearance of the universe. Stars created more complex atoms as they burned and exploded; the high temperatures allowed more particles to fuse, creating complex elements like carbon and nitrogen that later got incorporated into new planets. And, on at least one planet, these elements combined to produce life.

- The universe itself burst into existence 13.82 billion years ago. We know this from measuring how fast the universe is expanding and then extrapolating backwards in time.



backwards in time.

- The universe was initially so hot that the particles of atoms could not hold together. About 380,000 years after the Big Bang, simple atoms (hydrogen, helium) began to form. The universe is gradually cooling and expanding to this day.

- Big History's story is essential because it outlines what human minds have been able, collectively over millennia, to learn about how we, and our world, came to be. Curriculum that does not include such a narrative lacks strong coherence and can leave students disengaged, lost in a flood of seemingly disconnected data. Telling the Big History story engages students' interest, maps the big picture, and provides the essential basic information from various disciplines, filling in what may be missing from a student's background.

- This story is global and universal, and focuses on our deep common humanity rather than on historical differences. One of its most powerful lessons is that we are unlikely to survive long as a species without caring both for each other and for our planet. It provides a much needed way to begin to chart our common future.

#### *Related Resources:*

The International Big History Association (<http://www.ibhanet.org>) is an academic non-profit organization with 350 members globally. Its members

teach 75-100 university level Big History courses. Its website provides many resources.

The Big History Project is a Bill Gates-funded free, online site ([www.bighistoryproject.com](http://www.bighistoryproject.com)). It provides two programs, a general course to take to learn about big history and another course of curricular materials for teachers to use at high school level. About 10,000 students in 15-20 countries are currently learning from these materials.

The History Channel produced in 2014 a [Big History series](#) of 16 episodes. These are available for purchase on DVD ([www.history.com](http://www.history.com)).

#### **Recommended Books:**

Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*. 2nd ed. New York: New Press, 2012, 1st ed. 2007.

Christian, David. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Christian, David, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin. *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014. An undergraduate, university level textbook.

Spier, Fred. *Big History and the Future of Humanity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell-Wiley, 2010.

Simon, Richard B., Mojgan Behmand, and Thomas Burke, eds. *Teaching Big History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014.

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Cynthia Stokes Brown with Jonathan Markley, David Christian, and Craig Benjamin at 2014 IBHA panel.

New and Returning IBHA Members

Since its establishment in 2011 the International Big History Association has grown from a handful of members to close to 400. Like all professional associations, the IBHA rests on three key pillars of financial support – occasional gifts and donations from benefactors, the small profit generated by our biennial conferences, and dues paid by our members. Of these by far the most important in ensuring the long term viability of the IBHA is membership. With this in mind, the Board of the IBHA would like to acknowledge the critical ongoing support of our members by periodically listing in *Origins* the names of new and renewing members. On behalf of everyone associated with the International Big History Association, we extend our deep gratitude to the following members for their ongoing support of our endeavors.

Welcome - or Welcome Back - to our members!

August 10th – **Steve Sisney** – new member

August 21st – **John Griffin** – renewal

August 22nd – **Anthony Pavlick** – renewal

September 3rd – **Clare Patterson** – renewal

September 8th – **Randolph Kwei** – new sustaining member

September 12th – **Fred Weishaupt** - renewal

September 16th – **Allan Hayes** - renewal

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Lowell Gustafson, Villanova University, Pennsylvania (USA)

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