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tripartite division serves the ambitions of the project well. However, in works such as these, an explicit introduction that bridges the many gaps between chapters is almost a necessity. And while Richard W. Unger's introduction is greatly helpful in establishing the broad strokes of early modern European seafaring for those unfamiliar with the field, readers are left waiting until Maria Fusaro's afterword to see the full intent and origins of this volume explicitly outlined. Faults aside, the standout strength of this collection is the astonishing array of evidence on display, which has been cultivated from multiple archives, including the Danish Sound Toll Registers, the Nationaal Archief of the Netherlands, the archives of the *Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Marseille-Provence*, the British National Archives at Kew, the *Archivio di Stato di Livorno*, the Portuguese *Arquivo Nacional*, the *Archivo del Museo Naval* in Madrid, and the *Hamburger Staatsarchiv*, to name a few.

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Our Place in the Universe: An Introduction to Big History. Edited by BARRY RODRIGUE, LEONID GRININ, and ANDREY KOROTAYEV. Delhi: Primus Books, 2015. 357 pp. \$79.99 (cloth).

As recently as five years ago it would have been necessary to begin a review of a book on big history with a definition. Most historians had never heard of it. That has changed. With the publication of major new works by David Christian, Fred Spier, Cynthia Brown, and Craig Benjamin, the formation of the International Big History Association, the inclusion of big history panels at the American Historical Association and World History Association annual meetings, the launching of the Big History Project supported by the Gates Foundation, coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Times of London*, and elsewhere, and the introduction of courses in universities and high schools across the country, big history has come into its own. But we must still begin with a definition of sorts, because while big history has emerged as a field in its own right, there is disagreement, *especially* among self-avowed big historians, as to what should be included and what left out.

In its simplest terms, big history is an interdisciplinary approach to the past that combines the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. It seeks to understand the cosmos, earth, life, and humanity using the best available empirical evidence and scholarly methods. But how tightly is this interdisciplinarity to be understood? Must we really

think of history as a science? Can human history really be reduced to a unified theory based upon the second law of thermodynamics, that is, on physics? Or is there still room for the humanities, for interpretation? Is it in fact a new discipline in its own right? Or is it a branch of world history?

Our Place in the Universe: An Introduction to Big History is the first in a three-volume series published by Primus Books, a new academic division of the venerable textbook publishing house Ratna Sagar. The appearance of this series, entitled *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, celebrates a more international outlook for Primus, and indeed a more international outlook for big history itself. With more than one hundred contributors from thirty disciplines and twenty countries, this body of work comes down on the side of diversity and inclusion, veering away from a narrow insistence on a specific scientific approach and toward a broader worldview that sees big history as a collective human experience that has emerged over the past fifty years as part of a global intellectual conjuncture. It is not so much “interdisciplinary” as it is “transdisciplinary,” which is to say that it is more than the sum of its parts. This version of big history evokes the ethos of cooperation and environmentalism and embraces an optimistic worldview that looks to the future and infuses the past with meaning in a way that a narrowly construed scientific approach is incapable of doing.

There are some bumps and some rough edges—which is okay if you can accept the notion that big history is still history and are willing to embrace the humanities part of that, and if by scholarly methods you mean *all* scholarly methods, including psychology and philosophy, and even a little art and poetry (to appear in later volumes). For the editors and, clearly, for many other big historians as well, a little ambiguity in one’s theory of everything is tolerable and probably to be expected in such an all-encompassing intellectual venture.

Our Place in the Universe covers four broad themes. “Big History as a History of the Universe” serves as an overview. Opening with a prestige piece by neurologist and astronaut Roberta Bandar, who participated in a space shuttle *Discovery* mission in 1992, it includes much deeper enquiries by astrophysicists, geologists, and, yes, even a historian (David Christian on time and history), which serve as an overall introduction to the field. My favorite was by George Ellis, a cosmologist from the University of Cape Town, who worked with Stephen Hawking at Cambridge University in the early 1970s. “A simple statement of fact,” he writes: “There is no physics theory that explains the nature of, or even the existence of, football matches, teapots, or jumbo-jet aircraft. The human mind is physically based, but there is no hope whatever of predicting

the behavior it controls from underlying physical laws” (p. 76). This is remarkable because big history usually proceeds as if this were not true.

The following section, “Big History as Philosophy and Methodology,” furthers the editors’ purpose of showing how there really has been a sort of global convergence on this theme and that no single person or organization has a monopoly over how to define big history or the directions that it should take. Russian philosopher and psychologist Akop Nazaretyan notes that there is value for historians in “using the telescope and the microscope as instruments for assessing the past” (p. 125), but he does not want to make that approach prescriptive. Robert King, who integrates big history frameworks into his world civilization courses at Sierra Nevada College, echoes Nazaretyan in seeing big history as a study of systems, but he sees those systems as operating by different rules at different scales and calls for a critical engagement with big history’s (often unrecognized) intellectual debt to general systems theory and cybernetics.

Perhaps in thinking about big history as a *transdisciplinary* study, we should try to get away from finding the best modern label—universal history, deep history, cosmic evolution or, for the Russians, mega-evolution—and instead hark back to the broader (and looser) Enlightenment notion of natural philosophy. Thomas Wright (1750), Immanuel Kant (1755), John Herschel (1831), Mary Somerville (1834)—each sought to unify all the physical sciences. One need think only of Percy Shelley’s play *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), which connects the creation of the universe, the birth of the planet, and the fate of humanity, to find all the elements of big history in place.

Some might call this “Romantic science” instead of “natural philosophy,” but it amounts to much the same thing, and is in tune with sections three and four, “Big History as an Active Life Position” and “Big History and the Life of the People.” In his essay on “A New Design for Living,” co-editor Barry Rodrigue explicitly calls for a reevaluation of our priorities and an alternative way of viewing our needs on a planetary scale. Similarly, Indian educator and social scientist Ananta Kumar Giri seeks a new East-West dialogue, and geologist Nigel Hughes, writing from America, reviews the arguments against climate change denial as a way of showing how big history can be a positive force for changing the future.

Some within the discipline, notably Fred Spier, who also appears in this volume, see such sentiments as failing to maintain a proper “academic distance” from the subject matter, but this seems to be an increasingly isolated position as the discipline expands in the direction of “galactic civilizations” and away from a narrow insistence that the only

proper scholarly methods are rooted in physics. And this, I think, is precisely what makes this book, and this series, valuable, and why it deserves a place in all university libraries. It does what anthologies are supposed to do, and constitutes a set of primary sources in the sense that these are the background essays that will one day give shape to this discipline as a whole as it emerges. So it is a little uneven in places. So was the early universe. So was the planet. So was life. Without those bumps and edges, nothing ever grows.

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The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800. By ROBERT S. DUPLESSIS. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 351 pp. \$29.99 (cloth).

Historians have spilled a lot of ink recently to examine the production, distribution, and consumption of textiles across the world. Most famously, Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* (2014) details the changing relationship that existed between manufacturing centers and agricultural peripheries to explain the great divergence that occurred between East and West after 1780. Bruce Baker and Barbara Hahn's *Cotton Kings* (2015) uncovers the ways dishonest entrepreneurs manipulated the price of cotton until the United States government intervened and began regulating Wall Street. The bulk of this scholarship has focused on economic concerns such as industrialization and fraud. In his latest book, Robert S. DuPlessis weaves a richly textured portrait of the cultural landscape of clothing.

DuPlessis focuses on Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans who lived in the Atlantic World between 1650 and 1800. He examines "dress regimes" in this ocean-centered region, which consisted of "objects (garments and related items of dress), practices by which they were appropriated and deployed, and verbal and pictorial discourses that sought to direct, explain, and justify (or delegitimize) both objects and practices" (p. 19). People chose to wear certain items of clothing in particular areas. DuPlessis sucks every bit of cultural significance out of these decisions. He argues that early modern clothiers supplied an increasing variety of fabric to far flung locations and populations. Contrary to recent scholars, he argues that this supply fostered "both standardization and diversification of dress styles" (p. 20). By this, he means that free settlers in the New World tended to dress in similar ways

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