

Joseph Lloyd-Virgil Donica  
Bronx Community College, CUNY, USA  
joseph.donica@bcc.cuny.edu

Mark Denny, *Making the Most of the Anthropocene: Facing the Future* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017) 213 pp.



Mark Denny's subtitle says it all. To make the most of the Anthropocene you have to face the reality of the future that lies ahead. However, Denny's book is not just about strategies for facing a dire future but also about acknowledging the changes observed around us every day that are connected to climate change. His main concern in his book is what to make of the term 'Anthropocene'. At any academic conference in the fields of literature, modern languages, or cultural studies, the term 'Anthropocene' is widely accepted and rarely discussed. It fits scholars' purposes as they move to make the environmental humanities relevant at a time in which many think the humanities have very little to say about how we live now. However, in *Making the Most of the Anthropocene*, Mark Denny proposes we should wait a bit until we declare, hubristically, that we are now under a new geological age caused entirely by us.

The book seems to be made up of the articles Denny has written over the past years. While the structure is uninspiring Denny's content is not. *Making the Most of the Anthropocene* is written for a general audience, and general audiences would do well to read this book. Denny's ability to interpret complex science into digestible bits through the use of analogy and metaphor is impressive.

In his introduction Denny notes "our influence on the planet and its biomass has never been greater" (1). He does not sugarcoat it. He says our worst days are ahead. They are "survivable, but worse" than the changes we already see in the climate (3). The book's largest question is about if and when the Anthropocene began or will begin. There are several dates proposed for the beginning of the Anthropocene. One theory states it began in the late eighteenth century at the start of the first industrial revolution. Denny mentions that at the time of writing the Anthropocene Working Group suggests the date 1610. The reason for this date is that it is the "precise time" CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations had "a noticeable dip in the level centered around that year" (12). He sees one of the best markers of the reality of the Anthropocene or its coming reign being "the mass extinction of species." "Extinction rates," he says, "today are 100 to 1,000 times the background (pre-human) rates, due directly to hunting or indirectly to habitat loss" (13). He is firm in his argument that we need to wait on declaring the Anthropocene the epoch in which we now live. The problem, he argues, is that "earthly stratigraphers... deal with the past, not the future, and many of them are dubious about the whole notion of an Anthropocene epoch" (13). For Denny, the only real evidence of a current Anthropocene has little to do with existing geological layers. It has more to do with chicken bones. The Anthropocene Working Group declared

in 2016 that the mid-twentieth century might be a better date for the start of the epoch because of, as Denny says, “the radioactive fallout . . . along with (I kid you not) the ubiquity of chicken bones strewn around the globe” (15).

Most importantly, Denny’s book offers a practical response to critics like Timothy Clark who rightly note that “the Anthropocene evades normal categories of attention” (x). It is too big, Clark proposes, to wrap one’s mind around in a single thought. Timothy Morton contemplates the overwhelming size of ecological thinking too since everything is interconnected. Denny’s book cuts up the overwhelming size of the concept of climate change in order that we might understand it in more manageable chunks. Most books and films about climate change end with a call, and Denny’s is no different. He calls us “a stupid species” (171). However, he says that “is not the whole story.” If it were, “Darwinian natural selection would have seen us go extinct before we ever got to the stage of producing Darwin” (171). The other part of the story and the part we might still leverage is “our cleverness.” A key question Denny leaves the reader to consider is, “How will those two opposites [our stupidity and our cleverness] gel, to determine . . . our future?” (171).

Denny joins a long list of writers from multiple fields using the Anthropocene to think about humanity’s fundamental needs and desires and future. Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015) tackles these issues as well. Scranton’s humanistic take on climate change and our impending climate doom shows, as Denny’s does, not just that our lives are at stake but that the culture that makes us human is as well. Scranton explains: if we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die in it (27).

For scholars and students in literary studies wanting to better position their own thinking and arguments about climate change and its impact on everyday life, Denny’s book is essential. He lays out narratives about the environment that are all around us—some just under the surface of conscious thought. He also challenges us to see the narratives and narrative possibilities in the everyday changes happening to our environment. But he also asks us to consider the larger picture that all the little changes come together to make. The International Commission on Stratigraphy commissioned the Anthropocene Working Group in 2009 to determine if the field could accurately describe a new epoch in the earth’s crust as primarily formed by humans. Even though the group’s recommendation was that it is likely a new layer, it recommended holding off on declaring it one. Denny helps to cut through some of the rush to declare humans’ irrevocable harm to the planet and encourages readers to not think only about the future but about the narratives of change that happen right before our eyes.

## Works Cited

- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard UP, 2010.
- Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. City Lights, 2015.