

## Storying New Worlds: Educating to Counter Violence and Activate Alternatives to the Anthropocene

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*How to Confront Climate Denial: Literacy, Social Studies, and Climate Change* by James Damico and Mark Baildon. New York: Teachers College Press, 2022. 176 pp. US\$111.00 (cloth), ISBN 9780807767214; US\$36.95 (paper), ISBN 9780807767207; US\$29.56 (e-book), ISBN 9780807781159.

*Teaching in the Anthropocene: Education in the Face of the Environmental Crisis* by Alysha Farrell, Candy Skyhar, and Michelle Lam. Toronto: Canada Scholars, 2022. 338 pp. US\$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 9781773382821; US\$59.95 (e-book), 9781773382838.

*Educating for the Anthropocene: Schooling and Activism in the Face of Slow Violence* by Peter Sutoris. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022. 296 pp. US\$40.00 (paper), ISBN 9780262544177; open access (e-book).

It matters which stories make worlds and which worlds make stories. (Haraway 2016, 12)

In a world brimming with a multitude of stories, modern schooling has served to systematically command and control single, totalizing narratives. Among these narratives is the story of the Anthropocene, which places humans as superior to the rest of the Earth system and its species, celebrates (neo)liberal individualism and competition over the common good, and narrates human evolution in terms of the so-called progress propelled by the vertiginous growth of fossil economies. This storyline has led us to a dead end, destroying the ecosystems that have sustained life on Earth for millions of years and threatening the survival of both people and the planet. Changing the story of the Anthropocene requires a critical interrogation of the dominant narratives that have long been in circulation and the capacity to bring into focus alternative stories—both new and existing ones—about what it means to be human. Education is at the core of this challenge, which is collectively addressed by the authors and editors of

The authors of this essay hosted online discussions with the authors and editors of each of the three books under review. To view the full discussions, please visit the YouTube channel for the Greater Phoenix Regional Center of Expertise (RCE) on Education for Sustainable Development: Peter Sutoris, <https://youtu.be/4MbUnA5y5x4>; James Damico and Mark Baildon, [https://youtu.be/q33\\_pDm4AM](https://youtu.be/q33_pDm4AM); Alysha Farrell, Candy Skyhar, and Michelle Lam, [https://youtu.be/4\\_FeP9q0IXc](https://youtu.be/4_FeP9q0IXc).

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the three books reviewed here: James Damico and Mark Baildon's *How to Confront Climate Denial: Literacy, Social Studies, and Climate Change*, Alysha Farrell and colleagues' *Teaching in the Anthropocene: Education in the Face of the Environmental Crisis*, and Peter Sutoris's *Educating for the Anthropocene: Schooling and Activism in the Face of Slow Violence*.

While sharing a common purpose, each book takes a different approach to critiquing dominant narratives and offers unique ways of storying the new world. First and foremost, all books extend current scholarship in critically interrogating the story of the Anthropocene itself, pointing out that it is often portrayed as “a universal human threat that is experienced by a universal human subject (read: white Western man), silencing the manifold vulnerabilities to environmental catastrophes that have been conceptualized by global climate justice movements” (Xausa 2020, 92). All three books reckon with disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis against the “flattening and universalizing discourses of the Anthropocene” that “continue to have a firm hold in education” (Nxumalo et al. 2022, 102). They insist on acknowledging the histories of genocide and slavery, making visible the stories that have been previously silenced or erased—Black, Indigenous, and feminist ecologies, youth perspectives, and more. While Sutoris stops short of interrogating his own complicity in the Anthropocene, the authors of the other two books address this challenge directly and without hesitation. In the introduction to their book, Farrell and colleagues ask the readers whether “the climate crisis expands the ethical obligations of teachers to include ensuring livable lives for children yet to come. If not, what can it possibly mean to teach in a world that is prepared to go on without us?” (xv). Building on this question and expanding the conversation to include the authors of all three books—and to all readers—we ask: What does it possibly mean to learn in a world of shifting planetary boundaries, collapsing ecosystems, and emerging alternatives? How might we learn from this uncertain time to tell stories that extend beyond the familiar reruns of Western metaphysics (and Western man)? How do we begin activating alternatives and storying new worlds?<sup>1</sup>

Addressing these questions requires a commitment to facing and countering violence, a capacity to work across differences and form deep (and likely) unusual relationships, as well as the courage—and a radical imagination—to venture off the beaten path in search of counternarratives. Authors of each volume engage with these themes in their own thought-provoking and gripping ways—from writing a single-authored multisited environmental ethnography (Sutoris), to coauthoring a book that offers concrete pedagogical interventions to confront climate denial (Damico and Baildon), to coediting a volume that brings together nearly 40 colleagues to collectively decenter anthropocentric models in teacher education praxis and explore alternatives (Farrell

<sup>1</sup> Here we also connect these questions with the ongoing conversations in the CIES community, including the theme of the CIES 2020 conference, “Education beyond the Human: Toward Sympoiesis,” <https://cies2020.org/>.

et al.)—creating important synergies across efforts to rearticulate the role of modern schooling for more sustainable and just futures in the Anthropocene.

### Countering Violence

Although the narrative of the Anthropocene has drawn attention to the violence enacted by some humans on the Earth, it has also been “used to erase this history of violence. Narratives can conceal other narratives” (Simmons 2019, 175). As racialized and Indigenous populations are displaced for mineral extraction in support of green energy, for instance, anthropocentric imaginaries contribute to necropolitical violences even through climate change response (DeBoom 2021). Such concealments are taken up by each of the three books under review, as they open space to think about how education might work to confront and address the violences buoyed up by dominant narratives, including those of the Anthropocene.

Aiming to challenge the narratives used to justify broader systemic violences, Damico and Baildon situate their critique within broader histories and current articulations of injustice in *How to Confront Climate Denial*. Writing primarily about the United States, though with links to other contexts, the authors offer a political understanding of climate denial within “a longer historical trajectory of colonial injustices in the United States—namely, the forced expulsion and slaughter of Indigenous people along with theft and exploitation of Indigenous land and resources” (25). They point out how “wokewashing” and various “discourses of delay” shared through propaganda campaigns of oil companies (including those targeting schools) subtly contribute to violence because they “[impugn] or [dismiss] the need to address the causes and consequences of global warming,” enabling the largest emitters of carbon emissions, the wealthiest on the planet, to “sidestep a moral imperative to reduce their carbon emissions” (25). Such campaigns also erode possibilities for democratic deliberation toward collaborative solutions by segregating publics according to political and industry propaganda. Undermining these narratives, therefore, is necessary to respond ethically in the face of violence. *How to Confront Climate Denial* offers ways to analyze climate denial narratives across media and political systems but also to confront the resounding denials inherent to colonial habits of being. By analyzing “stories-we-live-by,” literacy and social studies classes can support self-reflexive learner critique of those dominant narratives that are implicated in climate and environmental injustices. Further, by centering the perspectives of those most marginalized in classroom deliberations and utilizing counternarration to examine dominant and non-dominant narratives, learners may collectively identify violent stories and create instead “ecojustice stories-to-live-by” (39). While Damico and Baildon stop short of critiquing and reconceptualizing democracy in the face of colonially informed climate violences, they seek ways to invigorate civic participation

through deeply and critically examining dominant narratives toward the co-creation of alternative narratives for more just futures.

Explicitly focused on the unevenness of slow and fast violence of the Anthropocene, Sutoris's *Educating for the Anthropocene* zeroes in on those communities he describes as being on the "frontier" of the high Anthropocene. In keeping with Indigenous scholarship that articulates Indigenous life as already facing "catastrophic violence, the loss of relationships, and the fundamental alteration of their ways of life" (Simmons 2019, 175), Sutoris understands the communities in Pashulok, India, and Wentworth, South Africa, to be already experiencing the violences associated with climate catastrophe and ecological degradation. In doing so, he demonstrates how "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) is only "slow" insofar as the "pace of life in (post)industrial societies arguably alters our perception of time, lowering the visibility of fundamental environmental transformations that will, sooner or later, make themselves known through 'fast tragedy' on a mass scale" (187). In keeping with the analysis of the creation of Anthropocentric violence through "centuries of Western colonialism, globalized neoliberal capitalism, and ideologies of infinite growth (and hence infinite extraction) on these spaces" (11), he explains how these spatial and temporal differentials result from structural and systemic causes. Paradoxically, while he rigorously describes both sites' violent historical and political contexts, and articulates awareness of his privilege as a White outsider, the ethnographic methods used raise questions about the extent to which extractive research can challenge and undermine the violences of the Anthropocene. We wondered whether participatory methods might further work against the slow violence of the Anthropocene, especially in relation to the increasing bureaucratization of education that Sutoris adeptly highlights. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, *Educating for the Anthropocene* contributes a necessary critique of the banality of evil—and therefore of violence—inherent in bureaucratic education systems, which render people powerless in the face of the violences of the Anthropocene. When education is situated within the space of education for sustainable development (ESD), it becomes impotent in the face of violence, shaped not only through the bureaucratization of education broadly, but also through the depoliticized vision of ESD, which focuses on individual actions within a neoliberal, competitive system. Noting that individual activities such as planting trees are clearly ineffectual expressions of education in the Anthropocene, Sutoris offers learning from youth, educators, and activists to undermine these prevailing narratives and ultimately confront and counter the violences associated with them.

From the opening chapter, "Weaving Critical Education Perspectives in Teaching for Social and Ecological Justice," by Kyra Garson, *Teaching in the Anthropocene* acknowledges violence head-on, including "dehumanizing processes of colonial oppression, patriarchal power, and neoliberal economics" (4). Supported through "normalizing hegemony" and "current dominant

narratives,” these violences lead to a direct imperative: we “can no longer sit behind a curriculum designed for individualist, capitalist, corporate aims” (5). The text as a whole responds to this imperative through a series of chapters that both unpack dominant narratives and offer concrete alternatives through creative pedagogies that support educators to become activists in working against the violences of the Anthropocene (for a discussion of teachers as activists, see Jenalee Klutz, “Unsettling Climate Education”). For instance, Jeannie Kerr and Sarah Amsler, in “Challenging Complacency in K–12 Climate Change Education in Canada,” draw on Stein and colleagues’ (2020) metaphorical “House of Modernity” to name and describe the modern-colonial imaginary that shrouds racialized and gendered violence inherent to modern progress that harms human and more-than-human beings (163). Situated within this imaginary, education curricula and pedagogies, including ESD frameworks, “[establish] a destructive relation with the life-giving systems whose continued flourishing is interconnected with our own” (166–67). To counter these violences, the authors avoid solutionism yet recommend critical analysis of the House of Modernity and familiarity and experimentation with more relational ontologies, including Indigenous ontologies, to counter modern-colonial violences. Other chapters offer experimentation with affective and arts-based pedagogies as potential means of resistance, whereby poetry, for example, may offer space to “name our human experiences, relationships, and entanglements” (Maya T. Borhani and Adrian M. Downey, “What Good Is a Poem When the World Is on Fire?,” 103). Still others discuss how historical consciousness may be expanded to explore the intersections of social and ecological oppressions, as learners practice listening and witnessing place-based changes over time (e.g., Heather E. McGregor and colleagues, “Listening, Witnessing, Connecting”). The chapters in *Teaching in the Anthropocene* offer educators across disciplines means to name, confront, and address the violences that directly result from the ecological changes associated with the Anthropocene and are also inherent to the underlying narratives and structures that contribute to anthropologically induced planetary shifts.

### **Fostering Relationality**

Considering much of the violence inherent in the Anthropocene involves severing relations among people and with the land, these three texts offer discussions that support relationality, agonistic encounters, and working across differences in education. Both *How to Confront Climate Denial* and *Educating for the Anthropocene* focus on dialogue and deliberation across differences, although Damico and Baildon focus on addressing climate denial toward more robust democracy, while Sutoris shares practices for temporal and spatial agonism across divides. Finally, both within its section on relational pedagogies and as a through-line within the collection, *Teaching in the Anthropocene* puts forward

various affective, creative, embodied, and relational encounters offered through pedagogy.

Damico and Baildon situate their work in the complex and entangled context of dominant climate denial narratives—ranging from political and economical to cultural-historical, sociopsychological, media, and geographic narratives—as a “web of climate denial” (chap. 3). They assert that recognizing the “connection between climate change and economics, race, gender, and colonization” is the starting point to understanding climate change and confronting climate denial (122). Drawing on existing scholarship, their work directly connects climate change to the long legacy of (settler) colonialism and the destruction of Indigenous lands, structural racism and white supremacy, and capitalism. The authors highlight the urgency of learning how to work across differences in classrooms and outside of schools, as the roots of the injustice are multilayered and deeply interconnected. Furthermore, Damico and Baildon call for collaborative action among social science and literacy educators and researchers to critically reimagine and radically transform curriculum by creating common relational grounds. Focusing on the development of practical ecocivic tools (reflexivity, deliberation, and counternarration), they offer a compelling pedagogical model for the creation of (new) ecojustice “stories-to-live-by” that are grounded in the interconnectedness between humans, nonhumans, and the world and that emphasize “cultural and natural diversity, human and ecological well-being” (123). In this context, they draw philosophical underpinnings from the ecofeminist theory of “care, concern, and connection” (Martin and Bhatt 1994, 124), Indigenous ways of living that nurture consciousness about the limits of the planet (consequently our own), and Indigenous and non-Indigenous activism that rejects individual rights and focuses on collective responsibilities for the common good.

Ethnographically researching rural India and South Africa, Sutoris’s book *Educating for the Anthropocene* touches on the fact that in both Pashulok and Wentworth, formal education and activism are disconnected and even contradicted. He writes that governments are purposefully employing the “politics of restraint” with the help of “the rigid, discipline-oriented culture and coloniality-fueled state ideologies of schooling” (195). Sutoris pays great attention to freedom as a right or freedom as participation by connecting freedom with responsibility for the Anthropocene. However, two main issues arise in the context of responsibility. First, generalizing responsibility as a collective fault tends to minimize the role of the Global North in the current environmental crisis. Second, “individualization of responsibility” encourages people to engage in personal actions such as planting trees, recycling, and reusing, without considering the broader and deeper injustices in colonial systems. In place of existing cultures of schooling, which commodify and depoliticize students’ freedom within a neoliberal, competitive system, Sutoris suggests “three ingredients of educating for the Anthropocene—radical imagination, agonistic



pluralism, and intergenerational dialogue” (197). Here he envisions relationality across time and space through both vertical agonistic pluralism, where we “think with the dead about ways to envision what future development may look like for the unborn” (155), and horizontal agonistic pluralism, where we hold countercultural dialogue “across formerly uncrossable lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class” (174). While the text offers this crucial understanding of relationality at the nexus of space and time, an even richer power analysis of these agonistic encounters may arguably result in even deeper self-reflexive criticality about the complicity of the Global North in pushing sites like Wentworth to the frontier of the high Anthropocene.

In *Teaching in the Anthropocene*, one of the book sections is entirely devoted to relational pedagogies, emphasizing the profound interconnectedness of our world and the pressing need to challenge the status quo. Focused on relationality among humans and with the land, chapters highlight best practices, progressive first steps, and future imaginations. For example, Kathleen Jiménez and Kelly Young, in “‘Country’ Is My Gender,” share their life stories and educational experiences about the importance of connecting language and human relationships with nature, including how metaphorical language reveals deeper connections, especially among women. Similarly focused on relational epistemologies, “Indigegogy: Using Indigenous Ways in Teaching,” by Stan Wilson, introduces the term for Indigenous pedagogy—“Indigegogy”—a way to mainstream Indigenous knowledge in teaching and learning. However, the author warns that Indigenous knowledge cannot be easily translated into Western systems; instead, Indigenous worldviews are foundationally different: “with this relational way of thinking, being, doing, and living at its center, Indigegogy provides a framework and structured approach to teaching and learning that seeks to maintain a harmonious balance between all life forms” (59). Several chapters favor place-based education and pedagogical ceremonies to counter subject-dominant placeless pedagogies of Western education, which isolate learning subjects and distance students from their locales. For instance, Wilson emphasizes that “land-based education teaches us that we are part of nature, and that, by being accountable in our relationships with the land and other living beings, we can have a healthy, mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world” (65). In the same vein, “Hope in Action as a Pedagogical Response to Climate Crisis and Youth Anxiety,” by Breanna Lawrence and colleagues, discusses activities such as community mapping and community walks as ways educators can help youth make connections to their local communities and environments with the help of hope-infused pedagogies. Finally, conceptualizing ceremony as a pedagogy, “Embodying Ceremony as Pedagogy,” by Kiera Brant-Birioukov and Gail Brant-Terry, discusses how ceremony can provide opportunities for modeling love, relationships, and listening to “reserve what is sacred in our lives and the lives of our learners. Honoring the sacred means to protect and nurture that which is worth preserving for future

generations; namely our natural resources, our relationship with the natural world, and our commitment to humanity” (144). While each of these relational practices may be suited toward specific contexts and not others, the collection invites careful reflection on the relations specific to readers’ locations, so educators may carefully adapt these pedagogies without appropriation according to their own positions, lands, and learning spaces.

### Activating Alternatives

The three books provide a range of entry points for activists, educators (formal and informal), policy makers, and others who are interested in exploring counternarratives to the current status quo in education. *Educating for the Anthropocene* approaches activism theoretically and explores the experiences of young activists throughout the latter half of the book, arguing that activists are an example of how “lifestyles of past generations enter the conversation about future lifestyles in a temporal arc that links memory of the predevelopment past with imaginaries of future progress” (155). *How to Confront Climate Denial* and *Teaching in the Anthropocene* connect a broader range of theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical approaches for readers, emphasizing practical applications that can occur in school contexts that unpack the complexity of the Anthropocene and situate classroom tools and resources for individual and collective action.

*How to Confront Climate Denial* positions activism and counternarratives within the context of the US kindergarten to grade 12 classrooms, drawing on the authors’ years of teaching experience in the United States. Damico and Baildon work to balance their US-based stories with a broad range of citations from literature, policy, and available resources from across the Global North and South. Aiming to “establish a clearer, tighter link between climate denial and climate justice” (24), the authors ground their book in their Climate Denial Inquiry Model, which emphasizes reflexivity as a component of critical literacy and builds on inquiry models that have been used in other fields (e.g., journalism, law, academia, etc.) in order “to guide what happens in schools where classrooms can be communities of inquiry-based practice(s)” (29). Damico and Baildon include various methodologies and resources to support educators in articulating counternarratives within classroom settings, especially given the entanglement of climate denial, politics, culture, and economics. They note that educators need to gain a base knowledge and familiarity with greenwashing, climate denial, and propaganda to better prepare themselves—and their students—to grapple with and confront “a core civic question of our time, which sources do we trust and why?” (80). For example, chapter 6, “Confronting Denial through Counternarration and Reliability of Stories-to-Live-By,” walks readers through the process for analyzing the reliability of texts that can be used within classroom settings to unpack broad



cultural narratives that are not always analyzed from a critical perspective. As students globally seek to “create learning spaces of resistance, resilience, and recuperation” (Anayatova et al. 2022, 59), Damico and Baildon’s text offers a practical guide and compelling example of the pedagogical shifts youth are seeking to navigate uncertain futures and narrate new ones.

In *Teaching for the Anthropocene*, Sutoris narrows the focus of climate activism to what he describes as the “communities of the future” (10) in Pashulok, India, and Wentworth, South Africa. He includes references to activist education, ecopedagogy, and Indigenous knowledges, specifically highlighting how the study participants reflect “the polyvocal nature of the activist movements,” something he notes is not previously considered within activist identities (202). Sutoris provides a lens into the entanglements experienced by youth activists, cautioning not to oversimplify climate change activism. The youth in his study challenge the narrative of “progress reflected in textbooks, curricula and in some teachers’ personal views,” while emphasizing the power of intergenerational dialogues “at the root of activists’ radical imaginations of the future” (203). The youth in Sutoris’s book align with global youth perspectives that education “must not be confined to the walls of school buildings” (Anayatova et al. 2022, 64) and that lessons from ancestors and nonhumans (both living or nonliving) can also help us engage with multiple ways of knowing. While Sutoris’s book does offer learning from activist politics and methods of producing multiple narratives, the book does not draw heavily on a broad range of Indigenous scholarly work and lacks references to land-based pedagogies, Black, ecofeminist, and other resistant scholarship where environmental education is being shaped by something other than ESD.

*Teaching in the Anthropocene* gathers insights from educators in both formal and nonformal spaces, offering a window into the multiple opportunities educators have to introduce counternarratives and promote activism in classroom settings. In a section discussing challenges to teacher education practice and praxis, Liza Ireland (“Recognizing and Addressing Influential Root Metaphors”) questions dominant metaphors (such as individualism, linear progress, nature as a resource, and world as machine) as a way to unravel Cartesian approaches in education and simultaneously challenge the readers to engage in establishing new metaphors as alternative education frameworks (such as interdependence, community, diversity, spiral teaching, and more). In another section of the book focusing on the affective dimensions of teaching, Maya T. Borhani and Adrian M. Downey (“What Good Is a Poem When the World Is on Fire”) frame ways to support youth in developing their identities concerning climate anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. They delve into *ecoanxiety* and suggest ways of learning about “infusing hope into pedagogical practices” (112)—an emphasis echoed by Maria Vamvalis (“Nurturing Embodied Agencies in Response to Climate Anxiety: Exploring Pedagogical Possibilities”) in

connecting climate emotions to just citizenship action. In the third section, on relational pedagogies, Jeannie Kerr and Sarah Amsler (“Challenging Complacency in K–12 Climate Change Education in Canada”) give an example of how educators of today might engage Indigenous knowledges and ontologies as counternarratives, noting that “educators have opportunities to recognize, question, and challenge modernity-coloniality in teaching, curriculum design, and policy, and to interrupt its circuits of power in education today (173). In the final section, each chapter looks to the future of teaching, planting the seeds for a multitude of social movements, activism-oriented pedagogies, ways of learning and knowing, geographies, and opportunities to codesign learning experiences as ways to reimagine education futures, while narrating a new world. As one example, members of the Sojourners Collective, in their chapter titled “Deep Listening,” position *ecocentrism* as “a term for post-anthropocentric, posthumanist worldview that all things are alive, entangled, and intra-active” (241).

Overall, each text contributes a unique perspective to the ongoing literature that is urgently needed to articulate counternarratives for the Anthropocene. The texts include a range of theoretical perspectives and practical resources, which could be shared across diverse educational contexts for inspiration, support, and mobilization into action.

### Storying New Worlds

Storytelling commonly involves three main components: the story, the storyteller, and the story listeners. So far, we have shared insights from the three recently published books about the story of the Anthropocene, highlighting various attempts to challenge this dominant narrative and make space for alternative education futures. We have also introduced many storytellers who are working to radically rearticulate the single, totalizing narrative of the Anthropocene while narrating and multiplying different futures. As story listeners, we now have the opportunity to dive deeper into the multiple stories shared by the authors and think together with these three texts about how these alternative stories might shift our systems and structures. We are also responsible for taking the baton and putting our own stories into dialogue with others. By accepting an invitation to think “outside the conventional paradigms, spaces, and practices of education for inspiration” (*Educating for the Anthropocene*, 200), we can join in the collective effort of creating a multiplicity of stories that will rewrite the single narrative of the Anthropocene. As Haraway reminds us, “it matters which stories make worlds and which worlds make stories.” So our invitation is to think deeply about the stories that have created the violences of the Anthropocene and seek out those worlds, visions, voices, and perspectives that might offer up alternative stories.

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