

## INTERVIEW

# Hyperobjects, Hyposubjects and Solidarity in the Anthropocene: *Anthropocenes* Interview with Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer

*Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*

On behalf of *Anthropocenes* journal, David Chandler interviewed Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer in advance of the publication of their book *Hyposubjects*, under review with Open Humanities Press.

The authors were asked to consider whether the anthropocene is used too much as a ‘short cut’ restraining thought; regarding the evolution of hyposubjects; about speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (OOO) and the role of withdrawal in their approach to hyperobjects.

**Keywords:** hyposubjects; hyperobjects; Anthropocene; object-orientated ontology; human; speculative realism

On behalf of *Anthropocenes* journal, David Chandler interviewed Timothy Morton<sup>1</sup> and Dominic Boyer<sup>2</sup> in advance of the publication of their book *Hyposubjects*, under review with Open Humanities Press.<sup>3</sup>

***Anthropocenes:*** *This interview forms part of the first issue of the Anthropocenes journal, so maybe it would be useful to start with how important you both feel the conceptualisation of the Anthropocene has been to shaking up more traditional academic approaches? Many readers may be unsure how a geological claim of human impact on the Earth relates to concerns of climate change and species extinction and to the popularisation of alternative philosophical and conceptual approaches. The Anthropocene seems to be doing a lot of work in bringing everything together, or is it perhaps used too much as a short cut, limiting our thinking?*

***Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer:*** A concept is only ever as good as the care with which it is put into the world. The very strictly scientific definition of Anthropocene (which too many non-science scholars flat-out ignore) is, ‘There is a layer of human-made materials at the top of Earth’s crust. This layer began around 10,000 BCE, has significant markers during the time of European colonialism (early seventeenth century) and the start of fossil fuel burning (1784) and accelerates in 1945.’ Period. Science could have called it Jellyfish Surprise for all it cares about the implications of the name.

‘Anthropocene’ can be (and certainly has been) used in all manner of universalizing transcendent ways that reinscribe a general category of Human Being. That ‘we’re

all in the same boat because we’ve all been very bad’ Anthropocene concept is pernicious not only because it re-writes history but also because it offers both global liberal elites and national populist elites an alibi for further programs of dispossession and domination in order to save ‘Humans’ from themselves. For us, we agree with our friend Claire Colebrook<sup>4</sup> when she writes that recognition of the Anthropocene ought to prompt the ‘return of difference.’ There have been a variety of phase-shifts within the Anthropocene trajectory: the agrilogistics of human settlement was one, the spread of apocalyptic desert monotheisms was another, the colonization of the planet by European empires was still another. All predate and inform the petrocultural accelerationism of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that is usually stipulated as the chief Anthropocene vector. We talk about all these things in *Hyposubjects* as a way of approaching the Anthropocene in a more differentiated way.

***A:*** *Could you say something about the evolution of your thinking of hyposubjects and the broader project of which this is a part? We like the 2016 phase that ‘hyposubjects are the native species of the Anthropocene’, could you unpack that a little – is all agency that of hyposubjects or is it explicitly contrasting with the hypersubject of the modern episteme?*

***TM and DB:*** Our motivating intuition is that the time of hypersubjects is ending because of the hyperobjective conditions they’ve created. At some level the hypersubjects are aware of their doom and they are beginning to panic about it. They are gathering hysterically behind the most grotesque exemplars of their kind—the Donald Trumps and Jair Bolsonaros—as though some angry old white lunatic or another will save them. It won’t. The earth is turning away from certain forms of life as Beth Povinelli<sup>5</sup>

likes to say. And, conversely, it is turning toward others. That's where the hyposubjects come in. But one thing you're not going to find in our project is a theory of hyposubjects. For the most part, we're simply bystanders to the process of hyposubjects coming into their own in the multiphasic landscape of hyperobjects. We have some thoughts about hyposubjects' potentiality and we share them but we'll leave it to the hyposubjects to theorize their agency (if that's something they're interested in doing). Maybe they'd rather just remake their world instead. What Vaneigem<sup>6</sup> wrote during the heyday of Situationism seems apt for the XR generation too: 'You're fucking around with us? Not for long!'

**A:** *Could you say a little about your conceptual journeys? How does the development of your thinking relate to some key figures and perhaps to the more formal theorising of Speculative Realism<sup>7</sup> and Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)<sup>8</sup>?*

**TM and DB:** Well, part of the motivation to write the book was a basic wish to curtail some of the narcissistic self-attack that seems so prevalent on the left. One of us is a deconstructive OOO kind of a thinker, the other isn't, though we are both very inclined towards left theory of all kinds. Timothy Morton didn't ever think he was going to use the word *subject* in anything at all! But as was pointed out in our answer about the Anthropocene, it's not so much what a concept is but how you use it that counts.

Why can't we all just get along? Solidarities have been eroded when they need to be forged and reforged, *right now*. If we humans can't do it amongst ourselves, we won't be forging any with polar bears and coral. The narcissism of small differences is why it's so hard to see that there's more in common between me and a \$30,000 per year person and a \$400,000 per year person, than there is between all of us and a \$65,000,000 a year person. It's hard to visualize such a difference in scale, which is what power is counting on.

One consequence of this is that we wrote the book like it was a Virginia Woolf novel. We use the first person singular (unlike, say, Deleuze and Guattari<sup>9</sup>), so there are sentences like: 'I like hedgehogs. I don't.' We think this makes a point. We also have a rule that in five years' time two other people have to rewrite *Hyposubjects*: the book as videogame. It's a way to make some hyposubjects, for a kickoff.

**A:** *How do hyperobjects<sup>10</sup> fit in with OOO? Are all objects hyperobjects?*

**TM and DB:** Yeah why not? A hyperobject is a relational thing. To an electron, a biro is a hyperobject.

**A:** *What is the role of withdrawal in your approach to hyperobjects, and indeed in the Anthropocene? One gets a sense that perhaps the Anthropocene is the time of revelation and rejoining rather than withdrawal, as the unintended consequences, the excluded relations and externalities return with a vengeance. Could you say a little more about this relation between withdrawal and appearance?*

**TM and DB:** It's a common and understandable mistake to visualize something when you hear the word 'withdraw.' What you visualize is something shrinking back or disappearing. That's not what the word means. What the word means is that no matter how you try to access a thing, all you ever get is thing data. It's basic contemporary philosophy, on which Foucault, Butler, Irigaray, Derrida<sup>11</sup> ... are all based.

Think about it. When you bite a banana you obtain a banana bite. When you lick a banana you get a banana lick. When you think about a banana you get a banana thought. When you draw the banana you get a banana drawing. When the banana becomes sentient and goes on Oprah and starts to talk—'I found myself in a paragraph about bananas by the authors of *Hyposubjects* ... it was a traumatic self-awakening ...'—all you have is banana interview. Even the banana themselves can't fully access the banana banana. And since licking is just as good or just as bad as thinking at accessing the banana banana, snails and hurricanes are just as good or as bad as humans and there's nothing special about humans at all. Note that this doesn't mean that hurricanes have the same rights as humans or whatever. It's a terrifically freeing way of thinking, politically. It means you're free to make the kinds of political affiliations you want to make, without recourse to metaphysics. You don't have to prove that lemurs have a self-concept or that angel fish are smart in order to forge solidarities with them. Let's get on with it!

It's all about appearing. Hyperobjects tell you something true about any old objects. You can think them, but you can't quite point to all of them, not because you can't know them, but because you can. Hyperobjects are so, so in our faces, so part of our DNA and our bloodstream, not sitting behind glass in some aestheticized 'over yonder,' that we can't quite point to them. It's not that *withdraw* means *become distant*. Withdrawal is just one word you can use for an unspeakable intimacy. You don't have to use that word in particular to concur with OOO, if it freaks you out.

We have loads of data about things that affect us as deeply as hyperobjects. So do flocks of geese and frogspawn—everything is affected by oil corporations, for example. All lifeforms contain some Teflon.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton is Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University, Texas and author of *Being Ecological* (London: Penguin, 2018) and *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017). See also blog.

<sup>2</sup> Dominic Boyer is Professor of Anthropology, Rice University, Texas.

<sup>3</sup> *Hyposubjects: Politics of the Ecological Emergency (Human Language Edition)*. Under revision. Open Humanities Press.

<sup>4</sup> Professor of Philosophy, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Penn State College of the Liberal Arts. On the 'return of difference' see C. Colebrook 'We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual' in *Anthropocene Feminism* edited

by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 1–20.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University in the City of New York. See E. Povinelli *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Raoul Vaneigem (1934–) author of *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (New York and London: Left Bank Books and Rebel Press, 1983 [1967]); see chapter 25, available at <https://libcom.org/library/revlife26>.

<sup>7</sup> A philosophical movement dating back to a conference held at Goldsmiths College, University of London, April 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Considered a subset of speculative realism initially propounded by (amongst others) Graham Harman and Levy Bryant.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Pierre-Félix Guattari (1930–1992).

<sup>10</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault (1926–1984); Judith Butler (1956–); Luce Irigaray (1930–); Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

**How to cite this article:** *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*. (2020). Hyperobjects, Hyposubjects and Solidarity in the Anthropocene: *Anthropocenes* Interview with Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer. *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*, 1(1): 10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.5>

**Submitted:** 29 November 2019

**Accepted:** 03 December 2019

**Published:** 27 May 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.

OPEN ACCESS