

BOOK REVIEW

Morton, T. & Boyer, D (2021). *Hyposubjects: On becoming human*. Open Humanities Press.

Nicola Robertson¹

In the opening of their book *Hyposubjects: On becoming human*, Morton and Boyer (2021) prepare their reader that “what follows is an exercise in flimsy and chaotic thinking” (13). As introductions go, it is certainly unusual, irreverent and an astute assessment of how the book unfolds.

While the book is credited to Morton, Boyer, their relations, and companions, it is safe to assume that the interlocutors in this dialogue are Morton and Boyer themselves. Timothy Morton is a prolific writer and creator spanning art, music, and literature, while Dominic Boyer describes himself as a “writer, media maker and anthropologist” (Morton & Boyer, 2021). What they share is a common interest in environmental challenges and posthumanism, and they come together in this work to share their unstructured discussions on a myriad of topics related to this theme.

Hyposubjects situates itself among the discourse of ecological posthumanist thought with serious credence. Morton’s overall catalogue of work could, itself, be considered canonical in the field and this book slots nicely into his back catalogue. What is ultimately presented is something that I felt was less prone to the trap of the “flat ontology” (Snaza et al., 2014) that posthumanism can sometimes find itself in, and is more in keeping with the heterogeneous companionship of species—beyond only animals—advocated by Donna Haraway in her *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), and again later when she calls for us to “Make kin not babies!” (2015, 161). Morton and Boyer do not believe that we should endow all entities with self-concept in order to treat them equally; rather it is possible to live harmoniously with them, sharing the status of hyposubject, without feeling the need to dominate over them. I interpreted the overall message of the book to be that it would be to our ecological benefit if we were to jettison our hypersubjectivity and move away from ideas of anthropocentrism.

Given that this particular book has no discernible structure, I must dispense with a meticulously delineated summarisation of the contents, and I suspect the authors might appreciate something of a departure from the norm. This being said, the book is loosely divided into chapters, each one delineated at the outset by themed headings. The first chapter introduces the hyposubject by way of discussing the associated concept of the hyperobject, and the key concept of squatting. The second chapter thinks about the subject from competing phenomenological viewpoints: from Heidegger’s concept of Dasein to object-oriented ontology. By rejecting the idea of Dasein, the hyposubject can accept themselves as “intrinsically un-alienated” (Morton & Boyer, 2021, 32) as

¹ Nicola Robertson, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G1 1XQ, United Kingdom. E-mail: n.robertson@strath.ac.uk



such that they can understand that other things can be subjects and, in fact, “humans are not so special after all” (Morton & Boyer, 2021, 32). In chapter three, the interlocutors discuss the game of (right wing) global politics. It compares the political space to live action roleplay, which in turn the hyposubject should ignore if they are to be politically effective. Chapter four muses on what kind of things could be a hyposubject, introducing the idea of subscedence (withdrawing, becoming closer to things) over transcendence (making oneself more powerful). The final chapter builds on the idea of subscedence and links it to desire, speculating that it is a modern objective to remain in a constant state of pleasure.

The above constitutes a very brief description of the contents of each chapter. Since each chapter in the book represents a transcribed dialogue between the two authors, they are uniquely characterised by the tangential, conversational aspect of such a dialogue. It is not immediately apparent that these are dialogues, or that there is more than one voice, as they are not presented in a recognisable dialogue format. The justification for this is that the authors were trying to invoke the chaotic, stream-of-consciousness prose occasionally found in the work of Virginia Woolf. As aspirations go, this is certainly an admirable one. I am sceptical as to its success as a method for creating an entire work, bearing in mind that Woolf used her technique as islands of chaos in otherwise normality. Although, I suppose it could be argued that a book such as this represents one such island in the vanilla waters of academic discourse.

While they claim that this book is not a theory of the hyposubject, it feels to me as though there is an attempt at creating one and if the reader is searching for a figurative vertebra of an argument, it is here that it can be found. I may have been impeded as a reader having not first read Morton’s work on Hyperobjects (2013), although from this book I now have a rudimentary understanding of a hyperobject as anything that is so large that it cannot be seen or comprehended in its entirety such as Coronavirus or, indeed, humanity. Further to this, hyperobjects can be constituted by both hypersubjects and hyposubjects: humans can be either hyper- or hyposubjects but neither of these need necessarily be human. Hypersubjects, the authors explain, are predominantly white, Western, men who look for some kind of status, either political, or as an expert (even a pseudo-expert on Twitter). These are the people who decide the way they want things to be and will make efforts to get there to the detriment of others. Kierkegaard’s (1987) pseudonymous “A” may have characterised these people as the *boring* ones whose constant quest to be doing has thrust themselves, and perhaps the world, into an existential crisis.

Hyposubjects, given the authors’ descriptions of what these are, do not seem to necessarily be the opposite of hypersubjects. In terms of humanity as a hyperobject, this is made up of both hyper- and hyposubjects. One distinction between the two seems to be that hyposubjects “squat” in the hyperobject. The connotations of the idea of “squatting” are of things that can inhabit anywhere, usually uninvited, nearly always maligned. It also makes one think that whatever is “squatting” is ready for something — to move on, to jump up, to break out. Yet, they also say that hyposubjects can never really be defined as living or dead, and they are always less than the sum of their parts (one forest is less than the sum of the total trees contained within). We could, though, also say the same of the hyperobject: is humanity, when taken as a whole entity, not also less than the sum of its 7 billion parts? Perhaps this is addressed in Morton’s earlier work. My interpretation results in an understanding of the hyposubject to be too playful to participate in the neo-liberal environment and executing a passive revolution (if such a thing could exist) by going off grid. The whole idea reminded me of the old Biblical adage, “the meek shall inherit the Earth.” Becoming a hyposubject is a route to becoming human, apparently. Much as the authors predicted, any theory that I have



extrapolated is flimsy, messy, and conceptually very blurry. This is perhaps not the place to look if your intention is to find a sharp definition of a hyposubject, but it is a good place to start if you want to build one yourself.

In parts, this stream-of-consciousness approach bears significant fruit. As someone engaged in the discipline of Education Studies, I am most intrigued by the conceptualisation of teenager as a state of suspended potentiality (Morton & Boyer, 2021, 22) even before any suggestion that we are somehow all teenagers being repressed by a world to which we have no access (the ‘adult’ world, as the authors tell us). The use of various science fiction franchises and characters to suggest the exohuman property of the hyposubject is delightful for me, as it roots the seeming randomness in something with which I can concretely identify. It was at this point in the book that I really felt that I was part of a dialogue, rather than a voyeur, although the feeling was short-lived. However, I suspect that any reader would be able to find themselves in parts of this book given that the subject matter shifts randomly across a diverse universe of thought.

In short, I cannot decide whether this book is a work of disruptive genius or a hubristic gimmick. On the first hand, to break down the accepted form of the academic dialogue is admirable—it has changed little since Plato’s time. To use such a deconstruction to then muse upon the deconstruction of the Anthropocene is a skilful and astute strategy to help the reader to try to identify the aim in this work.

If the reader is willing to commit themselves to the possibility, I think this work contains important contributions to current discourse in posthumanism. Most notably, for me, it establishes a feeling of optimism and hope; it relinquishes what Derrida termed the ‘apocalyptic tone’. The authors take responsibility—as white, heterosexual men—for their part in constructing the Anthropocene, but they further imbue themselves, and others, with the potential to transition from hyper- to hyposubjects. It is the hyposubjects of the world who can thrust off the neoliberal shackles of constant production, return to a playful sense of living, and ward off the impending ecological crisis. The underlying hopefulness for, and in, humanity as emerging hyposubjects is what adds to the potential genius of this work.

However, to just publish conversations, in the irreverent way that an inexperienced podcaster might, assumes that they believe people might be interested in their content (of course, this is true of any publication). To then tell the reader at the outset that they are bound to be disappointed by what the book contains certainly left this reader begging the question, ‘then why should I read it?’ If not for the fact that I was writing this review, upon reading the first few sentences of this work it is likely that I would have gone no further, and this is a shame given the occasional nugget contained within. Perhaps as a reader I am just not ready for neither brutal honesty nor heavy handed reverse psychology, or whatever strategy was being employed in this case. Furthermore, this work feels like it is very much aimed at those people who are already knowledgeable about posthumanist thought, and philosophy to a degree. This, of course, reads like a conversation between two academics, and so it holds all of the characteristics of academic conversations, including occasional obfuscation (not helped by the unique form and structure) and concepts introduced which neither interlocutor needs to explain since the other instinctively knows what they are saying. I would suggest this would suit academics, or readers who already have some involvement in ecology, environmental issues or posthumanism.

My suggestion: take the authors’ advice and read with caution.

References

- Haraway, D. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Haraway, D. (2015). Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making kin. *Environmental Humanities*, 6(2015), 159-165.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1987). *Kierkegaard's writing, III, Part I: Either/Or* (H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Snaza, N., Appelbaum, P., Bayne, S., Carlson, D., Morris, M., Rotas, N., Sandlin, J., Wallin, J., & Weaver, J. (2014). Toward a Posthuman Education. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(2), 39-55.

