

14 *Durée*

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Durée (duration) has come, after Henri Bergson, to be synonymous with *lived time*, with what it is to endure and live time (in both passive and active senses). While an initial reading of Bergson might take *durée* to be equivalent to the internal time or flow of consciousness—or, more broadly, mind (*esprit*)—and to be contrary to materiality, sociality, and space (especially if limited to Bergson’s early work),¹ this way of reading *durée* falters with subsequent texts (*Matière et mémoire* onward) and as soon as one begins to think through the lived implications of enduring.² For not only should we avoid pre-determining who or what is living time; lived time is not reducible to consciousness for Bergson, nor are *durées* limited to human, or even animal, lives. Taking seriously what it means to endure and live time impels us to think *durée* not only as substantive (*la durée*) but as verbal (*durer*), to take the ontological sense of being as becoming.³ I want to argue that what appears to be a quantifiable period or continuum—the *durée* of a phenomenon or life—is felt as an intensive and affectively differentiating process, *for which the weight of its own duration makes a difference*. This is to say that *durée* is not a linear flow that moves on from the past toward an indiscriminately “open” future, but is one that carries the past with it in relational and nonlinear ways—for which the past remains operative, neither closed book nor completed being. The duration of pastness continues to push on, or weigh down, the present but in differential and affective ways.

My purpose in rethinking *durée* is to make visible its sometimes sidelined ethical and political dimensions, while also putting under pressure the categories and distinctions according to which its phenomenological and ontological senses have seemed self-evident (e.g., future/past, quality/quantity, continuity/discontinuity). I want to retool the term so as to allow an understanding of the *longue durée*⁴ of racism and the afterlives of colonialism and slavery whose “rot remains,” instituting the phenomenological field of possibility and enduring in the material, embodied, and affective life of the present (differentially, for differently positioned subjects).⁵

Zigzagging Senses of *Durée*

The common sense of *durée* (in French) takes it to belong to something, a relation of possession. It is the *durée of* consciousness, of a life, of things, or of historical events. *Durée* is delimited and periodized within the life of things to which it applies. Because of the stability of the thing or the self-identity of the phenomenon projected behind it, *durée* is taken to measure the interval *in which* they take place, perceived as a continuum.⁶ What is missed is not only the way in which *durée* escapes quantification while grounding measure, but also how *durée* generates intervals through its rhythmic punctuation and hesitation—how its perceived continuity, or flow, relies on structuring discontinuities and differentiations, how *durée* is a kind of multiplicity.

More than a simple reversal, the Bergsonian sense of *durée* deepens and destabilizes the common understanding in three ways. First, it makes *durée* an absolute: rather than time belonging to us, we belong to it. This recalls Deleuze's argument, in his reading of Bergson, that reducing *durée* to subjective, interior life misses its radical immanence: we live, move, and change within time.⁷ But this relation should not be read as that of container to content. *Durée*, to borrow a Merleau-Pontian expression, is an invisible yet structuring dimension *according to which* we live; it is not a thing but that through or against which things and events appear.⁸ Thus *durée* lies before measure—a grounding dimension that makes measure possible.

It is commonplace to describe Bergsonian *durée* as a qualitative flow, which is falsified if spatialized (e.g., clock-time); time is taken to be opposed to spatial extension and quality to quantity. This misses, however, the second, deeper import of the Bergsonian turn in thinking time as *durée*. While Bergson often emphasizes the risks of spatialization (in addition to its practical and utilitarian functions), it should be noted that spatializing schemas skew not only how we understand life, consciousness, and time but also how we see matter and extension. The spatial schema is an abstract, homogeneous grid projected onto material extension that freezes its movements and empties out its temporal rhythms; this cuts up the flow of the material universe and solidifies it into (countable) objects, while condensing sensations into (qualitative) attributes.⁹ Rather than simply reversing the quantity/quality distinction, then, *durée* comes prior to this distinction and is the source of both terms.¹⁰

Third is the understanding of *durée* as continuum. Gaston Bachelard famously criticized Bergsonism for eliding the discontinuity and negativity that must ontologically undergird *durée*; what results is a confused flow, where interruptions are epiphenomenal, unable to do justice to either the phenomenology of the passage of time or the instant.¹¹ Bergson's early account of *durée* as interpenetrating, heterogeneous flow (*Essai*) sometimes lends itself to this interpretation. By overemphasizing the role of succession over coexistence in structuring *durée*, dimensional and vertical relations that organize the flow are presented vaguely in terms of overlap or "interpenetration."¹² But if this interpenetration remains undifferentiated, then heterogeneity disappears in a fog where moments blend and where differences in kind between past and present are subsumed to a presentist and linear continuum. Rather than taking *durée* to simply *flow*, then, I think that pastness and memory must be understood to form the invisible,

and unconscious, infrastructure of *durée*. Moreover, the past should be conceived as dynamic and nonrepresentational—as tendency and affect rather than sediment or aggregate of fractionable instants. This is born out by Bergson's accounts of the past in *Matière et mémoire* and *L'évolution créatrice*. The implication (in response to Bachelard) is that Bergsonian *durée* weaves together *both* discontinuity *and* continuity, one through the other.

Nonlinear *Durée*: Hesitation and the Affective Weight of the Past

That *durée* is neither linear succession nor uninterrupted continuity puts under pressure the idea of time as progress. *Durée* should not be construed as a seamless movement of progress oriented toward the future, *moving on and leaving the past behind* (with closure determining the past and openness located only in the future). This misses the intensively accumulating and differentiating force of the past. While *durée* may initially appear as flow, that flow is immanently structured through hesitation: "Time is . . . hesitation, or it is nothing at all," says Bergson.¹³ Such hesitation may be understood from three angles. (1) Phenomenologically, hesitation is the interval within *durée*, the delay in perception, opened up in the sensorimotor schema of the body by its affective thickness and complexity; living bodies feel rather than simply react, allowing memory to flood in and differentially inform the course of action. But (2), ontologically, the zone of indeterminacy that is my hesitating body is a rhythm of *durée* that embodies an intensive configuration of pastness—materialized in my habitualities, actualized in my recollections, and felt in the unconscious weight of the past that pushes down upon me or buoys me up. (3) The import of pastness reminds us that, structurally, *durée* involves a dissymmetrical splitting of time (more fountain than flow): ever *passing* on the cusp to futurity, the present is sustained by the *coexistence of the past* that it falls into and reconfigures.¹⁴

Thus *my durée*—how I live or endure time, how or that I hesitate—is linked to the affective weight of the past for me (which is more than just *my* past).¹⁵ Ways of living pastness shape the field of the present while opening intervals of indeterminacy that ripple through time. This coexistence of past with present—the past's nonrepresentational, affective, and dimensional work—(un)grounds continuity while making hesitation and transformation possible. To say that the past endures in or remains with the present is neither to make it another presence, nor is it nostalgic retrieval. What can be consciously recollected are fragments. But to remain unconscious and nonobjectivated is not equivalent to erasure or active disregard, for unconsciousness is part of the power of the past. It is how the contingent past becomes general, dimensional, atmospheric, and enveloping.¹⁶ In this way, the past as a multiplicitous whole—as a nonlinear system of relations—forms the virtual atmosphere, milieu, or texture of our lives; it insinuates itself into the present *as past*, without becoming actual.¹⁷ Unrepresented, yet differentially felt in its magnetizing effects and orienting force, the past is a structuring dimension *according to which* we perceive and live.

Although it is difficult to think the past beyond the dichotomy of conservation and negation, a third way is suggested by Maurice Merleau-Ponty when he notes, in *Le visible et l'invisible*, that “its absence counts in the world.”¹⁸ Here, absence is operative, orienting (and potentially disorienting); it acts indirectly through motivation rather than efficient causality. *Durée* has the power of *institution*. This points, on the one hand, to the past’s grounding function and normative weight in experience and, on the other hand, to how the past makes possible a sequel, which can also be a shift in sense and difference.¹⁹ This is because *durée* institutes dimensions, a system of differences, *according to which* meaning can be made; change in how meaning is made (or in how one perceives and feels) takes the instituted past as pivot.

To complicate the concept of institution, *durée* should also be understood as *tendency*. To describe the *durée* of a life and the *durée* of life, Bergson opens *L'évolution créatrice* with the image of a snowballing past, meant to show how the enduring past is felt as changing weight, pressure, and tendency (*tendance*).²⁰ Breaking with linear teleology and undoing the solidity of institution, tendencies meander, changing intensively and diverging through the contingency of their own duration. Events endure and are conserved not simply as contents but in how they relate to and reconfigure the past as a whole. It is in this sense that we can understand the *irreversibility* of the past within a nonlinear theory of *durée*. The past snowballing on itself is not the accumulation of events in a disorganized mass, but a past in continual movement, *immanently reconfigured through its own duration*.²¹ This past remains incomplete: because it is haunted by the memory of tendencies, diverged from but not actualized—traces of what might have been²²—and because it is open to the creation of possibility, when the circle of the social imaginary is disrupted, so that hitherto foreclosed meaning-making ripples through time.²³

Colonial *Durée*

To take seriously the *durées* of colonialism is to recognize their enveloping waters, their stifling atmospheres. Colonial and racial formations endure and are rephrased—or, more precisely, in enduring are rephrased, without losing hold.²⁴ Such an understanding of their *durée* presents an antidote to the idea of linear progress, in which the grip of oppressions is supposed to loosen in a present that overcomes, and has moved on from, the past. Indeed, the linear time of progress could be conceived as a ruse of empire—a way of hiding and exculpating present racism by positing racism to belong to the defunct past. This is where my rethinking of *durée* meets the concept of “coloniality” in Latin American philosophies (from Aníbal Quijano): the idea that colonialism is not a bygone event but a world system whose effects and affects continue to perdure and to structure our present.²⁵

So far I have drawn on several watery, atmospheric, and ghostly metaphors to describe *durée*. Such images powerfully capture the work of the past as a fluid milieu that overflows objectification, but also aptly describe how the past may immerse us or offer us buoyancy, how memories may flood in or remain nebulous, how my body may anchor me in the present, and how events may create ripples through time. Bodies of

water affectively pull us into the past: the Middle Passage, the Black Atlantic, refugee crossings and drownings of the Mediterranean, the Persian (Arabian) gulf, the Tigris and Euphrates. Colonialism, Frantz Fanon says, occupies not only the land but also our bodies and our breathing;²⁶ racism is not only institutional but, through the weight of its own duration, it becomes atmospheric.²⁷ Colonizations and stereotypes of the past *bog down* racialized subjects.²⁸ While searching in the archives of slavery and finding only spectral figures, silences, and evasions, Saidiya Hartman tries to conjure and give voice to the lives of ghosts (all the time wary of reproducing the specular enjoyment of suffering that was part of slavery).²⁹ Hortense Spillers goes back to the belly of the slave ships where gender was quantified and flesh made “cargo,” the journey through which African female flesh is “ungendered” and its racial afterlives.³⁰ Christina Sharpe charts the afterlives of slavery through the wake, ship, hold, and weather, interweaving present and past wakes, dead and living, in a methodology of “wake work.”³¹ And Alexander Weheliye exposes the racialization of the flesh in constructions of the “human” and appeals to its viscosity to rethink subjection.³²

We are reminded that the very duration of colonialism and white supremacy makes a difference: that they intensify through time, even while being rephrased. Its “retrograde movement,” or feedback loop, institutes a history that naturalizes and justifies colonial conquest by scapegoating the bodies and cultures of those who came to be colonized. But this is also a duration that needs to be shored up and maintained by active forgetting and disregard in the present and by reiterations and reinventions of colonial formations through other means. For the colonized and racialized—or the “formerly” colonized—to live under the weight of what I am calling *colonial durée* (*colonial duration*) is to experience a “painful sense of time.”³³

What is elided in colonial *durée* is the simultaneity and “coevalness” of *durations*, of multiple ways of living time.³⁴ The racialized subject feels herself coming *too late*, projected back to a perpetual past, in a linear timeline that begins with ancient Greece and where Eurocentric civilization constitutes modernity.³⁵ As Fanon shows, such allochronism may be lived as bodily fragmentation or “tetanization.”³⁶ At the same time, persisting legacies of white supremacy and colonialism are expressed in the “affective ankylosis” and indifference of colonial bodies³⁷—racial pathologies of ignorance that sustain sites of white and neocolonial privilege.³⁸ Despite them both outwardly resembling paralysis, tetanization and “affective ankylosis” reveal very different ways of living colonial *durée*, feeling the weight of the colonial past, and hesitating; they map different positionalities. *Tetanization* points to the hypersensibility and bodily sensitivity of colonized subjects.³⁹ But *ankylosis* describes the affective indifference of *colonial subjects*, their ability to disregard, compartmentalize, or “forget” the histories from which they stem; it captures the recalcitrance and lack of hesitation of racializing habits of perception.

That racism wears and bogs us down—differentially—through its duration, means that it cannot be shrugged off. To move on, leaving it unchallenged in the background, allows its colonial construction of the past to become normative—adherent, generalized, and atmospheric. Critique requires not only the recognition of simultaneous, multiple *durées*, but resistance at the level of the past: reconfiguring its relations to generate intervals of buoyancy, ebb and flow, to make the past hesitate.

Notes

1. Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1927).

2. Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (1896; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1939).

3. Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (1907; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1941), 298.

4. Fernand Braudel's historical term differs from lived time, but I also see convergences with Bergson. Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences Sociales: La longue durée," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 13, no. 4 (1958): 725–53.

5. Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–2. Stoler quotes "the rot remains" from the poem "Ruins of a Great House" by Derek Walcott. There, Walcott describes empire as "ulcerous crime" and "rotting lime," making palpable its corrosive duration.

6. This is the first (nonphilosophical) sense of *durée* in *Le Nouveau Petit Robert: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, VUEF, 2003). The second (philosophical) sense is "temps vécu," opposed to spatialization and derived from Bergson. Also, *La Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, www.cnrtl.fr/definition/durée, accessed December 14, 2017. *Duration* in English shares this sense of "the time during which a thing . . . continues." "Duration, n.," *OED*, 2017, www.oed.com, accessed December 14, 2017.

7. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), 110.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'esprit* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 23; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution, La Passivité, Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1954–1955* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2003), 249–50.

9. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, 231–36; Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, 299–307.

10. Witness Bergson's attempt to *think with* the duration of matter in *Matière et mémoire* (chapter 4) and his genetic account of materiality as the relaxation and inversion of *élan vital* in *L'évolution créatrice* (201–11).

11. Gaston Bachelard, *La dialectique de la durée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), vii, 7–8.

12. Bergson, *Essai*, 75–77.

13. Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* (1934; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1938), 101, translation mine.

14. Henri Bergson, *L'énergie spirituelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1919), 131–2; Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, 109.

15. I read the Bergsonian past-in-general as more than any personal past, even though it is the past from the perspective of my body in the world. Alia Al-Saji, "The Memory of Another Past," *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004): 203–39.

16. In *L'Institution*, Merleau-Ponty argues that, since the past is the level *according to which* one perceives, it cannot itself be perceived. This invisibility assures ubiquity or generality.

17. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, 5, 20.

18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, ed. C. Lefort (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 281.

19. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution*, 38–41.

20. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, 2, 4–6.

21. *Reconfiguration* is my term. I use it to capture how the past changes along with the present, without rewriting or erasure, and while retaining an organic memory of transformations it has undergone. Al-Saji, “Hesitation as Philosophical Method—Travel Bans, Colonial Durations, and the Affective Weight of the Past,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2018): 331–59.

22. In Bergson’s hypothesis of *élan vital*, life holds a multiplicity of tendencies that, insofar as they are virtual, coexist in mutual implication. As they grow, however, tendencies become incompatible and diverge. Nonactualized tendencies are not erased; they remain as *virtual memories* or *traces* that haunt other lines of evolution and could lead to different materializations (*L'évolution créatrice*, 53, 90, 100, 119–20).

23. “In duration, considered as a creative evolution, there is perpetual creation of possibility and not only of reality” (Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, 13).

24. Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 237–65.

25. Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80. Indeed, coloniality molds our concept of being. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 240–70. Critically, this requires rethinking the coloniality of gender, as María Lugones argues in “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209.

26. Frantz Fanon, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (1959; Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 49.

27. Frantz Fanon, *Pour la révolution africaine: Écrits politiques* (1964; Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 48–49; Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (1961; Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 279.

28. Fanon says “engluer” in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 32, 224.

29. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

30. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

31. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016).

32. Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

33. Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1997), 226, translation mine.

34. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

35. Fanon, *Peau noire*, 118–19.

36. Fanon, *Peau noire*, 110. *Damnés* describes the muscle contractions and spasms of colonized subjects (279–80). (“Allochronism” is Fabian’s term for the temporal othering and denial of coevalness to other cultures.)

37. Fanon, *Peau noire*, 118–19.

38. Charles Mills diagnoses this “epistemology of ignorance” in *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18. (See Mills’s entry, “Epistemological Ignorance,” in this volume.) Stoler captures this ambivalence in the concept of “colonial aphasia” (*Duress*, 122).

39. Fanon, *Peau noire*, 110, 114. Fanon uses *tetanization* in medical and metaphorical senses at once. If colonization is *tetanus*, then it infects colonized bodies through colonial *wounds* (33, 94, 181); its toxicity provokes muscle spasms which may externally look like paralysis but betray excessive activity.