

## **‘Things that stay’: Feminist theory, duration and the future**

### **Abstract**

Taking up Grosz’s proposal for the ‘complexities of time and becoming’ to be considered seriously, this article explores the status of time and the future within feminist theory through empirical research in which teenage girls describe things ‘staying’. Focusing on these ‘things that stay’ and drawing on Bergson’s concepts of duration and the virtual, it argues that time is dynamic and heterogeneous; things endure through divergence and transformation. It argues that if the relations of temporality are understood as both continuous and discontinuous, enduring and changing, feminist theory orients to the future in ‘novel’ ways.

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### **Keywords**

becoming; bodies; duration; feminist theory; temporality

### **Disciplines**

Sociology; cultural studies; feminist theory; women's studies; philosophy

### **‘Things that stay’: Feminist theory, duration and the future**

[U]nless feminist theory becomes more self-aware of the intellectual and political resources it relies on, and the potentialities of these resources to produce the impetus to propel the present into a future not entirely contained by it, it risks being stuck in political strategies and conceptual dilemmas that are more appropriate to the past than the future. Unless it is capable of thinking the complexities of time and becoming, which involves a careful consideration of the ways in which the past, present and future are entwined, it risks losing its practical efficacy as a politics of the future. (Grosz 2000: 230-231)

RC: [do you find] if people say something nice about you, it generally doesn't stick with you?

DIONNE: yeah

RC: but if someone says something horrible about you?

FAY: it does

DIONNE: it stays in your mind

FAY: it completely, it will stay with you, it could be a little comment

DIONNE: and you'll think about it at least every day for at least a week and you'll concentrate on it

RC: ok

FAY:           and you'll think about it, 'oh god, someone said that about me',  
                  like Dan's given me a phobia about my bum, I knew I had a big  
                  bum but now I'm gonna have, like all week I'll be like

This article is an attempt to explicate some tendencies within feminist theory, and social and cultural theory more generally, to notions of novelty and the future. These tendencies can be broadly characterised as, in different ways, taking up and dealing with the work of Deleuze and Bergson (or 'the Bergsonism of Deleuze' as Suzanne Guerlac [2006] phrases it)<sup>1</sup>. Elizabeth Grosz's work (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2005a, 2005b) is exemplary of this trend although other feminist theorists have also thought through Deleuze and Bergson to create new ideas of gendered bodies (for example Braidotti 1994, 2001, 2006; Weiss 1999; Colebrook 2000; Buchanan and Colebrook 2000). Central to these shifts to Bergsonian and Deleuzian concepts is an understanding of temporality not as linear but as dynamic and heterogeneous; time does not (only) progress from past to present to future but rather, in Bergson's and Deleuze's terms, time is multiple and assembling. As Grosz suggests above, 'the past, present and future are entwined'. Here, I consider what a feminist reading of Bergson's and Deleuze's understandings of time might do to conceptions of the relations between bodies and images and, more especially, to the ways in which bodies become through images which endure and which assemble as novel temporalities.

My focus on feminist theory, rather than on social and cultural theory more widely, is because notions of novelty and the future are interesting to examine in relation to

feminism as a 'progressive' movement. That is, feminism as a political movement seeks to assess the material and imaginary conditions of women's pasts and presents and propose and progress towards different futures. One question I address here, then, concerns the status of time and the future in feminist theory and the ways in which feminist attention to Bergson's and Deleuze's conceptions of time might conceive the relations between the past, present and future. Making clear how a feminist theory which takes up Deleuze's and Bergson's work conceives the relations between different temporalities, the future and novelty is necessary to demonstrate how a focus on 'the new' does not sideline or ignore the past and its interaction with the present and future. Introducing the concept of the virtual, and in particular the relations between the virtual and duration, I explore how an orientation to novelty and the future does not suggest a future temporality which is disconnected from other (past and present) temporalities but instead a future which is, necessarily, the assemblage of past and present temporalities. As such, I argue that a tendency towards the future does not mean that feminist theory disregards the past and present but that it engages these temporalities in different, or 'new', ways.

To examine these ideas, my focus is empirical as well as theoretical. I explore empirical research with thirteen 13 and 14 year old girls concerned with the relations between their bodies and images (see Coleman forthcoming). The girls who participated were aged 13 and 14, were all white and came from two British schools, one in south east London and one in Oxfordshire. The research involved different kinds of interviews with the girls: a focus group, individual interviews and a group image-making session where the girls

created images of their bodies by using magazines, Polaroid photographs, make-up, sweet wrappers and craft materials. The interviews were all conducted at the girls' respective schools in school time. The research took a feminist-Deleuzian position and explored bodies and images not as separate or separable entities but as processes which become through each other. As such, bodies and images are seen as dynamic processes of movement and transformation, rather than as static and bounded forms. At the heart of the concept of becoming is this movement and transformation and also, crucially, 'the endless unfolding of the new' (Grosz 1999a: 5). Becoming also suggests the interconnectedness of 'things' in the world (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); things (bodies and images in this case) are always-already in relations with multiple and different things and, moreover, the becoming of these things is through these relations. The research therefore made central the relations between bodies and images. It understood images as producing knowledges, understandings and experiences of bodies and it explored the images that the girls explained as important to them as making possible, and impossible, particular becomings of bodies.

As indicated in the interview extract above, for the girls, 'images' of their bodies included those produced through comments from other people. I pick up on and conceive as images what some of the girls explain as comments which 'stay with you', which are 'concentrate[d] on' and which shape, or produce, experiences of their bodies; 'phobia', for example. I explore these experiences that 'stay' through Bergson's notion of duration. Duration accounts for the specificity of a body's temporality and for the novelty involved in durational rhythms which endure. I suggest that things that stay can be understood as

durations; intense moments of the past which endure and which assemble with present and future temporalities. The past in this sense does not determine the future but rather, in Bergson's (1903/ 1999, 1908/ 2002) terms, the past is virtual and actualises the future. The past endures and assembles to produce particular (actual) presents and futures. It is in this necessary but non-determining relation between the past and future that the future is novel and creative; assembled with and through the past but different ('in kind' [Deleuze 2002]) to it. In the next section I outline some of the ways in which 'time' and the future is conceived in feminist theory and explain, through the work of Grosz, how Bergson's and Deleuze's time might instead underpin feminist theory. Taking up this feminist Bergsonian and Deleuzian time, I then explore the empirical material with a focus on how the futurity of becoming accounts for the relations between the girls' pasts, presents and futures.

### **Feminist theory, time and duration**

The quotation from Grosz above is a provocative call<sup>1</sup> for feminist theory to address 'the complexities of time and becoming' in order to ensure its 'practical efficacy as a politics of the future' is not lost. For Grosz here, feminist theory 'risks being stuck in political strategies and conceptual dilemmas that are more appropriate to the past than the future'. My aim in extracting this quotation from Grosz's sophisticated argument is not to present her feminist theory as antagonistic to other feminist theories but rather to take seriously, examine, and think through in relation to empirical work, her suggestion that time and becoming should be central to contemporary feminist theory. Grosz's comments on the need for feminist theory to think time are in keeping with the focus on time and the

relationship between feminist pasts, presents and futures in a number of recent publications (for example Adkins 2004; Hoogland *et al* 2004; McRobbie 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Hemmings 2005) and events (for example the *European Journal of Women's Studies* 'Passing on feminism' conference, 2004, and the 'Generations: On feminist timelines' conference, Goldsmiths College, 2006). One point that these various feminist lines of enquiry have in common is the problem of equating time with linear progress<sup>3</sup>. That is, in different ways, feminist theory has been questioning the extent to which feminism is linear in its progression to a better future, or in its nostalgia for a better past.

For example, for Angela McRobbie (2004a, 2004b, 2007), the relationship between the pasts, presents and futures of feminism demands urgent critical attention because of what she describes as the incorporation of feminist ideals into contemporary (popular) culture in such a way that the feminist project is made to seem complete. Feminism cannot be conceived as linear (McRobbie 2004a: 721) because post-feminism operates through a double move in which feminist pasts are simultaneously built on and repudiated; feminism is therefore not progressive.<sup>4</sup> Clare Hemmings also challenges the assumed progress of feminist theory by examining how 'Western feminist theory tells its own story as a developmental narrative, where we move from a preoccupation with unity and sameness, through identity and diversity, and on to difference and fragmentation' (Hemmings 2005: 115-116). She argues that this 'story' is over-simplifying, depends on the allocation of various theoretical concerns to neat decades and, moreover, presents feminist theory according to either a narrative of progress (from the 'ignorant', 'innocent' or 'exclusionary' 1970s to the difference and multiplicity of the post-structuralist 1990s)



or of loss (for a more political, collective past, manifested as nostalgia for the past<sup>5</sup> or a ‘moving beyond’ the present) (Hemmings 2005: 126). While both McRobbie and Hemmings are clearly, and differently, engaged in a ‘careful consideration’ of ‘time’ in feminist theory, the quotation from Grosz at the opening of the article urges ‘thinking the complexities of time *and becoming*’ (my emphasis) and of the ‘politics of the future’. As such, from the point of view of Grosz’s call, what is not dealt with is the concept of becoming and feminist theory’s orientation to the novel. What I do in the rest of this article, through empirical work on the becoming of bodies through images, is consider how feminist theory might reconceive time through Bergsonian and Deleuzian notions of duration, the novel and the virtual.

Grosz’s insistence on the need for feminist theory to critically engage with becoming and the future emerges through her reading of Bergson and Deleuze for whom the concepts (or the ontology) of becoming and novelty are key. As suggested above, becoming refers to the constant state of movement and transformation that things – bodies and images – are involved in, and the movement, transformation and becoming of these things through their inter-connectedness. Becoming, then, is necessarily tied to the new and to the future, to the novelty that is involved in transformation and to the openness and uncertainty that this produces. Grosz links becoming and novelty to feminist theory, and feminist politics more generally, and suggests that the

question of revolution, transformation and radical futures seems to be the unspoken heart of feminist politics: feminist politics cannot see itself except as a

form of overcoming and transformation, yet the very logic of change, the capacity to initiate a pragmatics of change, is central to its formation as a political and theoretical practice (Grosz 2000: 217).

One of Grosz's points here is that, while notions of transformation and 'radical futures' underpin feminist theory and politics, they usually remain implicit (Grosz 1999a). Indeed, she goes on to argue that '[t]he problem is that there is so little work being done under the *aegis* of feminist theory on the question of time and futurity, and so much work, relatively speaking, on the question of time, memory and history' (Grosz 2000: 217). In order for feminist theory to 'find more adequate resources by which to think the radical openness of the future' and to 'fundamentally orient[...] to the status of futures', Grosz suggests it must turn to, and think through, 'new conceptions of duration and becoming' (Grosz 2000: 217). So what is meant by duration, and how does thinking through duration involve an orientation to novelty and the future?

The concept of duration is developed by Bergson as a means to contrast a notion of 'extensive' time with intensive and intuitive time. The conventional way in which time has been understood is as extensive, 'as a series of "nows" which are connected together' (Colebrook 2002: 41). 'Time' in this sense can be conceived as spatial; as a uni-directional line on to which time is plotted and which proceeds and passes externally to our bodily experiences of it. However, Bergson proposes an understanding of time as duration which connects temporality with memory and matter. According to Bergson, the contrast between 'Time' and duration is that while Time is measured objectively and

externally (for example by clocks and calendars), duration is intuitive, a bodily knowing (Bergson 1999: 22-24):

There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time – our self which endures. We may sympathise intellectually with nothing else, but we certainly sympathise with our own selves (Bergson 1999: 24-25).

For Bergson, then, what is peculiar to bodies is that they cannot be known properly through Time but rather can only be grasped intuitively through their duration, through the rhythm which endures and is specific to them. Whereas Time progresses at only one speed (is divided into equally distributed spatial units for example), as becomings bodies have different and multiple durational rhythms and speeds. Indeed, in *Matter and Memory* (2002) Bergson argues:

In reality there is no one rhythm of duration; it is possible to imagine many different rhythms which, slower or faster, measure the degree of tension or relaxation of different kinds of consciousness and thereby fix their respective places in the scale of being. To conceive of different tensions is perhaps both difficult and strange to our mind, because we have acquired the useful habit of substituting for the true duration, lived by consciousness, an homogeneous and independent Time (2002: 207).

‘True duration’, then, ‘is not ours, assuredly, but neither is it that homogeneous and impersonal duration, the same for everything and for everyone, which flows onward, indifferent and void, external to all that endures’ (2002: 207). Bodies have their own durations and, further, the duration of bodies changes (contracts and relaxes), connects with itself and with other durations. What also distinguishes duration from Time is its capacity, or not, for division. This refers to Bergson’s equation of duration with ‘our self which endures’ for, while extensive Time can be divided, intensive duration, ‘our own personality as it flows through time’ cannot, without changing in kind.<sup>6</sup> What duration suggests therefore is an intensity which is both intuitive bodily knowledge and which is enduring, which might change as it flows through time but which is not extensively divisible.

The explanation of duration as both intuitive and intensive is important here insofar as it is the concept Grosz proposes for a re-thinking of feminist theory’s conceptions of time and of the relations between past, present and future. For Grosz, duration is a means to think through the futurity and novelty of feminist theory and to avoid linearity. Duration is both a method of feminist analysis (a concept through which to *do* feminist theory) and a rhythm which underpins feminist politics (the rhythm peculiar to the becoming of feminist politics and theory). Grosz suggests duration is,

never either a matter of unfolding an already worked out blueprint, or the gradual accretion of qualities which progress stage by stage or piecemeal over time.

Duration proceeds not through the accumulation of information and the growing

acquisition of knowledge, but through division<sup>7</sup>, bifurcation, dissociation – by difference, through sudden and unpredictable change, which overtakes us with its surprise’ (2000: 230; 2005: 111).

As that which proceeds through ‘sudden and unpredictable change’ rather than the unfolding of an already in place plan or a steady progression, duration is characterised by transformation and novelty. Indeed,

[w]hat Bergson’s understanding of duration provides is an understanding of how the future, as much as the present and past, is bound up with movement and impetus of life, struggle and politics. While duration entails the coexistence of the present with the past, it also entails the continual elaboration of the new, the openness of things (including life) to what befalls them. This is what time *is* if anything at all: not simply mechanical repetition, the causal effects of objects on objects, but the indeterminate, the unfolding, the emergence of the new’ (Grosz 2000: 230).

Duration, as ‘the continual elaboration of the new’, is, for Grosz, movement, struggle, politics, indeterminate emergence. However, what is crucial to remember is that although there is this emphasis on the novel, duration is also what endures, what flows through time. What is novel, then, is new *and* enduring, different from *and* connected to, the past. Indeed, as Grosz describes, ‘the future is the ongoing promise of both the continuity and discontinuity of duration. What endures, what is fundamentally immersed in time is not

what remains unchanging or the same over time [...] but what diverges and transforms itself with the passage of time' (2005: 110). Duration, then, is both continuous and discontinuous. Things 'stay', they endure, not through remaining 'unchanging or the same over time' but through diverging and transforming. The following sections take up this notion of duration as both novel and enduring through the girls' discussions of 'things that stay'.

### **Things that stay: 'shining points of memory'**

As the earlier extract from one of the interviews demonstrates, for the girls who participated in the research, images of their bodies were produced through comments from other people, and in particular boys and girl friends. In response to my question, they explain how some comments don't 'stick' while other comments, even 'a little comment' (Fay) 'stays in your mind'; 'you'll think about it at least every day for at least a week and you'll concentrate on it' (Dionne). Comments stay, then, regardless of their size<sup>8</sup> or intention; 'a little comment', perhaps seemingly unimportant to the person who made it, can endure. The endurance of a comment that Fay and Dionne locate in whether it is, in my words, 'nice' or 'horrible' is not experienced by all the girls. Katie, for example, distinguishes between nice and horrible comments but explains that 'nice' comments stay as well as horrible ones:

RC:                   ok, so someone says something nice about you, how long do you remember that for?

KATIE: quite a while! [laughs] A long time! But I dunno, it's more when the boys say things to you, like 'you look really nice today', that sticks with you a lot longer than when your girls, like when your girl friends do, sort of the girls you just think 'yeah thanks' but when the boys it's like 'yeah!' [...]

RC: and what about if someone says something bad about you, is that the same?

KATIE: that sticks with you a lot longer, cos you just like, you keep focusing, like say they've called you fat or something, like you focus on that a lot longer and you're like trying to change it all the time

What I want to pick up here is not so much the distinction between nice and horrible comments, nor whether it is a girl friend or boy who makes the comment, but rather the temporalities of the comments which Katie, and Fay and Dionne describe as staying. In other words, how might the endurance of particular comments be understood through becoming and duration?

Tasha describes the endurance of comments in a similar way to Katie:

RC: ok, so if someone says something horrible about you, kind of, how long does that stay with you? How long do you think about that and remember that?

TASHA: oh I think about it for ages, I don't, yeah cos I'm really sensitive to things as well so like if someone says something like tiny and it's not nasty then I'll get like really upset about it so, like it lasts for like a long time

Here, Tasha explains that a comment endures because she is 'sensitive' to certain things. In their individual interviews, both Katie and Tasha explain how they were or are bullied for being, in Katie's words, 'really fat'. Tasha's 'sensitivity' to particular comments can, in this sense, be understood in terms of this bullying, that is, Tasha's past produces the endurance of some comments. What needs emphasising here is that while the past stays, this is the endurance of duration; not the unchanging over time but the divergence and transformation of time. This endurance is therefore not extensive 'Time' but intensive duration. Tasha's or Katie's pasts in this sense do not progress linearly into the present and future but rather they endure, their pasts intensify their presents and futures.

The intensity of enduring things is understood both by Bergson (2002) and by the girls through memory. Consider for example Tasha's account of how comments endure through remembering:

RC: ok, so if, like you remember something someone said horrible, how do you remember it? I mean what are you doing?



TASHA: I dunno cos most days, like I do like sit in my room and I dunno, just think about everything that's like happened in my life and I just remember things then

RC: ok, so it's kind of at a specific time when you sit and think about it or is it kind of with-?

TASHA: well, I do think about it, it's weird, it suddenly just comes into my head, I'm not like doing anything to make me think of it but it just comes into my head

Tasha here describes how memories of something horrible that someone has said 'just come[...] into my head'. She describes the 'shock' of memory whereby she remembers things when sitting in her room, thinking about her life but not necessarily about that specific memory ('I'm not doing anything to make me think of it'). The conventional understanding of memory is of the present remembering of a past event. According to this view, the past remains in its place, earlier or previous to the present, and is tapped into; time is therefore linear, progressive, extensive. However, through his concept of duration as an internal, unified and multiple flow of difference, Bergson draws attention to how the past endures through its mobility and dynamism. In terms of Tasha's explanation of memory, the past is not what *has* happened to her but rather is what *is* (still) happening, what she is (still) experiencing. This is the intensive endurance of things, rather than their continuation, accumulation or advancement. Enduring things are not the linear progression of past events which survive into the present and future but rather are the ways in which certain things transform and become, that is move from 'the

past' and are re-experienced and assembled as different, novel, intensive, temporalities. Enduring things are not what a body has lived through but what a body *is* living (through) as non-linear durations.

The past for Bergson exists as a series of planes which contain 'the whole of the past' to greater or lesser extents. Grosz neatly sums up Bergson's notion of the past as such:

Each segment [of the past] has its own features although each contains within itself the whole of the past. Memories drawn from various strata may be clustered around idiosyncratic points, 'shining points of memory', as Bergson describes them, which are multiplied to the extent that memory is dilated. Depending on the recollection we are seeking, we must jump in at a particular segment; in order to move on to another, we must do so through another leap (Grosz 2000: 224, reference omitted).

Through the notion of 'shining points of memory', Bergson wants to draw attention to how memory works through a process of 'localisation':

The process of localising a recollection in the past, for instance, cannot at all consist, as has been said, in plunging into the mass of our memories, as into a bag, to draw out memories, closer and closer to each other, between which the memory to be localised may find its place. By what happy chance could we just hit upon a growing number of intercalary recollections? The work of localisation consists, in

reality, in a growing effort of *expansion*, by which the memory, always present in its entirety to itself, spreads out its recollections over an ever wider surface and so ends by distinguishing, in what was till then a confused mass, the remembrance which could not find its proper place (Bergson 2002: 171).

The work of localisation, then, ‘tracks down’ a memory through the different planes of the past by its proximity to these shining points of ‘dominant memories’ (Bergson 2002: 171). The remembering that Tasha describes can be understood through this process of localisation; Tasha remembers ‘everything that’s like happened in my life’. At the centre of this kind of remembering is, as Grosz explains in an earlier quote, the necessity for the past to be entered or ‘jumped’ into. For a particular memory to be sought, ‘the past’ must be jumped into. To re-experience the past as Tasha describes is not to remain in the present and recollect or recount the past but to ‘leap’ into the past, to remember the past and experience its intensive temporality again.

As such, the past is not lying latent, ready to be tapped into, or ‘plunged...as into a bag’, but is to be re-experienced through its intensity, through the endurance of a past thing, its connection with the present and future. This connection is not a replacement of one durational rhythm with another, nor a move from one durational rhythm to another. Moments of intense experience are not self-contained or bounded units (extensity). Rather, the jump or leap involved in re-remembering and re-experiencing a past moment is a connection between different durations where these durations are assembled simultaneously. As Bergson says, through intuition, that is the jumping into a state, ‘we

can picture to ourselves as many durations as we wish, all very different from each other' (1999: 47). Tasha's remembering does not involve the replacement of the one duration of 'sit[ting]' and 'think[ing]' 'in my room' with the duration of 'everything that's like happened in my life'. One duration cannot be subsumed by another but rather duration involves multiple rhythms, in this case of both sitting and thinking and of everything that has happened. What is involved in Tasha's remembering is the connection between the rhythm of her present remembering and the rhythm of the past remembered. The past endures and is entered into, connected with, through memory.

### **The past and/as the virtual**

Bergson's conception of memory is elaborated further through his understanding of the past and present. In defining the present in relation to the past, Bergson argues that the usual definition of the present 'as *that which is*' is 'arbitrary' (2002: 149). Instead, he suggests the present is

simply *what is being made*. Nothing *is* less than the present moment, if you understand by that the indivisible limit which divides the past from the future.

When we think this present as going to be, it exists not yet, and when we think of it as existing, it is already past. If, on the other hand, what you are considering is the concrete present such as it is actually lived by consciousness, we may say that this present consists, in large measure, in the immediate past (2002: 149-150).

Rather than ma(r)king the distinction between the past and the present in terms of what is and what has been, Bergson differentiates them through ‘the actual’ and the ‘virtual’. The present involves the actual, ‘*that which is acting*’ (Bergson 2002: 69) and the past involves the virtual, ‘*that which acts no longer*’ (Bergson 2002: 68). As it involves that which acts, the present is a duration placed

both on this side and on that, [...] what I call 'my present' has one foot in my past and another in my future. In my past, first, because 'the moment in which I am speaking is already far from me'; in my future, next, because this moment is impending over the future: it is to the future that I am tending (Bergson 2002: 138).

The past and future have different rhythms of duration which can be experienced simultaneously through their assemblage in the present. As Grosz puts it, the present ‘straddles both past and future, requiring the past as its precondition, while oriented towards the immediate future’ (2000: 222-223). There is a ‘*simultaneity* of past and present. The past is contemporaneous with the present it has been. They exist at the “same” time. The past could never exist if it did not coexist with the present of which it is the past’ (Grosz 2000: 223). Access to the past, and the future, are through the durational rhythm of the present, through the jump from the actual to the virtual: ‘we shall never reach the past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image’ (Bergson 2002: 135). The connection that Tasha makes between the present and the past through remembering involves the past and the present existing

simultaneously; the past is necessitated in the present, neither the past nor the present could exist without the other.

What this notion of the simultaneity of the past and the present suggests is that the present is *this* present of *this* past; *this* present and *this* past could not exist without each other. Tasha could not remember a specific past outside of a specific present and a specific present could not exist without a specific past. There is a particular and vital relation between them. The present, in Bergson's terms, 'contains virtually within it the whole of the past and present of the being experiencing it' (1999: 31). Grosz describes Bergson's understanding of the relation between the present/actual and past/virtual as such:

Each moment carries a virtual past with it; each present must, as it were, pass through the whole of the past. This is what is meant by the past in general; the past does not come after the present has ceased to be, nor does the present somehow move into the past. Rather, it is the past which is the condition of the present, it is only through its pre-existence that the present can come to be. Bergson does not want to deny that succession takes place – one present (and past) replaces another: but such real or actual succession can only take place because of a virtual coexistence of the past and the present, the virtual coexistence of all of the past at each moment of the present (2000: 224-225).

Understanding the past as ‘the condition of the present’ does not suggest that the past is the *pre*-condition of the present; the past does not *determine* the present. Rather, the relations between the past and present involve a ‘coexistent’ connection; the past and present are the *conditions* of each other. The ‘whole of the past’ is *this* past of *this* present, it is *the virtual of the actual*.

The concept of the virtual which co-exists with the present but which the present must also ‘pass through’, is particularly helpful to attend to things that stay. For example, Katie’s focus on comments about her weight which she says ‘stay’ longer than other comments and Tasha’s ‘sensitivity’ to certain comments might be understood through this notion of the relations between the past and the present – the past as the virtual through which the present is actualised. For Katie, the past can be understood as the virtual of the present in that she experiences comments about her weight intensely because of her past. In the following extract, Chloe discusses the actualisation of her present through her virtual past:

RC: so do you think you’re really judged on your looks?

CHLOE: yeah, very much so, everyone is I think but its mainly bigger people [...] I think being big has made me what I am, I like to think I’m funny and bubbly but I think that’s just through, I don’t know, just being who I am now, just being who I was when I was younger and that’s just going to stay with me for the rest of my life so if I wasn’t like this now then I’d probably be a completely

different person, I mean I might be one of those nasty people who took the mickey out of people when they walk down the street so I'm quite glad, I'm not glad I've been big all my life but I sort of am in a way

RC: ok, so you think that the things that you've been through, they make you think about other people?

CHLOE: yeah, and people who shout things out about other people in the street, they're just so inconsiderate of their feelings, see, me, I'd think about it, like if I was gonna shout something out in the street I'd think about it and be like 'no' cos I wouldn't like that to be said to me, so I always have to stop and think before I do stuff, cos being like, having gone through what I have it's made me think, well, I wouldn't like it if it was done to me

In this extract Chloe says that what she has 'gone through' endures into the present and 'it's made me think'; her past means that she 'thinks' before 'shout[ing] something out in the street'. Chloe's past endures through this 'thinking' which acts as a virtual to potential action, stops the actualisation of potential hurtful comments ('I wouldn't like it if it was done to me'). In this sense, the virtual past conditions the actual present through setting limits on what of the virtual might be actualised. The possibilities of how Chloe's body might become are not endlessly open – the virtual is not a state of infinite possibility – but are limited or conditioned by what she has been through.



Here, then, what is significant about ‘experience’ for Chloe is not (just) what she has been through but how what she has been through endures. This, for Bergson, is the duration of the present, an ‘inner’ duration which, while involving ‘that which is acting’, also involves ‘that which acts no longer’.

Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing within it in a distinct form the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, more probably, showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older.

Without this survival of the past into the present there would be no duration, but only instantaneity (Bergson 1999: 40).

The past ‘lives’ through how memory endures into the present. This virtual life of the actual for Bergson grows ‘heavier and still heavier’ as a body ‘goes through’ more experience. Importantly, though, this is not the past understood as the accumulation of experience but as endurance, the living of the past in a virtual state. Although it is only the present that ‘acts’, the past is not closed off from the present into a bounded unit; the past lives. As Bergson says, this is crucial to an understanding of the becoming of a body because it means that, despite a focus on the present, there is duration and not ‘only instantaneity’. Understanding a body as becoming is to ‘be in the present and in a present which is always beginning again’ (Bergson 2002: 210). But this is not to foreclose how the past, or the future, is involved in this present. In understanding the present, as discussed above, as *both* within the present and the (immediate) future, the present has a

duration which is not instantaneous. This is a focus on the present that does not ignore how a body changes. The past conditions rather than pre-conditions the present and, therefore, the present is not always-already determined by the past, nor is the past played out in the present with a regularity which can be predicted in advance.

The past that lives through memory, then, is not knowable prior to how it is actualised through specific spatial and temporal assemblages. The past that lives through memory can be open, intuitive, creative. Time is not linear progression: Chloe has not become 'one of those nasty people' because of the 'nasty' experiences she has been through and neither can the way in which she deliberately thinks in the present so as not to hurt people as she has been hurt necessarily be understood as the 'correction' to that past. Instead, how the past is actualised through the virtual as Chloe's present and future can be understood as 'a present which is always beginning again', as that which is 'simply being made'.

If matter does not remember the past, it is because it repeats the past unceasingly, because, subject to necessity, it unfolds a series of moments of which each is the equivalent of the preceding moment and may be deduced from it: thus its past is truly given in the present. But a being which evolves more or less freely creates something new every movement: in vain, then, should we seek to read its past in its present unless its past were deposited within it in the form of memory (Bergson 2002: 222-223).

Chloe's present might be understood as something of a mix between the past which is not remembered by matter but is repeated 'unceasingly' and the 'freedom' of 'creat[ing] something new every movement'. That is, Chloe's past is repeated in new and creative ways.

### **The future and the virtual in/of feminist theory**

Understanding the past as potentially new and creative has important implications for conceptions of the future. Indeed, in conceiving the past as the virtual to the actual present, the future is a temporality which is always already involved with other temporalities but is not determined by them. As the actual, the present is an unfolding of the virtual past but also of the future; the future is both novel and actualised through the virtual, 'new' but also in relations with its past. The becoming of the future is thus arranged or assembled in certain ways but is not already set out. Consider for example how Sammy responds to my asking her about the future:

RC:           so if you imagine yourself in the future, do you just imagine good things about you, so if there was something you didn't like about you know, would you think that would be gone when you're 20 or whatever?

SAMMY:     erm, I dunno, I haven't really thought about it like if things will go or if things will change, I haven't really thought about it

RC:           ok, if you did think about it now?

SAMMY: erm, I dunno I suppose I do need a mirror cos then I could see things I don't know, I don't actually know what I would look like, I just don't know cos like you know when you see your parents as a child they look so much different to what they are now and like I look more like my mum now than she did as a child

RC: ok

SAMMY: so I may change, I may stay the same, cos like she changed

Sammy here considers the possibilities of her future through the durational differences between her and her mother and through her mirror image. In both these cases, the future emerges not as an inevitable event which the past and the present lead to but rather is a possibility that might be anticipated through the actual present. The future, as with the past, emerges as virtual; it is not inevitable but neither is it completely open. What will change and what will stay will be actualised through the virtualities of Sammy's mother's duration and through Sammy's 'own' durational possibilities. Indeed, the way in which Sammy thinks about her future is not as *the* future but as *a* future, a *virtual* future, anticipated by, and made actual through, *this* present and *this* past.

Through conceiving the relations between the girls' past, present and future in terms of the actual/virtual coupling and duration, different ways of thinking the 'time' of feminist theory are opened up. For Grosz, duration is a productive concept for feminist theory precisely because of its re-framing of how time might be thought as both enduring and changing. She writes,

Although there is a fundamental continuity between the past and the present – the present being the culmination of the past, its latest layering – there is a discontinuity between the present and the future, for the future is not contained in (and thus pre-empted by) the present but erupts unexpectedly from it. Duration is the movement of divergence or differentiation between what was and what will be, a movement from one mode of virtuality (the past) to another (the future). Duration infects not only all of life, which carries the past along with its present; it also affects the universe as a whole. Not only does all of life proceed by differentiation, the material universe as a totality also functions through history, through deviation and surprise (Grosz 2005: 110).

What the concept of the virtual does, then, is understand ‘the new’ as both continuous and discontinuous, ‘not contained in (and thus pre-empted by) the present’ but also not detached from it; ‘the present being the culmination of the past, its latest layering’. Whilst the future is new, that is surprising and not contained within the past and present, novelty here refers to the discontinuity *and* continuity of duration, to what changes and/in what endures, to what of the (finite) virtual is made actual.

Through this recognition of both novelty and endurance, Grosz suggests that ‘the openendedness of the concept of the virtual may prove central in reinvigorating the notion of a transgressive, radical future, a political future without specification’ and ‘may serve feminist, anti-racist and other political movements by making it clear that there is always

a leap, an unexpectedness that the new brings with it, and that it is the goal of politics to initiate such goals' (Grosz 2000: 228-229). Taking up these points, I have argued that the time *and becoming* of feminist theory and feminist theoretical empiricism can be thought as future-oriented *and* as unavoidably attached to the past. The concepts of becoming, duration and the virtual, and the 'things that stay', make evident the non-linearity of time but also the connections between the past, present and future. Things that stay, thought through and as duration, endure not through remaining the same but through diverging and transforming. The past, then, is not extensive – a securely bounded earlier time – but is intensive movement, assembling with future temporalities in 'novel' ways. To conceive the relations between the past, present and future in this way is, as Grosz writes, 'to somehow generate a new that is not entirely disconnected from or alien to the old, which nevertheless overcomes its problems, its oppressions, conflicts or struggles (Grosz 2000: 214). This, it seems to me, is a necessary task for feminist theory which, by putting to work the concepts of duration, the future and the virtual in relation to empirical material, this article has attempted to engage with and extend.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is not a strict interpretation of Bergson's or Deleuze's work, then. Neither is it a tracing of the work of Grosz or other feminist philosophers and theorists. Rather, I am interested in exploring some of the ways in which some of Bergson's concepts have been taken up, often in relation to Deleuze, by feminist theory and, as I will discuss, how these might be explored through empirical work on bodies. It is worth noting that although in the arguments I focus on in this article, Grosz most explicitly engages with Bergson's

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work, her feminist theory is also influenced by Deleuze (see 1994, 2000 for example). In addition, my own research is from a feminist Deleuzian position. As such, although here Deleuze is a somewhat ‘implicit’ figure compared to Bergson, it is crucial to recognise how Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, and his work more generally, is key to the argument I make.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sara Ahmed (2002) who explicitly engages with Grosz’s argument and, in particular, its privileging of the future. For Ahmed, such a privilege is provocative for feminist theory because it collapses otherness into the future and risks ignoring the ways in which pasts ‘are never simply *behind* us’ (Ahmed 2002: 559).

<sup>3</sup> I am aware that here I am conflating ‘linearity’ and ‘progression’. My argument is not that these two terms should be collapsed but rather, and in the context of my simplified discussion of feminist theory, that linearity and progress are often put together and seen as operating in tandem.

<sup>4</sup> However, see Adkins (2004) for her suggestion that McRobbie ‘casts the history of feminism, as well as that of the history of specific forms of popular culture, in generational, familial and reproductive terms. Specifically, the passing of feminism and the dynamics and characteristics of post-feminist popular culture are cast as an issue of a failed reproduction of feminist consciousness, a failure of generational reproduction, with younger women refusing to inherit their feminist legacies’ (2004: 430).

<sup>5</sup> Adkins (2004) also identifies nostalgia and loss as key themes in contemporary feminist theory.

<sup>6</sup> Consider as another example, Manuel DeLanda’s explanation of colour as intensive: ‘Colours are [...] not divisible in extension: a certain patch of material of a given colour

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does not yield, when broken into equal halves, two smaller patches with half the value of its colour (half the hue and half the brightness)' (DeLanda 2002: 69).

<sup>7</sup> This is division not in the sense of the division of extensive Time but the capacity for duration to diverge from itself and enter into different rhythms.

<sup>8</sup> See Edward S. Casey (1999) for an interesting discussion of the capacity of the 'glance', the quickest (smallest) of looks which nevertheless 'can take note of entire worlds' (Casey 1999: 80). Casey argues that despite its tiny size and scale, the glance can disrupt linear temporality by 'put[ting] us both into and out of time – into an intense momentary time and out of a continuous distended time' (Casey 1999: 82).

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