

The Untimely “Now”: On the Crystallisation, Stretching and Shrinking of My Various Presents

By Eduardo de la Fuente

St Augustine’s famous declaration, that he knew what time was until someone asked him to define it, captures something about the fundamentally contradictory and enigmatic nature of time (Adam 33). Time is one of those things that evades easy classification—does it refer to natural cycles and elemental rhythms including those that impinge upon organic life (birth and death, aging and decay or renewal and flourishing of life)? Or to encultured phenomena such as clock-time, work and daily schedules, wedding anniversaries and holidays marking collective milestones? Encultured time itself seems to be further divided into the mundane time of everyday routines and those moments that take on a celebratory, commemorative, if not transcendental, character. And then there is the complicated issue of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of time. The quantitative is measured by seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years; and the frequency or likelihood with which something occurs. The qualitative dimension of time connotes the differences between “normal” and “special” or “disruptive” times as well as phenomena that either defy or suspend time (i.e., the “timeless” and the “eternal”). Highlighting



the complex relationship between the quantitative and qualitative we find it much easier to attribute meaning to decades, centuries, and millennia, as they imply phenomena that have “stood the test of time.” Although, there can be practical and emotional value in “being up to the minute.” Time seems to be one of those annoying phenomena that sit in the crevices of human existence—lodged between culture and nature,

Augustinean-like paradoxes proliferate further once we introduce the word “now” into the equation.

the quantitative and the qualitative, individual or collective bodies and individual or collective mindsets-cum-“souls.”

Augustinean-like paradoxes proliferate further once we introduce the word “now” into the equation. Most dictionaries—like my trusted *Concise Macquarie Dictionary* I won at a public speaking competition for high school students in my area—offer a list of defining attributes that include, at the top of the list, something like “at the present time or moment” (Macquarie University 854). However, as human consciousness and felt experience always seems to be catching up with themselves, we also find that now can refer to a “time or moment only just past” (854). Anticipation and seeking to produce desirable future outcomes are also part of the “now.” Thus, when now is “used as a preliminary word before some statement” it can serve to “strengthen a command, entreaty” (854). Similarly, commands and entreaties can be strengthened and weakened when we conjoin “now” with supplementary words. “Now” is weakened when we say things like “**now and again** or **now and then**” as both imply something that only occurs “occasionally”; whereas “**now that**” entails a significant qualification meaning something only occurs “inasmuch as” some contingent condition pre-exists (854; bold in the original). But put two

“nows” together and you have “**now, now!** . . . an expression used to reprove or placate someone” (854; bold in the original). Complicating matters further, my *Concise Macquarie* doesn’t include the plural form of the word; and every time I type “nows” with an “s” my spell-check underlines it with red. If you Google “what is the plural form of now?” you will find this lovely piece of conditional advice:

In more general, commonly used, contexts, the plural form will also be **now**. However, in more specific contexts, the plural form can also be **nows** e.g. in reference to various types of **nows** or a collection of **nows**. (Word Hippo np; bold in the original)

A word that can be a singular and a plural version of itself; as well as a word that permits the introduction of the plural with an “s” only when we leave the lofty heights of “general . . . contexts” and descend to “specific contexts” where we might find “a collection of nows.”

My essay is fundamentally about the latter—a set of reflections on my personal and scholarly “nows.” However, once we start “collecting” nows—to paraphrase Word Hippo—we encounter the possibility of shifting from “specific contexts” to more “general” ones by

virtue of the processes of comparison and contrasts one has initiated. Indeed, an important part of the subtext to this essay is that because little “n” plural “nows” are transient this doesn’t mean they can’t assume wider significance. They are quite capable, if we pay attention to such moments, of becoming other-than-themselves; they might morph into either the little “n” singular “now” of historical, cultural and political critique; or, if we are truly fortunate, the capital “N” singular “Now” of existential and metaphysical reflection. To borrow a metaphor from my favourite turn-of-the-last century sociologist (or was he fundamentally a philosopher, aesthete and essayist?) Georg Simmel, reflecting on the seemingly small or apparently insignificant can create “bridges” and “doors” to phenomena that have deeper, if not “cosmic,” significance (i.e., we get revelations into all existence; “Bridge and Door” 170–174). And, if bridges and doors aren’t your thing, Simmel also offered a metaphor derived seafaring. He claimed the “task” of reflection was to “lower a plumb line through the immediate singular . . . into the depths of ultimate intellectual meanings” (*Rembrandt* 3).

One further preliminary clarification: my title borrows Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the “untimely.” While he was interested in historical phenomena like the Ancient Greeks and the recurring patterns of history, Nietzsche also warned that attempting to make sense of the present in terms of the past ran the risk of

producing “a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination . . . which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture” (62; emphasis in the original). The pathologies associated with rumination and sleeplessness have multiplied greatly since *Untimely Mediations* was penned in the 1870s. Indeed, with the acceleration and fragmentation of the “now” due to technology, the pace of change, and the so-called “polarization” of collective sentiment, the opposite of “too much history” is also possible—namely, that we will retreat into a “presentism” incapable of imagining “other” times. Because of the shortcomings of too much and too little history, Nietzsche recommended a sense of balance: “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people, and of a culture” (63; emphasis in the original). While I share Nietzsche’s evocation of the untimely, rather than aiming for harmony between the historical and unhistorical, what I think is required is being attentive to the variety of connections possible, and that may be already present, between different temporal scales.

Where to start my untimely reflections? Perhaps by reflecting on recollections of when I first remember being interested in the “now”? I’d say my first firm memory of being interested in the “now” of the times I was living occurred around the time I transitioned from primary to high school. I’m sure I was aware of contemporaneous events whirling around me before then—how could I not, having been

migrated from South America to Australia at the impressionable age of seven? But it was somehow different when I became an adolescent. The need to understand things seemed deeper and more urgent; and such yearnings crystallised around the historical and political “now” of the era. My version of teen angst was spending the ninety minutes each way, from my home in Sydney’s Southwestern suburbs to the religious school my parents chose for myself and my brothers, reading books. It was the late 1970s and early 1980s, so I was lost in my own little world reading texts like Paul Kelly’s *The Unmaking of Gough* and Don Chipp’s memoir, *The Third Man*. Also important in the cultivation of my interest in ideas and the political *zeitgeist* was an economics teacher who, from Year 9 onwards, started lending me books from her own personal library that spoke to the policy debates of the time. This way I was introduced to John Maynard Keynes, to Milton Friedman and to Australian economics journalist Ross Gittins.

Since I still hadn’t heard of Karl Marx or Max Weber, let alone had a clue what philosophy, art history or cultural studies entailed, I applied to do economics at Sydney University with a second major in politics and a minor in anthropology. People familiar with my academic writings on art, music, modernity/modernism and the more recent stuff on materialities of place often express surprise that my first passions were economics and politics. Economics is often regarded as a “philistine” discipline —despite the fact Keynes

was a key member of the Bloomsbury avant-garde and authors such as Veblen had written about luxury, lifestyles and aesthetics. But I enrolled in economics because it felt like a central element of the *zeitgeist*. The 1980s were an era in which Australia was embarking on the economic and social reforms of the Bob Hawke-Paul Keating years. This gave economics and public policy an air of excitement. A historian has noted of 1980s Australia that it had a genius for combining the “ordinary” with the “extraordinary”; it was a decade that produced Kylie Minogue and the band INXS but also featured celebrations of the Bicentenary and sporting achievements like an Australian yacht winning the America’s Cup (Bongiorno). The curious nature of the *zeitgeist* was also captured by feminist cultural studies academic Meaghan Morris. She wrote of Keating’s time as Treasurer-cum-economic reformer that the autodidact—who had left school at the age of fifteen but had a penchant for Italian suits, antiques and Mahler—had converted economics into something “ecstatic” or erotic. The erotic and economics don’t usually go together. But in Keating’s case they did.

I also remember feeling that the exoticness of economics lay in how some of our lecturers engaged in the policy debates of the time. While not all our teachers were advising government, I can still remember one associate professor saying in a class on microeconomics: “And as I advised the Federal Government in a report on its

domestic two airline policy . . .” Even more “other-worldly” was a visit by John Kenneth Galbraith to the university. The Galbraith talk was held in the same lecture theatre I had often sat in. But the atmospherics couldn’t have been more different. Just before entering the lecture hall, I saw the elegant Harvard professor (an economist whom, like Marshall McLuhan, was probably meant for the age of television) arrive in a chauffeur-driven car with the university’s chancellor, Sir Hermann Black. Sir Hermann, who was not of the television age, wore a suit that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a 1940s British film. He told the audience he had personally known Keynes decades earlier, and that the man he was about to introduce had once taught US President John F. Kennedy. For a working-class, migrant lad commuting to the campus from Western Sydney, all this name-dropping was super-glamorous and living proof that the life of the mind was not without allure or institutional-cum-historical significance.

However, despite moments of intellectual stimulation and elements of glamour-cum-feeling-close-to-power (e.g., there were classmates who became senators or media personalities), I eventually decided that economics wasn’t really for me and that its ability to understand the *zeitgeist* was heavily circumscribed. The mathematics had gotten more complicated, but the explanations of human existence hadn’t taken me past what I had already gleaned from the discipline during high

school years. A secondary issue was that economics itself seemed prone to cycles of fashion and collective mindsets, and some of these were starting to fray badly by my final undergraduate year. In any case, 1989 was exciting for lots of reasons that had little to do with economics. The Fall of Communism might have been partly about whether socialist economies were inefficient at allocating scarce resources. But the *zeitgeist* opened up much larger questions: were we witnessing the “end of history”? What would it mean for liberalism and capitalism not to have clear alternatives? And what role had the mundane actions of everyday actors played in the sudden collapse of a monolithic system? Televisual images of the Berlin Wall coming down and of student protestors in Beijing bravely standing in front of army tanks also highlighted that our contemporary “now” was global, interconnected and a product of events that hadn’t been fully anticipated.

Therefore, my second important “now” became the social theoretical and sociological now of modernity and its various off-shoots such as “post-modernity,” “post-industrial modernity,” “late-modernity” and “reflexive modernity.” I started to feel that what made intellectual work valuable and exciting was being able to diagnose a “now” that I was part of historically, politically and culturally. As the world around us was changing it seemed that theorizing mattered more than ever. What felt relevant now,

in terms of understanding our “now,” were journals like *Telos*, *Thesis Eleven*, *New German Critique*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* and *Theory, Culture and Society*.

Faced with this evolving and complex “now,” instead of finishing honours in economics I enrolled in politics and was lucky enough to take seminars with two academic figures who seemed to have their “finger on the pulse” of contemporary social and political theorizing. The first seminar was on “Power” with internationally renowned feminist political theorist Carole Pateman, who had just published *The Sexual Contract*. This was the first time I encountered gender theory and also the writings of Michel Foucault. A year later, the department hired Alastair Davidson, a prominent Gramsci scholar and historian of the Australian Communist Party. In the context of Sydney academic life, the latter’s arrival was a piece of sublime geographical inversion, as at that point Melbourne was Australia’s purported cultural or intellectual capital. The arrival of someone who had been a leader within the southern capital’s social and political theory “scene,” and who had participated in the founding of *Thesis Eleven*, was life changing. Suddenly, I went from not knowing anything about social theory to being stretched by feminist political theory and Foucault (in Pateman’s seminar) to weekly discussions of structuralism and poststructuralism, the Frankfurt School and the Budapest School (in Davidson’s seminar).

Around that time, I couldn’t get enough of Theodore Adorno with his “negative dialectical” sensibilities, his stylistic flair and his participation in the arcane aesthetic and musical innovations associated with Central European modernism. I became so obsessed with Adorno that when the class was assigned a three-thousand-word essay, I handed in an undisciplined eighteen-thousand-word treatise on Adorno and theories of modernity which the seminar convenor recommended I submit as my actual honours thesis! As fate would have it, my unruly honours seminar essay that became an honours thesis, morphed into my first conference paper and first-ever publication: “The Last of the Modernists: Adorno, Foucault and the Modern Intellectual.” Reflective of my interest in the *zeitgeist*, that first article was part of a 1993 special issue of *Meanjin* entitled “Intellectuals in Europe Today.” “The Last of the Modernists” was also reproduced years later in a multi-volume collection on Adorno.

However, thinking about “now-ness” as a justification for intellectual work was never a straightforward matter for me. Note that my first publication, although prompted by being introduced to ideas about social theory and the contemporary or post-modern situation, had the perverse title of “The Last of the Modernists.” It was also based on a comparison of theorists who were not only asynchronous but who some saw as representing two different phases of critical thought (i.e., Adorno as quintessentially pre-

I also concluded that modernity, rather than been some external reality that impinged on musical developments, was a set of practices for demarcating what it meant to be modern.

1968; while Foucault post-1968). However, there was a point to my perversity over and above wanting to show that my readings of the social theoretical “now” were novel; there was also the desire to uncouple theoretical “nows” from being grounded in simple homologies between stylistic-cum-theoretical and historical-cum-sociopolitical “nows.” I formed the opinion that apportioning value to thought, due to how “modernist” or “postmodernist” ideas were, was tautological and circular.

I’m also slightly contradictory when it comes to being in-synch with the times. I envy scholars who can smell which way the wind is blowing, and often feel as though I need to play “catch-up” with some sexy new theoretical “-ism” that others are talking about. But I also have a retro, if not antiquarian, sensibility that draws me to the unfashionable, the musty and what may have been prematurely “put out to pasture.” Thus, out of contrariness-mixed-with-a curiosity about untimely things, at the very moment scholars in the arts, humanities and social sciences were discussing post-modernism, I embarked on a PhD thesis about twentieth-century classical and avant-garde music. The musical culture of the twentieth century might be described as a series of musical “nows” where composers and their

supporters struggled over what it meant to be modern. It was essentially a competition over what kind of music had a right to claim “now-ness”; and which past, present and future “nows” were aesthetically and sometimes politically legitimate. By the end of the century, the quest for newness or “now-ness” had exhausted itself and composers could break taboos and/or choose the musical style that they thought best suited them. The neat “now” narrated in music histories had fragmented into the multiple “nows” of late- or post-modernity. Or so it seemed. However, when I turned the PhD into a monograph, I ended up arguing that the multiple “nows” of musical modernity had been there all along; and that there were recurring cycles of musical charisma and its dissipation through imitation and/or routinization (*Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity*). I haven’t written anything further about the musical culture in question after converting the thesis into a book. But the exercise reinforced the feeling that the “now” of social theoretical and aesthetic modernity was not as neat or linear as many were suggesting. I also concluded that modernity, rather than been some external reality that impinged on musical developments, was a set of practices for demarcating what it meant to be

modern. And the ongoing interest, amongst twentieth century composers, in the sacred and in merging music with film and sound/noise (or, in the case of John Cage, merging composing with mushroom collecting!), led me to further question sociological narratives regarding macro-social processes of disenchantment, differentiation, rationalization, etc.

But I couldn't throw the "baby" of sociological modernity "out with the bathwater" of epochal scepticism, quite yet. Part of the reason was that three of my first four academic jobs were in sociology programs and most had a commitment to sociology as the study of modernity. They also divided the teaching of "theory" into the epochal categories of "classical" and "contemporary." The first provided an overview of the rise of the discipline in the context of industrial or national modernity; and the second, a reflection on the new modernities associated with the shift to the post-industrial and global-increasingly mediated societies. Teaching the latter was easy and gave sociology an air of "now-ness." The curriculum kind of wrote itself. Social theory and sociology were part of a fragmented but dynamic "now" consisting of imaginative new concepts like the "risk society" (Beck), "liquid modernity" (Bauman) and "economies of signs and spaces" (Lash and Urry).

This left the other course I mentioned—the one about the so-called "classics" and the rise of modern societies. Here one could adopt different kinds of strategies. One could suggest to students

that Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Freud and Simmel were incredibly skilled and imaginative at analysing the modernity associated with their own "now" (i.e., the modernity that existed from about 1870-1940). Another option was to claim that Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Freud and Simmel had been incredibly prophetic and what came to fruition after them was pre-empted in their prescient texts. I was only given the opportunity to teach the "classics" course once in my thirty years of teaching academic sociology and chose an altogether more divergent (and, for some of my colleagues, controversial) approach. I proposed that since sociology had no unique claim to either the critique or study of modernity, the *Sociological Theories of Modernity* subject serve to contextualise sociological ideas horizontally. This meant reading Weber alongside Nietzsche and Thomas Mann; and I encouraged students to understand why, despite his claims about the Protestant Ethic and the increased rationalization of modernity, Weber was fascinated (and, for a time, resided with) the artistic and sexual counterculturalists of pre-World War I Ascona on the Italian-Swiss border. The students seemed to like my mania for contextualization, and one particularly bright student who went on to become a tenured academic specialising in quantitative methods and social policy, ironically, claimed it had been the lecture on Weber and his bohemian contemporaries that made him decide upon sociology as a vocation.

However, the die was cast regarding my

attitude to the limitations of sociology as an epochal discipline. In the space of just a few years, I went from being modernity-obsessed, to wanting to pluralise and refine what I/we meant by modernity, to not talking about modernity at all. While it didn't directly influence me at first, I think Latour gave voice to the growing scepticism about sociology as the study of a neatly defined "now" with his book, *We Have Never Been Modern*. The chutzpah of the French. Not only are we now not fully postmodern or whatever you want to call it (i.e., late-, reflexive-, hyper-, liquid, etc); we have actually never been modern. With his usual mix of ridicule and eye for empirical detail, Latour hypothesized that modernity as epoch concealed a "whirlwind of mediators" (i.e., it hid the various human and nonhuman agents that made us feel modern or act as moderns); and that instead of the faux battles between moderns and postmoderns—which he saw as instances of "moral grandeur"—we engage in the tedious but "meticulous triage of circumstances and cases" (46). The "now" of the social sciences becomes more prosaic but also less epochal with this move. A science lab is a "now" that comes together in time and space through concrete actions; as is a building, an organization, a city or the nature—that from Marx and Weber through to the Frankfurt School—we were told humans had sought to control. Nature was also process and could be studied as a set of "events."

My next intellectual and existential "now" (and it is the one I am still working with) sits

within the "messy now" of Latour's material and affective mediators. Only instead of science equipment and laboratory methods, my focus is the varied "nows" of buildings and landscapes, places and spaces. This phase began with what could be called my last foray into modernity studies—namely, two essays on concrete architecture and Brutalist material surfaces ("Concrete Materialities: Architectural Surfaces and a Cultural Sociology of Modernity"). I was struck by how concrete, that "most modern" of building materials, had oscillated between been seen as a symbol of progress and of socio-political decay, as something that resists nature or is at its mercy. Critics and the public alike couldn't decide if concrete architectural surfaces were cosmopolitan or backward, too hygienic or unruly and shabby. And, while a few Brutalist "monstrosities" had met sorry fates (abandonment, being torn down, or becoming unrecognizable after being resurfaced), raw concrete architecture seemed to be suddenly reborn in the age of Instagram and hipster nostalgia for the forlorn. How's that for a materiality being able to exist in various states of "now"? As I had worked at several Brutalist university campuses, and many Australian universities seemed hellbent on eradicating their 1970s concrete buildings (just as coffee table books about ugly Soviet-era buildings and Etsy T-Shirts identifying the wearer as a "Brutalista" were proliferating), I published an opinion piece for *The Conversation*: "Brutalism, A Campus Love

Story—Or How I Learnt to Love Concrete.” I remain convinced that opening ourselves up to the diverse “nows” of material existence is fundamentally an act of love. Latour terms it the process of “learning to be affected” by the human and nonhuman entities present in the world we live in (“How to Talk About the Body?” 205). It was also my first foray into thinking about how we see the life of materials, and their aging, has an uncanny resemblance to our attitude to human health and decay.

From concrete I moved on to Sydney sandstone. The rock is present throughout the geology and topography of the Sydney region ranging Newcastle in the north to the Illawarra in the south, is evident along the various waterways and coastline of the Sydney region, through to the higher plateaux of the Blue Mountains and the Southern Highlands. Sydney sandstone cuts across traditional divides between culture and nature, architecture and landscape, what is aesthetic and what is functional or belongs to the realm of infrastructure; and as we can see from everything from where Sydney sources its freshwater through to how sandstone acquired its shape (i.e., through a combination of sediment deposit and then subsequent sculpting of formed rock), sandstone is also fundamentally linked to water. In general, Sydney sandstone is seen as an important shaper of landscape qualities and place ambience. For example, novelist and creative writing academic Delia Falconer suggests the topography, geology and attendant ecosystems

create the sensation of a “semi-wild Sydney” where, even close to the CBD, there are “giant leaps from one village to the next” and it is hard to “pinpoint, exactly, where the city begins and ends” (22). Biologist and environmentalist Tim Flannery writes about an urban and regional “rocky foundation . . . which has given form and colour to its finest buildings, shaped its economy, guided its spread and protected its natural jewels” (8). Playwright and place “biographer” (the title of his book is *Sydney: A Biography*), Louis Nowra sees sandstone as a case of “Sydney creat[ing] itself” from what was “under everyone’s feet” (206). The lithic-induced creations he mentions were based on a colonial extractive economy involving quarries and convict labour (Irving); as well as the physical displacement and symbolic erasure of first nations people (on how Aboriginal rock art, which appears in various sandstone surfaces, represents a type of “ghosting” which “haunts” Sydney, see Falconer 15-16).

Writing about Sydney sandstone is often lyrical, if not poetic, even when psychogeography or place histories are the purpose of such writing. This is how Nowra describes the stone and its surface-textural qualities:

It’s almost as if the sandstone is alive. It can change colour . . . It can be stained by weather to an inky dark green or be a pristine bright mustard. At times it is as if it is a living creature as water seeps from

its pores, and the stone itself hosts lichens, mosses, creepers, ferns and orchids, and can live in a symbiotic relationship with the exposed roots of fig trees. (Nowra 206)

Given that in the last few years I have been developing a theoretical framework I have variously called “textural sociology,” “texturology” and the “textural gaze” (“After the Cultural Turn: For a Textural Sociology”; “Living in a Textured World: Sociology and Contextual Intelligence”), sandstone seemed like a perfect case study—one that resonated with my current and unfolding interests. In fact, if my reader will permit me a couple of instances of epistemological-cum-experiential mysticism, I should mention that: (a) my first major journal article on textures was written and revised at a desk looking out onto a Sydney sandstone retaining wall; and (b) that when the online magazine version of that journal decided to use textures as its monthly theme in September of 2020, and commissioned essays and artworks from others, I felt compelled to supplement my online “manifesto” piece with two photos of Sydney sandstone—one of the harbour littoral zone and another of the type of sandstone urban stairs that link different neighbourhoods. Since publishing something with images of Sydney sandstone occurred in the context of a piece of writing that had nothing directly to do with the stone (i.e., it was about how we might use surface-textures to broaden the “sociological

imagination”), the use of these photos has always left me with the niggling question: are landscapes and sensescapes part of our scholarship even when we they are in the background? Equally, we could ask: had I sat at a desk looking out at a stone retaining wall when I was an economics undergraduate student or going through my sociology of modernity phase, would the materialities of place have had the same effect? The answer is: probably not. Past Eduardos probably weren’t ready to see significance in everyday materials; and, like possibly many other Sydneysiders, either ignored or were indifferent to the lithic environments around them. In this respect, my lithic turn was “timely” (in the sense of I was ready to accept what my surroundings could teach me) but “untimely” in that it took a long time, many detours and doing lots of “catch up” reading in areas like landscape theory, cultural geography and the anthropology of natural and sensory ecologies, to be ready for my sandstone gift.

Sandstone is untimely in other respects. It resists neat historicization or reduction to common timescales. Sure, the last twenty-five years have seen everyone from geologists to photographers, poets to regional strategic think-tanks suddenly start talking about Sydney sandstone (Committee for Sydney; Deirmendjian; Jones; Tredinnick). And sure, some of the new sandstone place/regional consciousness dates from, clusters around, and is partly shaped by historical events like the

Bicentenary and the Sydney Olympics (Flannery; Turnbull). There is also a history of material desecrations and shifting architectural fashions involving the post-war “now” of architects like modernist Harry Seidler and the building of the Cahill expressway at Circular Quay. There was a “now” that turned its back on the local lithic form, and in cases actively wanted to eradicate it. Had it not been for the BLF Green Bans of the 1970s, even the sandstone architecture and feel of The Rocks may have disappeared.

But sandstone is a resistant and unruly stone that doesn't always conform to human expectations or planned projects. In any case, material histories aren't so easily erased; and with sandstone we have a historical or even transhistorical material serving as “an ever-present reminder of [Sydney's] Georgian beginnings and more ancient past” (Falconer 3). And we are talking about capital “A” Ancient. Almost all the texts that discuss sandstone mention its long natural history and geological temporalities. As one author notes, having taken “over *two hundred years*” to form, sandstone offers an “awareness of an incomprehensively ancient and intricate natural history” (Jones 12). Similarly, the stone often captures the imagination of authors because it dates from a time when what now appears fixed or settled was still in a dynamic state (i.e., continents hadn't yet formed and even iconic landmarks such as Sydney Harbour were yet to have water in them—re the latter, see Gibson).

However, what was also interesting is that from the very beginning my research and writing about Sydney sandstone took on a biographical and existential character. Just as my temporal scales were beginning to stretch to the historical horizons of two hundred plus million years (and, what does a sociologist know about natural history, let alone geological time?), sandstone also seemed to introduce the temporal register of personal memoir and important biographical “landmarks.” My mother gave me photographs from our early years in Australia and I saw that Sydney sandstone was often our companion in family photos taken at Fitzroy Falls or at Avon Dam both perched in Sydney's scenic sandstone rim. Indeed, after becoming custodian to these family photos, I soon realised that a lot of our family's leisure and leisure-related mobility, during my late-childhood and adolescence, involved either sandstone-saturated locations or travel via sandstone-framed roads. The latter was not without consequence and reverberated in the following recollection I placed in my “Sandstone Files”:

About fifteen years ago, I am an adult in my forties. I am living in the Dandenong Ranges and working at Monash University but driving “home” to Sydney for Christmas. I am hurtling along the Hume Highway, and some 90-minutes out from Sydney, I sense that the landscape has somehow changed. At first, this sensation

As in the case of concrete (which had surrounded me particularly in my professional or workaday life as an academic), it had taken the material-affective qualities of Sydney sandstone for me to start linking biography and place; embodied experience and existential issues to do with migration and where—through decades long place attachments and memories—I felt that I did or didn’t feel at home.

is nothing more than something registering in my peripheral vision. I am after all driving and focusing on the road. But the pleasant associations and the heightened awareness of landscape are palpable and force me to look sideways (i.e., out the driver’s window). I immediately realise I am driving through a sandstone cutting in the vicinity of the Nattai River in the Southern Highlands. I have entered Sydney’s scenic sandstone rim. There is a strong sense of *déjà vu* and of having arrived. My mind instantaneously conjures up primal scenes, from decades earlier, where I am also in a car and there is sandstone “outside” (I put outside in quotation marks because the stone is obviously also “inside” of me). My imagination also triggers quickfire comparisons: the colour of the sandstone which I am presently driving through is predominantly dark grey and some of it looks like dirty fabric that requires washing. Whereas, when our family used

to head north, to visit friends who lived in Terrigal, I remember oranges with splashes of purple and red. Much more evocative of sunsets. (Personal files, document dated January 20, 2023)

I had never written in such a personal manner before either as a methodological tool or as text to be published. As in the case of concrete (which had surrounded me particularly in my professional or workaday life as an academic), it had taken the material-affective qualities of Sydney sandstone for me to start linking biography and place; embodied experience and existential issues to do with migration and where—through decades long place attachments and memories—I felt that I did or didn’t feel at home.

I soon found I wasn’t the only one making connections between Sydney sandstone and biographical experiences operating on a human scale. Thus, we have a Catholic priest, theologian and archaeologist writing about personal recollections of “rock-hopping around the

harbour foreshores, clambering over rock faces, picking our way through the ridge-top heathland or viewing far vistas from cliff-tops” (Stockton np); and the previously cited Falconer noting “childhood memories . . . of the dark layer of black pollution and mould soaked into the sandstone fronts of Sydney’s grand buildings, and the green trails of water leaking from the . . . high walls of the rocks” (Falconer 4). For her, sandstone is part of place-based emotional and psychic affordances that make any local wishing to engage in metaphysics into a “materialist” in the best sense of word:

Think in Sydney and you can be no cold metaphysician. The material constantly includes . . . Even a walk up the street is often literally “up”, as the city climbs to precipitous cliffs at its sea edge [and harbour foreshore] . . . Yet this constant awareness of the material, which goes back to our Georgian past and its interest in the body’s humours like bile and phlegm, is quite different from shallow materialism. (Falconer 5)

The lithic then is something that operates at several temporal (and, for that matter, spatial) “scales” all at once. It points to a multilayered “now” that traverses the temporalities of geology and natural history, biography and personal experience, colonization and the “Georgian” worldview. As Falconer proposes, the lithic even

determines the body-energies and patterns of movement associated with walking “up the street.”

As a result of how geological and everyday temporalities combine some have started talking about a *Geologic Now* (Ellsworth and Kruse). The editors of a collection with that title, describe how the unimaginably long duration of geological time is now colliding with the accelerated time of an everyday Anthropocene:

Humans seem to be sensing, in new ways, that the forces and materials of the earth are not only subjects of scientific inquiry—they have also become conditions of daily life . . . Geologic topics and themes are underscoring daily experience in ways that are stark and arresting. Deep time is beginning to have applied, material meaning for non-specialists . . . Today, [the existence, effects, and nature of earth dynamics] are topics of breaking news about *tectonic plate movements, travel-disrupting volcanic eruptions, deep time, slow accumulations and metamorphoses of the world’s materiality, erosion and displacement of landforms, dramatic earth reshaping events, and geo-bio interactions.* (Ellsworth and Kruse 6-8)

The notion of a *Geologic Now*, then, is based on the idea “We’re now living on a qualitatively different planet” (Ellsworth and Kruse 8). But the formulation “Today . . . [the] topics of breaking

news are . . .” reminded me of other formulations regarding the *zeitgeist*. Now instead of the “Fall of Communism”, it is the “planetary crisis” that shapes our collective futures. But, as two scholars within the environmental humanities, who want us to take the elemental worlds of earth, fire, water and air seriously, caution: “To think that the world is ours to ruin or to save are two expressions of the same hubris” (Cohen and Duckert 5). They recommend taking a cue from the “elements themselves [as] vortex-spawning” entities, without “partition” of any sort, from the level of “micro- to macrocosm” (3). As with Gaston Bachelard’s forays into the elemental as a route to a “material imagination” that doesn’t separate matter from metaphor, or substances from the kinds of “will” they enable, we need to be able to imagine how “[d]ense earth and weighty water sink, air and fire rise”, and there are “all matter of spirals, a gyre of renewal and catastrophes” (Cohen and Duckert 3).

I concur. I think avoiding hubris is not fundamentally about who has “agency.” Nor about how the human and the geologic are “now intermingled”—as a text like *Geologic Now* proposes. Haven’t the different substances of the world always intermingled? So why put so much emphasis on today’s intermingling? Much more pertinent I think is how we imagine and connect different aspects of the world: the temporal and the spatial, the material and the metaphorical. I’m not the only one reaching this type of conclusion. Thus, anthropologist Tim Ingold—a vitalist who

emphasizes process, shares the current ethos of attributing importance to nonhuman phenomena in the social sciences, and who has studiously avoided proposing an ontology—surprises when he states that “[a]t the root of the problem, I believe is a peculiarly modern severing of imaginary worlds from the world of real life” (xii). The trick as he sees it is “how to make allowance for imagination without reopening a gap between humanity and nature,” or between human history and other kinds of history, that he and others “had gone to great lengths to close” (xii).

And the book where Ingold sets out “to heal [such] rupture[s],” *Imagining for Real*, operates at two seemingly contradictory levels. The book offers experimental reflections on whether “creation” is a better word than “creativity,” whether certain types of texts might be deemed “landscapes of the imagination,” what the world feels like from the vantagepoint of light, sound, noise and silence, and what happens if we imagine “cities as oceans” and “buildings as ships” afloat whirling seas; alongside recurring references to old-fashioned metaphysical concepts such as the “soul,” “wisdom,” and how we might achieve a sense of “wholeness” (xii). Yet Ingold is not so rarefied that he can’t acknowledge several of the essays in the book were written at a “time of immense and indeed worldwide distress” due to the Coronavirus pandemic: “The feeling of having had the rug pulled out from under our feet is, I think, shared by everyone. We had been sleepwalking, thinking

that life can be taken for granted” (xiii-xiv). It’s just that whether we are living in a time of crisis or in a state of supposed normality, we need to remind ourselves that “Living . . . is a perpetual balancing act” (xiv).

Someone who understood that existence was both part of and larger than the flows of time was Marxist urbanist Henri Lefebvre. He put forward a “rhythmanalysis” and a complementary theory of “moments.” Lefebvre’s argument is that even if modernity has flattened aspects of everyday life, and capitalism has rendered qualitative differences abstract and commodifiable, “The gaze and the intellect can still grasp directly some aspects of our reality that are rich in meaning . . . Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and expenditure of energy, there is **rhythm**” (25; bold in the original). Perhaps, we need to talk about modernity after all? However, rather than resort to abstract tools like periodization or seeing in history some pre-designed pattern, Lefebvre thinks we need to develop the capacity to engage in moments of profound presence. As Lefebvre-exegete Rob Shields observes: “Moments are those times when one recognizes or has a sudden insight into a situation . . . a flash of the wider significance of some ‘thing’ or event” (61).

Existentialist German-Jewish-American sociologist Kurt H. Wolff framed it differently, but meant something similar, when he wrote what is required is an act of *surrender* to a time or place (and the radical alterity they imply). He

called such surrenders total experiences and acts of “cognitive love,” the sort of thinking needed to grasp “what happens when we see a street for the first time, when we meet a new person, see a new part of the city, enter a house not entered before” (13). Rather than resulting in countless acts of appropriation or in a faulty “diagnosis of our time,” surrendering to lived moments can teach us to better appreciate “*What* is to be taken literally” about our situation; as well as serving to remind humans that, despite their capacity for consciousness, creativity and communication, they are also “an object, an organism, an animal, [who] has weight, and innumerable other characteristics that are also attributes of other contents of the cosmos” (61).

This is where my intellectual journey is at presently. I am currently seeking to inquire into the richness of moments by actively building bridges/opening doors from the mundane “nows” of everyday life and everyday “textures” to the “now” of history/politics and the “Now” of existential-cum-phenomenological meaning. My intellectual journey began, as a high school student and university undergraduate, with a focus on the “now” of economic debates and national politics; but I soon fell in love with what some call “Grand Theory” via the global events of the late-1980s and then a curiosity with respect to the grand gestures of musical modernists/avant-gardists. However, epochal explanations and placeless social theorizing made me start to feel less and less connected with either

my time or my place. At a certain point in my thinking and writing I started feeling not only less grounded but also less able to ask larger questions. Ironically, it has taken a turn towards the spatio-temporal scales of buildings, stony landscapes, and the mundane materialities of place, to help me personally reconnect the “here-and-now” of lived moments with both history and embodied perception-cum-metaphysics.

Intellectual insights glimpsed through “moments” will no doubt seem overly subjective to some; and to others, like a case of “too much interpretation” or theorizing and “not enough explanation” or facts. However, what if what really matters is the *quality* of our encounters with the world and with each other? And what are encounters if not little “n” nows where, from time to time, we get access to a meaningful (or should that be “a meaning-full”?) lower case “n” or capital “N” now/Now? Arguably, being present to the world increases the likelihood we will find something meaningful to talk about; and perhaps be guided by that world regarding how to communicate and do justice to what we find. Who knows where such thinking and writing (or doing) will lead us? There are no guarantees regarding final—personal or collective—destinations. We may or may not become wiser; we may or may not change the world for the better. But, if Nietzsche was right about getting our temporal frames right, and that what was at stake was the vitality of individuals, epochs and

cultures, long may attentive and meaningful encounters with the world continue!

Works Cited

- Adam, Barbara. *Time and Social Theory*. Polity Press, 1990.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Dallas Institute, 1994.
- . *Earth and Reveries of the Will*. Dallas Institute, 2000.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity, 2000.
- Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society*. Sage, 1992.
- Bongiorno, Frank. *The Eighties: The Decade that Transformed Australia*. Black Inc. Books, 2014.
- Cohen, J. J. and L. Duckert. "Eleven Principles of the Elements." *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, pp. 1-26.
- Committee for Sydney. *The Sandstone Mega-Region*, June 2018, sydney.org.au/policy-library/the-sandstone-mega-region-untitling-newcastle-the-central-coast-sydney-wollongong/. Accessed 30 May 2024.
- de la Fuente, Eduardo. "The Last of the Modernists: Adorno, Foucault and the Modern Conception of the Intellectual." *Theodor W. Adorno*, edited by Gerard Delanty, vol. 4, Sage, 2004, pp. 200-209.
- . *Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity*. Routledge, 2011.
- . "Brutalism, A Campus Love Story – Or How I Learnt to Love Concrete." *The Conversation*, 15 Mar. 2017, theconversation.com/brutalism-a-campus-love-story-or-how-i-learned-to-love-concrete-72081. Accessed 3 Dec. 2024.
- . "After the Cultural Turn: For a Textural Sociology." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2019, pp. 552-567.
- . (2020). "Living in a Textured World: Sociology and Contextual Intelligence." *The Sociological Review*, 4 Sep. 2020, thesociologicalreview.org/magazine/september-2020/texture/living-in-a-textured-world-sociology-and-contextual-intelligence. Accessed 29 Nov. 2024.
- . "Concrete Materialities: Architectural Surfaces and a Cultural Sociology of Modernity." *Sociology of the Arts in Action: New Perspectives on Creation, Production, and Reception*, edited by Arturo Rodriguez Morató and Alvaro Santana Acuña, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, pp. 213-237.
- Deirmendjian, Gary. *Sydney Sandstone*. Craftsman House, 2002.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth and Jamie Kruse. "Introduction." *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to the Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, edited by Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, Punctum Books, 2012, pp. 6-26.
- Falconer, Delia. *Sydney*. University of New South Wales Press, 2010.
- Flannery, Tim. *The Birth of Sydney*. Text Publishing, 1988.

- Gibson, Ross. *Flooded Canyon*. Upswell, 2023.
- Ingold, Tim. *Imagining for Real: Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence*. Routledge, 2002.
- Irving, Robert. *Paradise, Purgatory, Hell Hole: The Story of the Saunders Sandstone Quarries*. Media Masters, 2006.
- Jones, Gil. *Wasteland, Wilderness, Wonderland*. Blue Mountains Education and Research Trust, 2013.
- Lash, Scott and John Urry. *Economies of Signs and Spaces*. Sage, 1994.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
- . "How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies." *Body and Society*, vol. 10, nos. 2-3, 2004, pp. 205-229.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Bloomsbury, 2004.
- Macquarie University. *The Concise Macquarie Dictionary*. Doubleday, 1982.
- Morris, Meaghan. (1992). "Ecstasy and Economics (A Portrait of Paul Keating)." *Discourse*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1992, pp. 3-58.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Nowra, Louis. *Sydney*. University of New South Wales Press, 2022.
- Shields, Rob. *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*. Routledge, 1999.
- Simmel, George. "Bridge and Door." *Simmel on Culture*, edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, Sage, 1997, pp. 170-174.
- . *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*. Routledge, 2005.
- Tredinnick, Mark. *The Blue Plateau: A Landscape Memoir*. University of Queensland Press, 2009.
- Turnbull, Lucy. *Sydney*. Random House Australia, 1999.
- Wolff, Kurt Heinrich. *Surrender and Catch: Experience and Inquiry Today*. D. Reidel Publishing, 1976.
- Word Hippo. "What is the Plural of Now?." *Word Hippo*, www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the-plural-of/now.html. Accessed 2 Dec. 2024.

Image: "[8183 Sydney Sandstone](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [Robert Montgomery](#)