If, as Freud wrote, eros is the force that binds communities, and if, via the ecological turn, we extend this notion of community beyond the human to various non-humans, then we can make the case that eros is architectural—if architecture is conceived primarily as the design and production of binding structures. American phenomenologist Alphonso Lingis’s work is extraordinarily helpful in such an endeavour, since it consists largely in presenting a cross-species, even cosmopolitical phenomenology of what it means to seek to bind and be bound to other entities, in full awareness of our vulnerability and capacity for exploitation.

In a series of books that begins with *Excesses: Eros and Culture* (1984) and *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (1986), continuing with the remarkable *Abuses* (1994) and *Dangerous Emotions* (2000), through to the recent *Violence and Splendor* (2011), Lingis documents the varieties of erotic experience, building on Plato’s “love of knowledge” (“philosophia”) and Freud’s meditations on the erotic drives and how they form “civilization and its discontents.” But Lingis goes much further, proposing, for example, the possibility of a civilization built around an unsublimated eros. He gives as historical evidence of this possibility the temples at Khajuraho in India. Yet his argument also relies on an intimate but rigorous analysis of his own erotic experiences.

For Lingis, eros is the binding of the body/mind in relation to others: literally the architecture of bodies in their relation to others, “erotic” in terms of specifically sexual practices, but also erotic in the broader sense of establishing codes and practices of intimacy, ways of sensing, practices of being together, of existing in a world held (bound) in common. Via his readings of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and others, Lingis suggests that eros may also involve more primary bindings of our bodies to our psyches, fundamental articulations of our desire for a configuration, for taking specific corporeal forms, for elaborating particular distributions of the sensible and the material at the phenomenological level. Eros spans the intimate and the cosmic, and represents a set of practices and beliefs as to what is proximate, what can be touched or can touch us, and what bridges can...
be built between self and non-self, however these are constellated. I met with Lingis at his home outside of Baltimore on an early summer afternoon—his garden humming with insect life—after visiting his avairy and his preferred companion species, a collection of birds, some of which have been with him for twenty-five years.

One of the other speakers [at the conference] objected quite strongly, and she said that anything other than these signs doesn’t exist. It’s metaphysics, it’s essences, it’s a whole philosophical vocabulary that has been debunked and shown to be illogically motivated. And eros in particular seems to disappear as soon as you make the move. AL. Also, when I was thinking about the seductive voice I was thinking about the powers of the voice itself, and I was struck by the fact that in seduction usually the words are commonplace, like “I love you”; they are the most commonplace words. But the voice. I mean, I think every traveller has been seduced by a voice in a language you hardly understand, maybe not at all. But in the seductive voice the whole person is there, is present, and so close. The person who is whispering in your ear, the voice is completely inside you. So it was intimacy where the message is very often insignificant. And very often lovers murmur or giggle or talk nonsense or sing commonplace songs to one another. There is nothing to be learned from listening in to lovers’ talk. So there, again, I felt it was a place for phenomenology to examine exactly what is happening and not reduce it. There are a number of things that struck me about the seductive voice: on the one hand it’s natural; somehow quite artlessly we know about the seductive voice, and I was very struck that in seduction it’s not the meaning, the words, which are often banal and quite trivial. But you know, when I was in London on the subway going to this meeting there was a kind of stout woman, the subway car was kind of crowded, and she had a daughter who was probably thirteen, and there were some empty seats but instead the daughter wanted to lie against her mother. And the mother is stroking her hair and stroking her shoulders and so on. It was, to me, a vivid example of the caress not saying “I’m not going to hurt you.” Or, after thirty years of living together and loving one another, a pair of people sitting in the park and the man with his arm around the woman and stroking her hand: this is no longer saying “I will not.” Perhaps it is saying “I choose.” The very fact that this hand is doing is not giving any new message after thirty years—it’s instead a plausible experience.

It’s hard to talk about eros these days partly because of this thing called the “linguistic turn,” whereby everything, it’s argued, ends up in a message or a sign and in some sense the vulgar version of the linguistic turn just says that anything other than these signs doesn’t exist. It’s metaphysics, it’s essences, it’s a whole philosophical vocabulary that has been debunked and shown to be illogically motivated. And eros in particular seems to disappear as soon as you make the move.

I thought a lot about Bataille, who has this conception of giving information. Of course, sometimes, for example a parent caressing a child who is frightened or in distress is saying “I will protect you” and things like that. But you know, I was in London on the subway going to this meeting there was a kind of stout woman, the subway car was kind of crowded, and she had a daughter who was probably thirteen, and there were some empty seats but instead the daughter wanted to lie against her mother. And the mother is stroking her hair and stroking her shoulders and so on. It was, to me, a vivid example of the caress not saying “I’m not going to hurt you.” Or, after thirty years of living together and loving one another, a pair of people sitting in the park and the man with his arm around the woman and stroking her hand: this is no longer saying “I will not.” Perhaps it is saying “I choose.” The very fact that this hand is doing is not giving any new message after thirty years—it’s instead a plausible experience.

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lot about these two things. We could call this one the “erotic figure”—well Bataille would call it the hairy animal... or coarse or if we could. It's such a mysterious juxtaposition of forces and powers. Ah. Yeah, the way I came upon this a long time ago was with people that talked about other species, and of course especially pheasants, who have the most elaborate and complicated and extravagant courtship ritual. Like the fireback (pheasant) with all this amazing elaboration.

MB: It's hard to see dirtiness as functioning within that animal mode itself. That would also be what Bataille would say separates the animal from the human. AL: But I did pursue the Darwinian concept of sexual selection in reference to selection for fitness... in the newspapers ordinary people say when someone commits rape that he acted that way; that's completely false. In nature most animals do not just jump the female by force; very often the male is bigger and stronger, but it's the females who choose and the males who display. And in birds it can be very complicated, so that a female can visit many males who will display in the most elaborative ways before she chooses. It's very easy to prove that that's how these birds got such fantastic decoration. There's a little bird in Africa called the “widow bird,” a small black bird and it's really short and a little male has a very long tail. So they [researchers] cut off one-third of it, the bottom part of the tail of some of them, and glued it on other males to make their tails one-third longer. The females choose the long ones, the short ones didn't get any dates. So this kind of experiment is very easy to do, and [biologists] have done many experiments like that. Birds that are red, they dye them so they get even more red, and they get even more attention from the females. MB: Is that where sign systems come back into the picture in a way? Because what you're saying is that there's a dimension of eros that is about display, about showing off, and not necessarily about reproduction. But when we were looking at the birds one of the first things you said was "how could it be that evolution could produce such a creature," and, in a way, that's the mystery of eros to some degree, how sexual selection and natural selection correlate, or even why they coexist. It's such a mysterious juxtaposition of forces and powers.

AL: Well, I've been thinking about this a lot, actually. One of the things I have been thinking about is that there's a lot of poetics in the way that eros is a force that is directed toward the beautiful. So I think that's part of what Bataille means when he talks about the beautiful——I think Bataille would say that the beautiful is “the beautiful”——and that it's a force that is directionless. It's about being open-ended, it's about being receptive, it's about being vulnerable. And I think that that's really important.

MB: But it seems to me that so much traditional Western thought about eros is really about making love to someone. AL: Yeah. MB: And that's certainly not how Bataille would think about eros. AL: Yeah. MB: But that is what he talks about in terms of the beautiful. AL: Yeah. MB: And so this idea of eros being directionless would be important to Bataille. AL: Yeah. MB: But for most people eros and architecture would somehow be absolutely opposed to each other. Could one say that modern architecture in general is sometimes more about eros, or is it just eros in a way?

AL: Well there's Gaudi. In Barcelona, you see how much of a development in his own life Gaudi did and nobody picked it up. Everybody began to build in the international style. Glass boxes. Those apartment houses. He said there were no straight lines in nature, so there were no straight lines in his architecture either. But it seems to me that so much traditional architecture really has an erotic dimension to it. Right?

MB: Oh, you're talking about the funerary architecture?

AL: Yes, but also their buildings were just so amazing. And it's not dying out. Of course,
in the towns the commercial buildings are just stores, but they continue to build these extraordinary buildings. These are fantastic houses, they’re on stilts. They make no nails, it’s kind of like felling a tree and then they make it. They’re a very small group on the island. It’s quite strange, because they have this very interesting religion and then independently the Dutch time there were almost no converts to Christianity. But when independent came and they were being sucked into it by Islam in the valleys and the coasts and so on, they sort of massively converted to Christianity to distinguish themselves culturally. But they retained so much of the old religion. To me, the most moving thing, was… you know, I was at a woman, a companion, so we rented a driver because it’s cumbersome. He said that babies are buried in trees, so I imagined that the coffins were put in trees. And at the end of the stay the driver took us to this place where they had buried a baby. They cut a tree and put the baby into the trunk of the tree. These are huge trees, and of course as the tree continues to grow it seals over this hole. And this tree has a white milk sap, so it’s seen as a milk. So the baby lives the life of the tree. It’s this fantastic conception. And we saw three of these trees, they’re very beautiful, the trees are enormous and the forest is very beautiful there. There’s so much involved with this conception of nature there. I think the trees giving milk to an albino or who died before their first milk teeth.

MB That strikes me, the trauma of having teeth and the concept of how something inorganic pushes through the gums. It makes the baby have to cry so much, the cutting through the skin by its teeth. But then it will also constitute them as these beings who have that capacity. I guess it’s a kind of capacity for violence, in a way. AL That’s wonderful, I’ve never thought of that in any way. MB Well, they cry so much during the teething period, and they pour fountains of drool as well. They suffer an incredible amount. More than those two processes go together for you, that there isn’t one without the other.

AL Well, you know, I agreed to write a piece for a book on, I think, political animals. I developed two thoughts. Do you know this guy Robin Dunbar, who wrote on grooming and gossiping? [Grooming: Gossip and the Evolution of Language (1996)] He talked about grooming among our close relatives, the apes and baboons, who spend about twenty percent of their time grooming one another. So they groom their children, they groom another, they groom after a quarrel, to sort of reconcile. One thing I was very struck by to start with is that every animal not only knows pleasure but knows that it can give pleasure. In modern British philosophy there’s this argument that feelings have only one witness: only I know my pain, and it’s a completely private theatre. And this thought struck me that every animal knows it. It becomes pleasure by caressing another animal. The other thing on pain that struck me… when I was in the Ocean there these little stinger bees, and some are so venomous that they could kill me, and they don’t know it. They know that they can hurt me. But I think that every person knows that an animal knows it can hurt you—when a dog snarls and cats can bite and so on. But I think what we don’t talk about is that they know they can give pleasure to one another. And to other species. You know, Zoltan [one of Lingis’s birds], when I miss a hair shaving he finds it and clips it off. MB What strikes me when I read your books, even when you’re not directly talking about eroticism—like I was thinking, how is this architecture?—but in some sense, the whole of the relationship to the other is the building up of phenomenological architectures of sense.

AL In so many cultures building repeats the human body; there’s always the head, the body, the arms and legs, and so on. MB So these houses… AL But I’ve come across this language in a number of cultures.

MB But eros is a kind of capacity for building. Certainly for building bridges between beings, but for building more than just bridges, between all kinds of beings. Even between inorganic and organic beings. Building is a kind of binding, and vice versa. And cosmopolitan communities becomes a play of boundaries and ways of these boundaries of rest, and so on. AL He knows that my face should be shaved even though his face is covered in feathers. Anyhow, with grooming the animal group is bound together by pleasure, so that the alpha male and the subordinates and children and so on give each other pleasure. So the bonding is pleasure. And then Dunbar argues that in the human group, which is bigger, human beings can have relations with about 150 people, and even that’s true today in cities. You can maintain relationships with 150 people. And villages are about 150 people all around the world. We also grow one another. Lovers do, parents of children, and so on. And we have professional groomers like hairdressers and dermatologists. Even dentists are careful to give us as much pleasure when they handle our bodies as they can, comfortable chairs, often soothing music. So there’s an element of grooming with every kind of touch. But then he says that the way we keep in touch with these 150 people is gossip. And of course gossip has always gotten a bad reputation among philosophers, especially Heidegger. Philosophers and people of ethics have condemned gossip because they always think it’s malicious, but in fact only something like a form of care, of sympathy, that occurs when hurting somebody’s reputation when they are not there. Most gossip is keeping in touch with people, and I think this really struck me—Dunbar didn’t say this but this was my idea—I’m very struck that when we talk about different foibles and foolishness and nonsense or failures in the life of people, we know and we make stories about them, it’s not malicious, we make them comical. We give a comical version of somebody who did something foolish. Especially in those cultures, they’re thinking malicious because we include ourselves as people who can do things like that. And often we tell foolish things that we’ve done in a comical way. MB I was going to ask—do you read queer theory? AL I guess not especially.

MB Because there’s an extremely interesting book called Sex, or the Unbearable (2013), which is a book of conversations between Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, and Berlant is someone who think Berlant in particular is interested in is what she calls “non-sovereignty.” You can see it in Bataille, that he still talks about sovereignty in a situation where sovereignty is not there. And then he also says that he’s interested in exactly as if this second process is an interruption of the first process—but I don’t think you believe it’s an interruption. So I was wondering, and that’s those two processes go together for you, that there isn’t one without the other.

AL I guess not especially.
notion that it requires sovereignty. But when you remove the need for sovereignty what you’re left with is something...
trouble. There are a lot of images of limbs that were broken and healed: well, it’s not a miracle but it is good luck that it successfully healed. Anyhow, I had such a vision of this whole realm of chance… in all activities they were extremely aware of the factor of chance.

MB: Do you think that there are better or worse orientations towards eros? In a way, that’s what Freud’s question in *Civilization and its Discontents* is as well: are there political configurations of eros that are superior or more interesting?

AJ: Do you know this piece by Ruth Benedict called “Anthropology and the Abnormal”? [1934] It’s a piece I’ve gone back to over the years. She says this: there are well-documented cultures in which what’s abnormal in our culture has a significance and place and prestige and value. So the most obvious example is trance in Bali. In Bali trance is extremely common, and Benedict says that was also the case in the Middle Ages in Europe, but now there’s no longer a place and significance in the culture, so the people who have a talent for it either never develop it, or if it is developed it becomes an abnormality. And she cites other examples that are more and more strange. Well, just recently I read the two books about the Ilongots of Luzon, who are head-hunters. When you look at these photographs they look like Filipinos, beautiful, with very fine features. And in their culture, their cultural norm is for a young man to chop off somebody’s head in order to become a man and to marry. They’re not warriors and they don’t like to take risks themselves, so they ambush people—it could be anybody, it doesn’t have to be anybody they have anything against. It could be a woman or a child. I was thinking how strange this is, here’s this young woman waiting for her lover to come by and say I chopped the head off a child or a woman and now we can get married. Anyhow, what Ruth Benedict says—and it’s a very interesting explanation—she said that there was no culture that has been able to give significance and place to every human ability or capacity, and she compares it with language. She says that in order to have a language you have to make a selection of sounds. But she then raises the question of whether anthropology could make a ranking of cultures, and she believes that right now we’re so ill-informed of the variety of cultures, and also of human nature, that it’s far too soon. But she holds it up, that theoretically it can be done. And so, I think the same thing would be true of eroticism.

I had become very fascinated by Gilbert Herdt and his work with these people who he calls the Sambia, to protect them, in New Guinea, who have this fluid conception of sexual identity. I mean, immediately the whole thing made so much sense to me. So children until puberty are not really boys or girls. They’re addressed as that by culture but since they are not functionally sexual—they have no end of polymorphous sexuality, anal and oral sexuality and so on, but they don’t have genital sexuality, which is the difference—they are not considered male or female. Anyhow, the Sambia have this idea of fluids, a kind of fluid body. So the men draw milk from a certain kind of tree, this white sap, and then they give… I think probably the best word is “male milk,” because they don’t have the conception of semen; rather, it’s a seed that you plant. Well, I think a whole lot of cultures have the idea that to have a child men have to continually pump male milk in the womb and the child forms with female blood and male milk. So the men are giving their milk to women, but also to boys, who fellate them until they ejaculate, that is produce male milk on their own. In order for boys to functionally become men they have to have absorbed quantities of male milk. So it’s a radically different conception than we have of identity, and then for them when the male milk no longer flows as it were, they’re no longer male. They no longer have this identity. I spoke about it once, a long time ago in Britain, and I remember in the audience there was a woman who was an expert in medieval culture, and a lot of it resonated with her. It’s been so long that I couldn’t possibly reproduce what she said, but she saw this fluid conception of bodies and sexual identities in medieval thinking and life. Anyhow, I think there’s a great variety that we have not begun to see and recognize in erotic experiences, that depends on the whole conception of what the human body is and what is happening.

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