



Marcus Boon / Alphonso Lingis

ON THE BOWER- BIRD, THE *DIFUNTA CORREA* AND SOME ARCHI- TECTURES OF SENSE: AN INTER- VIEW WITH ALPHONSO LINGIS BY MARCUS BOON

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" ("philo-sophia") 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 aviary and his preferred companion species, a collection of birds, some of which have been with him for twenty-five years.

Marcus Boon Reading *Libido* and *Excesses*, what struck me is the almost complete absence of thinking about eros in philosophy: the most basic considerations seem like they haven't really even been attempted, which seems extraordinary considering the importance of the topic, that it's so self-evidently important to human beings and non-humans too. Where would you begin in thinking about eros?

Alphonso Lingis I think, perhaps, that I've touched on this subject in four different directions. The first is phenomenology. It was Sartre who first tried to describe what is distinctive about erotic contact, the caress and so on. And Levinas elaborated on that. But I think there's still some work to be done. I was in London last week for this conference on "intimacies" and I spoke about four things, including the seductive voice, and I was very struck that in seduction it's not the meaning of the words, which are often banal and commonplace, but it's the voice itself, the voice's seductive power in its resonances and its melodies, its pacing and its silences. And then I spoke about tact, which is a light touch that is not a kind of appropriation, and then finally about the caress. In general, there's more, but these are intimate, erotic behaviours, and they need a different language since the dominant language, especially, I think, recently in human relations, is the language of communication, of the exchange of messages or information, or of action, of initiative. None of these apply to these intimate behaviours. One of the other speakers [at the conference] objected quite strongly, and she said that through caresses one is communicating, one is saying "I'm not going to hurt you," things like that. And I was saying that we should ask

what the hand is doing. The hand is passing back and forth aimlessly, repetitively, it's not searching for information and it's not gathering information; one learns nothing by caresses. It is, in fact, awakening eddies of pleasure and torment in the other. And the other striking thing is that the pleasure of the caressing hand is the pleasure of the other. If you think about the difference between stroking a soft leather sofa, which is pleasurable, and caressing a living body... the hand awakens, senses sensitivity and feeling and pleasure in the other body. The pleasure of the hand, more than stroking the sofa, is gathering the pleasure of the other, is sensing the pleasure of the other, and that's the pleasure of one's hand.

Anyhow, this is how I was speaking about the caress, and I was struck by the objection that she made, which was again to not really look phenomenologically at what the hand is actually doing, and instead reducing it again to 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, 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 protect you." So you have to see that what this hand is doing is not giving any new message after thirty years—it's instead a pleasurable experience.

MB 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.

AL Also, when I was thinking about the seductive voice I was thinking about the powers of the voice itself, and I was so 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 enacts 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 how to speak seductively. I had this thought a long time ago that I was very struck by: it's that when we meet one another, to meet someone is immediately to pick up the tone of the other's voice. If someone is bubbling with excitement, if you just answer in a flat and officious tone of voice, you refuse the person before you refuse what they have to say. But any two friends begin to adjust to the level and tone and pacing and tempo of the other's voice. So one "picks up" the other's voice in one's own voice. That seems to be a kind of intimacy, a kind of non-separation that happens at once.

Anyhow, I think that's one path I took in thinking about things erotic, and as I say, even very recently for this meeting in London on intimacy. And I realized that phenomenologists have not really looked at what's distinctive to

erotic behaviours or erotic words, the erotic voice. So phenomenological description is still very important. After Jacques Derrida died, I got a phone call to speak at this meeting, and of course I say yes, but then the next morning I get this e-mail—they want the title and abstract and they want it right away. I had never read *On Touching, For Jean-Luc Nancy*, but I had read an interesting interview with Derrida where he says that in that book he had expressed his criticism of Levinas. So anyhow I'm very interested in touching, and I said I would talk about that book—and I didn't at all like what he said about Levinas. It was just a short paper, so I just talked about the light touch, tact, and caress, phenomenologically, and I did it in a kind of non-academic way. I wasn't quoting anybody, but just describing these experiences themselves.

Everybody talks about sex but they talk about it in language from other domains. They talk about communication or somehow make it into a sort of action that has a goal. It's inappropriate language. And of course I thought a lot about Bataille, who has this great tension between two different figures: on the one hand there's this erotic figure, this ethereal woman dressed in totally impracticable garb, situating herself outside the world of work and reason, and stepping in moonbeams and floating and so on. And then on the other side, this sort of animal body, this hairy animal body with its excretions and its body that is half-corruption and so on. And someone wants to tear and disrobe this goddess and find this animal body. Some of this seems, to me, to reflect a certain Catholic culture and language, but on the other hand it seems to me that in our culture we have this idea, especially for people who want to talk about sex, that the naked body is presented like some Greek statue. It's hygienic, it's pure, it doesn't smell, it doesn't shit and so on. Whereas in fact, when we disrobe one another—actually we don't want other people to watch because we want to burrow into the anus and so on, and smell the sweat and excretions. Starting with Bataille I thought a

lot about these two things. We could call this one the “erotic figure”—well Bataille would call it the hairy animal body—but anyhow in Bataille there’s a very intense tension between these two. But then I thought a lot 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 model right? 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 as opposed to selection for fitness... in the newspapers ordinary people say when someone commits rape that he acted like an animal, but 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 elaborate 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, but the 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’s about display, about the play of appearances. 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 Yeah, the way I came upon this a long time ago was with people. I noticed that everybody, when they find a man or a woman they want to go to bed with, or have gone to bed with, they always say “he’s gorgeous” or “she’s so beautiful.” And when I think about it, you never hear anyone say “she’s not much to look at, but turn off the lights and she’s a fantastic fuck,” you know? It’s so striking that human beings of every possible age and class demand beauty, lust demands beauty. I think that in general it’s so fantastic and so strange. Sometimes I think that the strongest urge in nature is beautiful. I mean you have all these seashells that are as beautiful as any pheasant—under that seat, for example, is a conch shell, it’s made by an animal that has very primitive eyes and does not really see such things, but somehow nature has a drive to make things beautiful.

I was writing an article about sexual selection. So the first thing I wanted to do was actually see it, so I bought a pair of grey peacock pheasants, they’re small and they have these peacock eyes all over their bodies. I had a glassed-in porch and big windows, so from my desk I could watch them and for the first couple days of course they were shy. You can tell they were becoming familiar with the environment. And then one day I looked around and the male had spread his gorgeous tail and his wings and he was bowing, dancing in front of her. And I thought “he knows he’s gorgeous.” He knows it. As a matter of fact, I once spoke about this when Michael Taussig invited me to speak in his class, and one of the positivist anthropologists objected, [saying that] animals have no self-consciousness and so on. I think that’s foolish; you don’t have to recognize yourself in the mirror to be aware of how [you look]—but we are completely aware of how we look and how we’re walking, we don’t need to look in the mirror to know how we’re walking or if we’re slouching or bouncing. We have an inner awareness of our posture. So we know if we’re looking rude or coarse or if

we’re looking graceful. The same thing is true of these pheasants. And, in fact, pigeons do recognize themselves in the mirror.

MB But that seems like a basic form of eros, right? There’s something about self-recognition that has an erotic force to it. Even when you read about Lacan’s mirror stage, he basically describes it as an erotic moment, and that it’s the chaos of the unorganized drives in the infant’s body that are ordered into a fascinating image. In some sense that’s already an ordering of the drives, the drives appear as image or self-image, or the possibility of object and subjectivity.

AL Already, there’s display and beauty—and value in beauty. Do you know about the bowerbirds?

MB Tell me about the bowerbirds.

AL Some of them are in Australia, and some are in New Guinea. So the male makes a theatre, a whole construction. The only one I saw was the satin bowerbird. The male makes a “bower” that is a two parallel walls of sticks. And he paints them with a kind of sponge that he makes with berries and berry juices—he paints this building and then it functions. He makes a collection of art objects. And the satin bowerbird especially likes blue; he has blue beetles and blue flowers, anything he can find that’s blue. So the one that I saw was on campus at the university, and he was standing right next to the main sidewalk, there were bushes and right there was this enormous collection, and he had a lot of blue straws he stole from the cafeteria, drinking straws, and blue bottle caps. And they told me that he had been there for years. And then he removes the leaves from the bush so the sunlight can illuminate his little art collection. Then the females, they visit, one bower after another. Maybe they will even visit about forty males. And when the female arrives, he calls, he sings, he dances, he picks up the objects to show her. Anyhow, some of these bowers involve the most fantastic constructions; these are small birds (the satin bowerbird is about as big as a starling), and some of them make domed buildings five or six feet high, and they completely cover them with mosses and

orchids. Then they clear all the ground and they make a mat and have their collection. The gardener bowerbird [aka the Vogelkop bowerbird] brings flowers, and they’re very particular about colour. In one experiment, while the bird was away, a researcher put flowers of three different colours there. When the bird came back he immediately saw that and picked the flower of one colour and just discarded it—he had a garbage disposal place because every day these flowers wilt, and he has to take them to the garbage. So the first one he immediately puts into the garbage. And the second colour he tried in different places to see if it would match his collection here and there, and finally he also took it to the garbage place. The third colour, he found a good place for it. They do these fantastic constructions. And then when the female finally chooses and they make love, she then goes off and makes the nest in a tree by herself, and raises the children by herself. So the males are like full-time performance artists.

MB It’s all about display. I mean, I guess we’re into the territory of eros and architecture.

AL Right!

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 profoundly anti-erotic?

AL Well there’s Gaudí. In Barcelona, you see how much of a development in his *own life* Gaudí 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. When I think of all these Spanish, colonial-style villages in South America... Or the Toraja, who have built some of the single-most spectacular buildings. I was there, in Sulawesi, about two or three summers ago.

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 all dove-tailing, and they're intricately made. All these magnificent paintings. And this is bamboo, small round bamboo, but maybe six or more rows. And then on the top of the roof the designs are spectacular. They're these enormous rooms like ships in the sky. I thought they were simply the most beautiful homes I had ever seen anybody make. They're a very small group on the island. It's quite strange, because they have this very interesting religion and then independence, so during the Dutch time there were almost no converts to Christianity. But when independence came and they were being surrounded 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 with a woman, a companion, so we rented a driver because it's mountainous. 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 bore a hole in the 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 and life—it's babies who are stillborn 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—that's what makes the baby 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 the mirror stage, perhaps it's the tooth stage that's the trauma, because it will define their capacity for violent incorporation. And it plays into the ambivalence concerning the mother's breast that Melanie Klein describes so well: with teeth, the infant is capable of hurting the mother's breast. To some degree, a consequence of having teeth is the aggression against the breast: that doesn't amount to much without the teeth. But it makes sense in a way, that the moment where you become capable of violence would be this shocking moment, but it is also an erotic moment in a strange way too.

AL Of course it comes to my head, these words: "nature, red in tooth, and claw."

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 Especially in those Sulawesi 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 cosmopolitical communitas becomes a play of boundaries and ways of accessing and traversing boundaries of many kinds. And not just at the level of exteriority. Erotic binding is also the process by which the capacity for interiority is articulated. What I find strange is that on the one hand there's an almost ontological quality to the erotic in your work, and so the most basic structures of sense, of being in the world, seem to emerge out of the erotic. But then the other aspect of your work has to

do with lying, deceit, and appearance... money and economy and hustle. And it's almost as if this second process is an interruption of the first process—but I don't think you believe it's an interruption. It's almost like those two process 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 gossip? [*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 one 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 can give pleasure by caressing another animal. The other thing on pain that struck me... when I was in the Ocean there are these little stingrays, and some are so venomous that they could kill me, and they 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 No, really?

AL He knows that my face should be naked 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 groom 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 in ethics have condemned gossip because they always think it's malicious, but in fact only something like five percent of gossip is occupied in 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 behaviour 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, and we're not being 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 a really interesting book called *Sex, or the Unbearable* [2013], which is a book of conversations between Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, and one of the terms that I 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 (of erotic experience) where really what matters, as you've said, is non-sovereignty: whether or not you're able to recoup this experience as a sovereign one doesn't matter. The political failure of Bataille's whole project has to do with the

notion that it requires sovereignty. But when you remove the need for sovereignty what you're left with is something that corresponds much more closely to human eroticism in a genuinely open form. But non-sovereignty also requires a certain discipline or ethics or practice as well. It's not simply random; it's a kind of practice that produces something, and that's the aspect of eroticism that I find least developed in your work: the notion of a kind of art of love or practice. Precisely things like the Kama Sutra, in a way. As much as there's a sense of non-sovereignty as self-abandonment, there is also a kind of practice that's happening there that requires discipline. Even caresses can't be completely aleatory—they're part of a teleology of pleasure.

AL You know, I had always sort of admired the Surrealists from a distance, without really having read them. If I could move a little bit to the side, the theme of chance that I was moved to think about recently is another topic... A very long time ago, in India, I was in Sarnath, the deer park, where the Buddha preached his first sermon. And it had just started to rain a little bit, just sort of drizzle, and I retreated under the Bodhi tree, which was huge, and it's the granddaughter of the original one. There was a branch taken from the original to Sri Lanka by Ashok, and then when the original either died or got chopped down during the Mongol invasion a branch was taken from the Sri Lanka one and brought back to Sarnath. So it's not really a granddaughter, more like it's cloned. Anyhow, under this tree there was this man and little by little we start talking. He was very beautiful by every sense of the word. He was physically beautiful but he had a very beautiful presence. And he identified himself as an astrologer, and I had never particularly paid attention to astrology. And I just want to quote the one thing he said that made a great impact on me—he said there are three things: there's necessity, choice, and chance. We have a discourse about necessity, the natural sciences. We have a discourse about choice: ethics and politics and psychology. But we do not now have a respectable discourse about

chance, we just have the disreputable pages of horoscopes in newspapers. I was very struck by this, and I was thinking and I was talking about it in an ethics class, but really all the essential things in your life are matters of chance. The fact that out of however million sperm that got injected that day this one got connected with this egg and produced me—I'd tell you the number but I never retain numbers. It's something like one in forty-seven billion. But I think that's the number of genes or something. But any change and I would have been somebody else. And then that I was born intact and that if I caught a disease, that was chance. Any disease you could think of, however dangerous, even Ebola, there are some people who are immune who somehow survived... You know, that I found my true love, right? For example, I was on my way to class to register, and on the way I happened to meet somebody that I sort of knew and talked about nothing for five minutes, and as a result when I arrived at the registration room the section I had chosen was closed so I had to take a seminar that I didn't want. And there in an adjacent room was the woman who became the love of my life, whom I would have never met if it hadn't been for this chance encounter on the way. And then for me, for philosophy, several people have asked me how I got into philosophy, and it's the same way everybody gets into philosophy—it was a teacher. In my case, it was a freshman logic teacher, of all things. If I had gone to his class now I probably would not be impressed at all, but somehow I was captivated to take more and more philosophy classes until it became what I majored in. And for most people, it's still just a job. So all the essential things... And then you're going to die by chance, you know? A microbe, some car accident, whatever it is. The Surrealists were so vividly aware of this realm of chance and they had all these practices, you step out the front door and you either go right or left, but you make sure you don't have any idea of a goal and then they would take out the map and point, and then go there, wherever it is!

MB Benjamin said they wanted to unlock the powers of chance for the revolution somehow...

AL Much more recently I had this experience. In Argentina, the most rational and Eurocentric country in Latin America, I had twice gone there and rented a car and did a circuit under the Andes on the West side of Argentina, and I began seeing these shrines, little primitive shrines, and there were all these big piles of water bottles, and then finally I found it in the guide book, the explanation. These are shrines to the "Difunta Correa," the deceased Correa. Around 1850, during the time of the warlords (*caudillos*) Correa's young husband was conscripted by one of these passing warrior bands, and she heard that he was ill. So she headed off to find him, sixty-two kilometres away, across the desert. So she took her baby and set out on foot. Presumably she got lost and in any case she perished of thirst and exhaustion. She was found a couple of days later by passing mill drivers who buried her there. And then, less than fifty years later there was a cattle driver and there was a sudden violent storm which terrified his 500 cattle and they dispersed in all directions. I think it even happened at night. He happened to be near the grave of Correa, and he promised that if she would help he would build a shrine over her grave and the following morning he found all of his cattle, so he built a shrine. And that became the shrine for passing cattle drivers across the desert. And then when trucks started drivers picked this up and they began building little shrines further and further across Argentina. And then finally around 1940 the story stabilized that when she was found by these mill drivers she was dead but her baby was alive sucking at her breast. Now there's a woman you can count on to take care of you, even when she's dead. So I had seen these shrines everywhere, every five kilometres, and there are typically all these piles of water bottles, which you might think is a little late for that. So I actually went some ten years ago to where she was buried, I mean her shrine, and there were seventeen buildings, chapels that were more like sheds, very simple buildings

filled with thousands of ex-votos, little... sometimes they were just words. And every kind of ex-voto... there was an entire shed filled with wedding gowns. So young women who had found a husband thanked Correa by giving her the wedding gown. There are all sorts of model trucks, model cars and so on, notes of thanks from truck drivers who had made a successful trip. Finally—it gets even more and more astonishing—there's a whole building of people who thank her for animals, for cattle, but even for the most expensive racing horses that she helped win. And prize dogs and so on... There are luxury cars given to this shrine, jewels, every conceivable object. But then where she's actually buried is atop this sort of hill that is filled with thousands and thousands of model houses, so people who found a home...

MB Sounds like an incredible place...

AL It's incredible... it's the most intense exhibition of all the hopes, fears, and loves of Argentines. But, you know, there are things like doctors who have gotten their certificates, people who have gotten scholarships to American universities...

MB But your point is that the category of chance...

AL Yeah, so all of this is called *milagro* in Spanish—miracle. The *Difunta Correa* could never be a Catholic saint or a patriotic saint because nothing is known whatsoever about whether she had any virtues—but she is a miracle worker. And yet, you know, I'm looking at all that and I'm thinking: these are not exactly miracles, they're more like favours. A truck driver went to Tierra del Fuego, a trip of a couple of thousand kilometres, returned safely and he thanks her. So I could see more and more that the people of Argentina are very much aware that everywhere there's a matter of chance. Whether you successfully find a husband is a matter of chance. They thank her for this—as I say in my language—favour. And they say it's a matter of luck that I made a trip without a mishap. I saw that they all live in this world of chance, that when I take a trip it's a matter of good luck that I'll make it without

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?

AL 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.

Thanks to Anna Sullivan for transcribing this interview.