

Introduction

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Ours is not a sedentary anatomy, Alphonso Lingis muses in the “Departures” section of *Violence and Splendor*; “our feet are made to move on.” Thus, he goes on to say, we travel to nearby or far-off places, making our way “across mountains and continents as the continental plates collide and buckle up those mountains that freeze the west winds and dry out these deserts.” And, no doubt recalling his own departures while writing in the third person: “We descend into the Grand Canyon treading the eons that deposited those fifty layers of petrified sediment. In the crystal nights of deserts and mountains our gaze travels the light years of the stars. We visit excavations and monitor the millions of years from algae to dinosaurs. We trip through the savannah with the wildebeests and impalas and stroll the beach taking the waves with the plovers.” In short, and in a statement that says much about Lingis and his unique phenomenology, “Spaces, just because they are exterior, exotic, enthrall us and summon us” (40).

Safe to say, it was in response to such a summons that Lingis, as early as the 1970s, set out to go “as far as you can go on our planet” (11). These words are taken from the “Space Travel” section of *Violence and Splendor*, where, setting out from Baltimore and changing planes in Chicago and Seoul, he ends up in Ulaanbaatar, another departure point from which he undertakes a summer circuit of some three thousand kilometres around Mongolia, moving with nomads who move with herds

as they graze upon the steppe, asking himself how to understand these most passionate of people and how to live in their time: “When you awake in the morning you find yourself in yesterday’s landscape, when you move you move in the landscape of hundreds and thousands of years ago” (14). Even on arriving in Ulaanbaatar and seeking a Mongolian companion who can drive him out of the capital into the Gobi Desert, Lingis reflects on the *trust* that travel involves—not the kind of trust that instills confidence in us of someone we know or of some assured outcome, but trust as impulsive and immediate, a “strong surge of feeling that connects us with others.” For Lingis, “there is nothing more exhilarating than trusting a stranger with whom you have no religion, ethnic or moral community, or language in common” (13).

In his book *Trust*, Lingis recounts his journey to Mongolia for the New Year’s Day of the new millennium when, in two Ulaanbaatar museum shops, he came upon first one and then another human femur bone, both very aged, wrapped in fragile silk bands, and displayed as ritual horns. Shopkeepers who spoke no English wrote out slips in Mongolian script that, they indicated with smiles and gestures, would clear the items at the airport. When these turned out to be sales slips only, Lingis faced scrutiny from an airport official who asked him what he was doing in Mongolia. “I took pleasure in answering, ‘I’m a tourist!’” (149). If not in Mongolia, he might as well have been in Africa, India, Egypt, Argentina, Bolivia, Indonesia, Peru, Haiti, Bali, Java, Antarctica, Nicaragua, or any number of other places that, if not forsaken, are at least off “the tourist’s” beaten track; places in which he has encountered not reassuring sameness or likeness, but differences, and in which he has connected with (trusted) others and attempted to understand how and what they see. For this superlative academic, critic, translator, and publisher of so many scholarly texts, “not simply academic matters,” Janice McLane suggests, “but how to live and act, what people, places, and things to approach, all become choices to examine and live out philosophically. One might say that Lingis’s life itself has become a phenomenology” (51).

WORKS CITED

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