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Pigeon stories

Colin Jerolmack, *The Global Pigeon*. (Fieldwork Encounters and Discoveries.) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. 288 pp. \$80.00 hb; \$27.50 pb; \$7.00-\$27.00 e-bk.

Pigeons are funny creatures. They are globally urbanized fellows, so much so that they have become a separate species — in English set apart from their rural cousins, the doves. As many urbanized animals, they thrive in the cities because they follow human patterns and live off our excess. People of all ages enjoy feeding pigeons, and in some settings, such as Trafalgar Square in London, pigeons are iconic to the “place images” (Shields) held and practiced. Moreover, they make use of human technologies and infrastructures. A couple of years ago, a Swedish newspaper wrote about a group of pigeons who regularly commuted inside the subway train from the outskirts to the suburban center, where they fed outside restaurants and in parks, only to head back “home” again in the evening. Obviously clever and successful in their urban lifestyle, pigeons have become “natural” inhabitants of city parks, squares, roofs, and walls. Moreover, on a global scale, different pure breeds are also popular human companions in play, work, and social interaction, and serve as important social facilitators, cultural anchors, and objects of love and care. Yet their existence is not uncontested, and when their presence exceeds certain limits — be these limits numerical, spatial, or behavioral — pigeons become vermin, or “rats with wings” (Jerolmack 45).

Sociologist Colin Jerolmack starts from and explores the complexities of global pigeons. He does so through a number of ethnographic case studies in different pigeon contexts in a number of places around the world, for example micro-spatial conflicts around pigeon feeding in Venice, human-pigeon interaction in New York, pigeon racing in South Africa, and Turkish tumblers in Berlin. The “global” in the title refers to and problematizes the fact that even though the book obviously does not cover the whole world, similar interactional and meaning-making patterns seem to structure the social worlds of pigeons. It also refers to the structuring of the social contexts present — through “extra-local” political and economic processes and histories. Theoretically, the book is placed firmly in urban ecology, but goes against the “bio-philial” hypothesis — that humans as all other animals are hardwired to long for and seek out nature — and the more sociological but equally problematic “nature lost” paradigm, which claims that naked urban life makes us anomic and irresponsible in relation to the environment

because the bond to nature has been cut. This, the author claims, represents an “a-social” view of nature, as something out there — non-human, pristine and vulnerable. But the author is similarly dissatisfied with urban scholars’ failure to account for human-non-human interaction, which has resulted in an equally problematic “a-natural” view of the social. On the contrary, the book sets out to examine the social context in which human-pigeon interaction is formed and given meaning, thus combining the urban ecology perspective with social psychology, investigating issues such as performance of self and other, ethnic-, class- and masculine identities, as well as emplaced sociability. Following in the footsteps of Chicago School ethnographers and classical scholars of sociology such as Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, Jerolmack explores the social meaning of human-pigeon interaction in its specific setting. The book ends with a discussion of how urban ecologies can be better understood, not in terms of social or natural, but rather as hybrid, and “hybridity as a way of life” (237), paraphrasing Louis Wirth’s famous expression, “urbanism as a way of life.”

The Global Pigeon is divided into an introduction chapter, three thematic parts — The Pedestrian Pigeon, The Totemic Pigeon and Deep Play — that are divided into seven chapters, and a concluding section. Reading the chapters with great joy and interest, I find myself most deeply absorbed by the stories told of various feeding and place-making practices in emblematic squares (Chapter 2), and the male flyers and hobby breeders of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Berlin (Chapter 3, 4 and 5). I will give just a brief overview of a few of the findings and arguments, before concluding with the more general strengths and weaknesses of the book as a whole.

In Chapter 2, “Do not feed the pigeons. Cultural heritage and the politics of place in Venice and London,” two competing stories are told: the pigeon as a rightful member of a community and enchanting creator of the squares of St Marco and Trafalgar, or as trespassers threatening the public health and architecture with a cultural heritage and of historical value. Despite the many historical and political differences attached to these places, there are also striking similarities in the politics taking place. In Trafalgar Square, pigeons, feed vendors, and tourists feeding the birds were set up against local politicians, “pigeon police” or “heritage wardens,” and cleaners who eventually, at least partially, won the battle in 2007 through a decision made by the local government of Westminster to ban pigeon feeding. However, where there are rules, there is disobedience, and consequently the activities moved to a part of the square belonging to

the neighboring municipality, and “guerilla feeders” emerged at night time while “rogue feeders” continued to break the ban throughout the day. Thus, the multi-species time-space patterning of Trafalgar Square changed and, according to the author, fierce policing has now disrupted the “spontaneous and idiosyncratic interactional moments that made the space a place *like no other*” (74, italics in original). The prohibition of feeding and removal of Trafalgar pigeons, the very animals people conceived of as special and as constituting the specificity of the place, has led to different place-making practices and meanings. The chapter convincingly highlights the slippery boundaries between nature and culture, wild and tame, inclusion and exclusion, and follows up on the argument outlined in Chapter 1 about the strange position of the sidewalk pigeon as neither tame and protected under the jurisdiction of companion animals nor wild and considered pristine and conserved, but as an animal that transgresses or moves between these positions, resulting in a troublesome feral category. Geographers Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert state that, “feral creatures are in themselves curiously transgressive beings, neither purely wild nor purely tame, existing as ‘in-between’ animals finding themselves, appropriately enough, utilizing ‘in-between-spaces’” (Philo & Wilbert 21). Pigeons inhabiting urban spaces are often portrayed as “homeless” or “bums,” as they corrupt our sense of nature and pollute cultural orders (Jerolmack, 73; 230).

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the reader gets to know in more detail the interactions, meanings, and practices that structure personal human-pigeon engagements: that of breeding, flying, keeping, and exchanging certain breeds. In New York, the keeping of pigeons in coops on rooftops, and the culture of pigeon flying taking place in pet shops, is an endangered urban way of life. Due to sanitization and the gentrification of working class, immigrant neighborhoods that used to flourish in these regards, rooftop coops in connection to dwellings have been removed and are now rare. For the often older enthusiasts interviewed in Chapter 3, pigeon keeping and the daily training and flying function to connect the men to a lost history, and to keep them in touch with a valued neighborhood community. The praxis and interaction are mainly understood in terms of labor, working with the animals and keeping the breed, flock, and coops clean and healthy, which, according to a working-class ethics, is something that facilitates a certain hard-working, dedicated, and family-sustaining masculinity.

Partly in contrast, the Turkish immigrants in Berlin, portrayed in Chapter 4, typically keep their highly valued pigeons of Turkish descent in coops away from their private dwellings. Like the New Yorkers, they fly pigeons as a way of life, but rather than through a discourse of work, they conceptualize the cross-species relations more in terms of unavoidable faith, addiction, and belonging together; they consequently talk of

caring for, even loving the birds. It is thus a certain kind of kinship that is being performed, and one that connects these immigrant men with a Turkish, nationalist view of "nature" (118), seemingly in contrast to the meaning of the word. One of the interviewees keeps his tumbler coops in a backyard, close to the main airport, and Jerolmack writes,

I saw buildings and concrete in every direction from his roof, and planes flew very low overhead. Yet he answered, "Being in an urban center doesn't matter. I just love nature. Even if we are in the city, we create our own natural environment. It's about being in nature. I can meet my friends and we stay outside. We all love nature." (119-120).

Interestingly, in both cases, pigeon flying appears as a "men only" activity, and in the Berlin case it restores a masculinity that connects to a nationality partly lost, one in which engagement with and caring for pigeons are conceptualized in sharp contrast to the morally degrading "tea houses" that Turkish males frequent and where they, according to the interviewees, smoke, gamble and drink. Instead, masculinity is formed through the idea (and not always the practice) of homosocial outdoor activities of caring for, grooming, training and flying pigeons. Thus, in both cases, class, gender, ethnicity, age and breed intersect in interesting ways, and even though a more thorough theoretical exploration of these intersections is missing, Jerolmack proves to have a good ethnographic eye, ear, and nose, as well as the ability to write about his observations.

On the critical side, animal geographies could have been engaged with more thoroughly. As van Dooren and Rose point out, "to draw attention to animals in city spaces is, in itself, nothing new," and delving more deeply into the literature could, I believe, have resulted in more nuanced analyses of animal agency and interaction. As for now, Jerolmack sometimes falls into the same trap — the nature-culture divide reproduced by the social sciences — that he criticizes, for example when he dismisses the notion that humans and pigeons interact through shared symbols (37) while at the same time describing in detail how certain pigeons obviously recognize certain feeders, such as the classical "pigeon lady," and are invited — if not through symbols then what? — to sit on their arms or hands and eat (34-35). This kind of analysis, along with the anthropocentric social interactionist perspective, sometimes, as in Chapter 1, reduces the complexities at hand and the role of urban animals to mere functionalist

terms. Moreover, I am slightly disappointed that Jerolmack ends up taking the hybridity perspective. What the reader gets in the book is a detailed and nuanced picture of various ways of dialectically intermingling, of strengthening or of weakening, the nature-culture binary. For the actors involved, such as the Turkish migrant men in Berlin, pigeon keeping connected them to nature, and thus more firmly to their national – cultural as well as natural – history. This means that there are complex, multi-species meaning-making practices going on, but it is not synonymous with hybridity, and it is discordant with the interactionist perspective.

These critical remarks aside, the book makes an enjoyable contribution to the sociological and social-science literature on human-animal relations. In particular, it engages with mundane spatial practices, such as children feeding pigeons in Father Demo Square, New York, and older men visiting a pet shop in the Bronx, where the complexities are not obvious from the outset, but unfold through the process of analysis. In so doing, the book extends the social-science framework by broadening concepts such as urbanism, sociability, interaction, social self, and craftsmanship through the lens of human-animal sociality. And, as already mentioned, the reading is as illuminating and challenging as it is, to borrow one of the analytical terms used in the book, enchanting. Readers will rethink and revitalize their ideas about pigeons' social worlds and worldlings.

Works Cited

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