

Acknowledgements

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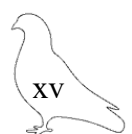
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Les Convoyeurs Attendent : Establishing Shot

Les Convoyeurs Attendent is a 1999 Belgian film directed by Benoît Mariage and starring Benoît Poelvoorde, set in a drab mining town where fanciers¹ wait for the release of truckloads of pigeons to race home. July 2021, I am unloading my camera gear at Martens truck depot in Zomergem as my crew partakes in the crème de la crème of pigeon races, the bastion of long distances: the Barcelona International. My crew, in fact, is not a film-team, but seven fellow *convoyeurs*, amongst whom they have delegated me as their compatriot *convoyeur*. *Convoyeurs* are transporters that travel together, a fleet of trucks that overlook the goods; in the context of pigeon racing, *convoyeurs* simultaneously act as pigeon caretakers. *Con-voyeurs* see *together*, they monitor *together*², they travel like homing pigeons, seeing the world *together*. My camera immediately resuscitates memories for these veteran *convoyeurs*, film sets that hark back to Benoît Mariage's film crew equipped with dolly devices, multiple cameras, the tedious coordination of a large production team. Guy, a fellow *convoyeur*, amuses at how Benoît's crew film had set up and stood by for hours to capture a mere two-second shot of thousands of pigeons released synchronously into the skies.

Not only am I on board as a *convoyeur* heading to the Barcelona International, but I am filming alone and without a crew, while maintaining my role of researcher, equally feeding³ and caring for the pigeons en route. After two full days of preparation, our fleet of trucks and flocks of pigeons embark southbound from Belgium to Barcelona. After an additional two full days on the road, our convoy parks in a field, eight semi-trucks stockpiled with 16,485 homing pigeons. Not a single cloud in sight—the sunlit-field radiated a ripeness. *Convoyeurs* were scurrying the field, attending to the pigeons, facilitating the smoothest of the following morning's release. Filip Norman, the President of the *L'Entente Belge* became 2021's organizer for the Barcelona International, an undertaking that shifted responsibilities for the first time in Belgian history, removed from *The Cureghem Centre* hands into those of *L'Entente Belge*. Filip saunters over to us *convoyeurs* with his father's whistle, a token memorabilia handed down from generation to generation. This whistle was the bugle that commenced the Brive competitions for 40 years and would be cutting the ribbon, inaugurating Filip's first Barcelona International race. He remains stoic, his whistle dangling around his neck as he solemnly heralds the news that we would not be releasing the pigeons for another two days. *Les convoyeurs attendent*⁴ once again.

My interest in Belgian pigeon racing was first piqued when a friend pointed out a cafe on the corner of Terveuren: “that’s where every Sunday men used to come with baskets full of pigeons!” While the defunct club had been decommissioned for over a decade, the thought that people raced pigeons stuck in the back of my mind, ruminating for a year. One day, I picked

¹ Pigeon fanciers are called *colombophiles* in French, *couloneû* or *colèbeû* in Wallonian dialect, *duivenmelker* in Dutch and or *liefhebber* in Flemish dialect.

² My etymological breakdown of *con-voyeur* alludes to Donna Haraway's (2008, 17) *cum-panis*, “with bread,” making companion messmates at a shared table.

³ Fanciers use the Wallonian term *fôre les colons*.

⁴ *Les convoyeurs attendent* translates as “The convoyeurs are waiting.” I opt to keep the French title for its cultural significance throughout Belgium as part of a collective consciousness that situates this ethnography both geographically and temporally. Similarly, *attend* is a play on words with *attending to*, a theoretical and conceptual framework that guides this ethnography.



up my camera to pursue Belgian pigeon racing as a film topic and made a trek out to Zwijnaarde during a basketing event⁵ at the *Union et Liberté* racing club. The village center was bereft of pigeons, the cafe barren—not a pulse to be heard, not a fancier in-sight. I was growing despondent, reminded of the Terveuren club. A beaconing light then lured me around the corner of a nearby church, where a makeshift racing club was running on generators as if on life support. *Union et Liberté* was struggling to survive, hanging on to its last threads—for a breath of relief, the Zwijnaarde racing club had temporarily found salvation at the backside of a church. I stepped into the iridescence aureole, glowing from one of the aluminum storage containers, where I entered into an unearthly atmosphere: the clattering of encodings; the ping of the *constateurs*⁶; the cooing of hundreds of pigeons; the pattering of their feet. Fanciers were roving in like rote humdrum, entrusting their pigeons to the club, then parting impartially. There was a banality to the basketing events, a serene sobriety that lent an air of mystery as to who each fancy was. Some would come with a mere handbasket carrying four pigeons while others rolled into the church parking lot with droves of baskets, trunks loaded, while others tagged a trailer behind their vehicles to support the load.

Daniel Aerens arrives at the scene, Belgium's reigning figure in the acclaimed Barcelona International races. Daniel's prestige and position prevailing over the most notorious pigeon racing competition are downplayed by his unassuming meekness and taciturn character. His wife Helene ambles over to me, an art curator intrigued by my project. She not only invites me to the couple's home and loft in Drongen, but to film the release of these very pigeons in Quiverain, a small city straddling the border of Belgium and France. I invite the friend who had incited my initial interest in the sport to accompany me to Quiverain. With hardly a wink of sleep, we head out at 4 a.m., uncertain of what would transpire after our two-hour haul to the hinterlands. We open our rental car doors to a tranquil solemnity that instills a pervasive silence, spread across the field that almost suspends time. A throng of specially designed trucks (See figures 1 & 2) are regimentally arranged in rows where the *convoyeurs* await instruction to unlatch the automatic doors, releasing thousands of pigeons in unison. Communication lines transverse beyond the field: a murmur of CB radios, walkie-talkies, and cell phones exchange vital information and coordination amongst airports, pigeon racing clubs, Quiverain organizers, and truck drivers. These choreographies are highly orchestrated events as I watch the Quiverain organizer, Edmond Briquet, conducting the symphony. Leaden clouds are looming over our heads as I am lying on my back in a scrubby field with my camera propped, pointing skyward to capture a fleeting image of these winged racers airborne above me. The weather was inauspicious, and so, *les convoyeurs attendent*. After two hours of anticipated waiting, the *convoyeurs* open the gates and a swelling mass of pigeons floods out, enshrouding the skies. We marvel at the sheer number of pigeons that accumulate, forming a cumulous cloud that dissipates within a mere thirty seconds as they navigate their way home.

⁵ Basketing events happen on the eve of a race, where individual fanciers bring in their selected racing pigeons to their local club, which are then placed in larger baskets to be transported overnight to the racing site. Basketed racing pigeons are carefully attended to by *convoyeurs*.

⁶ *Constateurs* are regulatory devices that measure the exact time a pigeon returns home to the loft after a race. *Constateurs* exist in various forms—both mechanical and electronic—having undergone various evolutions throughout the course of the folk sport's history.





Figure 1, *Convoyeur* Trucks in Barcelona, Spain



Figure 2, *Convoyeur* Trucks in Narbonne, France

Belgian pigeon racing quickly revealed itself as being more than meets the eye, pleading not only for a cinematic lens to peer into its profundity but to delve deeper into the subject matter through an Anthropological lens. Consequently, I find myself two years later, sleeping overnight in Marten's truck hangar in Zomergem after a strenuous day's work as a *convoyeur* preparing for the world's largest and most esteemed pigeon race, The Barcelona International of 2021. Guy, a fellow *convoyeur*, is a seasoned veteran whom I found sleeping in the back of one of our trucks, his camping cot unfolded and stretched out amongst the thousands of basketed pigeons. Guy smirks goodnight at me, a snickering jeer at how I would not be able to handle the sultry air and pungent odor that builds up like a backdraft in the back of the trucks. Indeed, any novice unaccustomed would suffocate, and so I opted for the open air. I hit the sack on my makeshift cot that I cobbled together, a twenty-kilo bag of corn serving as my pillow for the night. Guy woke up at 4:30 a.m. refreshed, reveling in the soft patter these pigeons make at night, a symphonious foot-tapping that lulls him to sleep. But, Guy cautions, "if one pigeon is startled, there's a thunderous wave of movement that pulsates the truck, pigeon basket after pigeon basket awakening the other in a domino effect." While Guy had a sound sleep, I am jarringly awoken at the crack of dawn. The truck depot's doors are pried open—along with my eyes—as headlights blare straight in. German and Dutch trucks have arrived, enlisting in our fleet. We head off at 5:00 a.m., deploying 16,485 pigeons collectively to Spain.

Our excursion Southbound through France was met with dreary and dismal rain showers, a festering storm that escalated day by day. The clouds of misfortune lifted as we approached southern France, permitting us to get some fresh air at a pit stop in Narbonne, France. My truck driver Jean-Paul, another *convoyeur*, and I are being blown around the parking lot, tussled by the blustery Mistral winds of Narbonne. They point out over there beyond the marshes: "look over there! You are headed back here as a *convoyeur* in just three weeks from now for the Narbonne International Race." I could not fathom how pigeons could fly through this squalling wind as I could barely stand on my own two feet. Unable to fight the belligerent Mistral winds, we hop back in our trucks, arriving a few hours later in Barcelona, having dodged the menacing storms and squalling gales. The pigeons, however, would need to cross back through France where the incensed storm was busy building up its bile. Two days thereafter, the whistle had finally blown. A colossal cloud of pigeons congregate above, circling a few rounds before orienting and heading Northbound. The pigeons act as our beacon of glory that washes away the despondency that had dampened the mood. Unfortunately, we had underestimated the storms we thought we had so cunningly escaped, the behemoth only now baring its teeth. The

Liège region, where I am residing and conducting the majority of my field research, flows the Meuse river, which is now effortlessly overflowing, besieged by the surging rain. Deplorable news from Chaudfontaine, Pepinster, Verviers poured in as these major historical pigeon racing villages were harrowingly ravished and swept away. The torrential floodings hit fanciers in the Liège region particularly hard, wiping out with a single blow their homes, their lofts, and their beloved pigeons who would never return from Barcelona.

Three weeks later, I find myself back at Marten's truck depot as a researcher, filmmaker, and *convoyeur* for the 2021 Narbonne International Race. Our drive down South is smoother than our last trek, clear skies ahead. However, we lose one Dutch and one German *convoyeur* along the way due to an internal quarrel amongst crew members. A slight tension remains taut, brooding over our team as we approach Narbonne and set up camp for the night. What had transpired en route ominously presaged our wake-up call to a callous tempest that roused us at 5:00 a.m. Was this foreboding another calamitous event, an unnerving reminder of what the pigeons had faced head-on during the Barcelona International Race? The squall of the storm cathartically vents its frustration, lashing out in a single spurt of anger. The rain relents, unclenching its wrath. Skies brighten, glistening blithely. The tantrum has blown over and cooled off. Relieved, our crew reemerges out of hiding as we prepare to release the 28,876 pigeons ready to race.

After shop has set up, I dash up to the highest ledge of a nearby cliff, where I perch my camera, surveying the entire scene with a bird's-eye-view. Far off into the distance, I am not privy to what is orchestrating below on the field and wait in anticipation, thinking, "now's the moment they're going to blow the whistle. The truck doors will fling open. Anytime now." Those moments don't arrive. I crouch down, on standby. Still, no release. An exaltation is racing through my body, my awareness keenly sharpened, my gaze picking up cues from others at a distance. I intermittently gaze through my camera's lens, zooming in to get a better reading of what is happening below, picking up signals that further incite this anticipation. The perpetual postponements build up a buzz that stirs. The inebriation then subsides, distilled throughout the environment, lingering profusely throughout my body. These charged waves of waiting are apprehending—they take ahold of me as a researcher and thrust me into my participants' habitus. My awareness is amplified, my attention attuned to the same manners as my subjects in the field. Geurts reflexively writes about the Anthropologists' experience within the field as being *in tandem with* one's subjects, calling this a "countertransference," (2012, 498-9) (cf. Csordas 1993) whereby researchers emphatically share somatic experiences with their subjects; subject and researcher are *attuned to* and *in tune with* each other. The siren sounds and a burst of pigeons flush out. This time, the pigeons don't make any rotating laps, revolving to orient as they had done in Barcelona. They swiftly advance directly above me (See figure 3), my camera capturing a riveting shot that culminates into a crescendo of an unforgettable feat. I descend the hilltop a bit light-headed with elation. My crew and onlookers below remain in a similar daze, relishing the mesmerizing event. We wallow silently together in an incandescent afterglow that lingers while our crew cleans the field and packs up to head home, similarly northbound. We are sentiently in synch.





Figure 3, A single frame, a fraction of the 28,876 pigeons released from 2021 Narbonne International Race

The Transmission of Culture

Les Convoyeurs Attendent is likewise the title of Belgian folklorist and RTBF/VRT journalist, Françoise Lempereur's book that bears the same name as her 60-minute documentary on Belgian pigeon racing. The fanciers within both Benoît Mariage's fictional film and Françoise Lempereur's documentary sit silently beside the radio, tuning into the Sunday broadcasts emitted on Belgium's national channels, RTBF and VRT. Fanciers would hush their homes, not a peep heard. TVs were turned off, household cleaning was suspended, kites drawn down from the skies, children silenced as they tuned into the news broadcast to clearly pick up vital information: "Quiverain. Seven ten. Slight overcast, 18 kilometers per hour, South-East. Central lines. Brussels. Six fifty-five. Misty with Drizzle. South, South-West. Signies. Cloudy. Sufficient visibility. North-East." Quiverain, *my* Quiverain. Quiverain is a household name in Belgium, even to those who do not practice pigeon racing—it conjures up nostalgia for a time when the sport was ubiquitous, when such broadcasts were part of the Belgian collective conscious, eliciting memories for fanciers and non-fanciers alike. For the layman, this information may be enigmatic, meaningless, but for fanciers, they are making instantaneous computations, judgments, calculations. Such radio broadcasts not only disseminate essential information, they are soundscapes that belong intimately to the Belgian fanciers' *habitus*, that circulate, "animat[ing] and sustain[ing] the substrate of sensory knowledges and embodied aptitudes" (Hirschkind 2006, 2).

Under the menacing threat that Belgian pigeon racing will perish within the next decade or two, lost in the midst of time, this endangered folkloric sport relies on the transmission of culture to safeguard it from vanishing. Intergenerational communication is vital not only transmitting knowledge and keeping *agencements*⁷ intact but for maintaining relations between pigeon and

⁷ As both Deleuze's translator, Brian Massoumi, as well as Vinciane Despret's translator, Brett Buchanan, keep the original term *agencements* rather than the English *assemblages*. Throughout this thesis, I secure a similar

fancier in close proximity, in physical contact. As an Erasmus Belgica exchange student at The University of Liège, I enrolled in Françoise Lempereur's course on Immaterial Cultural Heritage, whose expertise places emphasis on the *transmission* of culture for preserving folklore practices such as Belgian pigeon racing from endangerment. Covering the sport thirty years after Françoise's reportage, my ethnography continues to trace evolutive lines that document the historical fluxes it has undergone throughout the tides of time. Françoise invites me to accompany her to Wancennes, a small village that straddles the edges of Belgium and France, where we meet Eddy Martinot, who plays the unique role of fancier and Environmentalism teacher. Eddy brings students not only into the heart of wilderness but organizes school activities, opening the doors of his pigeon loft to children whilst simultaneously opening their eyes and hearts to the passionate world of pigeons. Eddy teases intergenerational ties by putting the youth into contact with the pleasures this folksport proffers by putting children into *direct contact* with pigeons. Immaterial cultural heritage necessitates maintaining lines of communication to pass down traditions, knowledge, and customs. In one of Eddy's activities, he interprets this literally, having children each write a message on a sliver of paper, attaching them to his pigeons. After releasing the pigeons and waiting for their return in his loft, Eddy recites his students' messages thereafter: a telephone call to their families, announcements over the school's loudspeaker, written correspondences, and photographs of the students' messages. Eddy literally and figuratively opens the doors for them, allowing for possibilities of relating to the world differently, *alongside* pigeons. Embodied knowledges are matters of coming into direct contact with pigeons, of touching and being *touched by* them. Eddy's school children are mesmerized by the silkiness of the pigeons, their warmth, their tenderness. He asks them, "do you have a teddy bear? Well, it isn't as soft as this here pigeon⁸." Pigeons enchant⁹, they are spellbinding; they bring people together to share, to experience *with*. Knowledge is literally and metaphorically being *handed down*.

Pigeon fancying was once a topic taught in schools throughout Belgium, and though it is no longer seen as essential education, there are still extracurricular activities that help keep the folksport thriving. Throughout the course of my ethnography, I hear names of racing clubs I am familiar with, who have had to shut their doors for good. It was merely a half a year ago that I was basketing pigeons in Ramillies for the 2021 Barcelona International, returning in February to the very same racing club, *Union Wallon*, this time around for a pigeon auction. This is one of the last events that the *Union Wallon* will be holding, ceasing operation as the sport's decline has become perilous for the region. Vincent Donnay, a fancier from Verviers, recognizes me from another auction held at *L'Indépendante de Liège*, and invites me over to join his table where he introduces me to José and DJ. DJ is short for Didier Jacquemotte, a fancier from Herve who was first initiated into the sport in 1973 when he was only thirteen years old, inheriting his knowledge and skills from both his grandfather and father, as well as their pigeon loft, which still runs in the family. DJ continues this lineage of intergenerational transmission of knowledge by keeping the ties closely-knit between him and his grandchildren. During the

thread. *Agencement* maintains a double meaning of agency as well as "insist[ing] upon an active process of attunement that is never fixed once and for all. (Deseret 2013, 39).

⁸ Translation mine. Original : "Ton doudou n'est pas doux de tout."

⁹ *Enchanter* is simultaneously a magical enchantment as well as a greeting, of bringing two people together.



Ramillies auction, DJ shows me family photos on his phone, one being a picture of his grandson at school in Herve, holding a pigeon that he is presenting during an all-day pigeon fancying school showcase. Eddy's Environmentalist education as well as (extra)curricular activities in schools are settings that connect generations of knowledge, that build identities that cohere; such settings structure a *habitus* and educate modes of attention (Gibson 1979, 636) that mutually assist in orienting the world together.

After our budding and fruitful bonding at the auction, the close-knit group of fanciers offered to drive me back to Liège, allowing these burgeoning acquaintanceships to flourish during our car ride home. They reminisce how on Sundays, fanciers would saddle along roadsides and churches selling their squabs to help cover their costs¹⁰. With Covid-19 pervasively lingering throughout Spring 2022, I despondently renounced the hope of witnessing such outdoor markets, until DJ invited me to drive along to Lier with him and José. Three weeks later, we depart at 6 a.m. on a nippy Sunday, arriving two hours later in front of a church where gloved fingers sprout into the air, waving numbers like a stockbroker. The Lier pigeon market is only one-third of the size it once was (See figures 4 & 5) , DJ emphasizes, and although he still purchases three pigeons that morning, the low turn-out rate of fanciers selling their birds at this landmark once-a-year event is a grim reminder of the sport's detriment—in Belgium, that is to say. I feel privileged to have witnessed such a folkloric gathering unfold before my eyes before the sport is atrophied even further. I hear English, Polish, Romanian, Chinese fanciers milling around, fondling pigeons, making their sales through sign language as money is thrown on the table to seal the deal. These foreign fanciers have traveled exclusively to the historical Lier market to buy some of the world's most renowned racing pigeons¹¹, walking away with a widened grin and a newly acquired pigeon in their hands. Racing pigeons travel and make people travel far and wide.



Figure 4, Lier market in 1990



Figure 5, Lier market in 2022

¹⁰ DJ uses the term *fôre les colons* or *fôre la dette* in Wallon to refer to this type of curbside pigeon market.

¹¹ I overhear some fanciers muttering that some pigeons up for sale are nothing but rabbits (*robète di ti*), ducks (*canâ di ti*). A few elitist fanciers are tossing jabs at one another, jeers meant to deride another fancier as nothing but a chicken peddler (*pouyeti*). Despite these insults, most of the pigeons up for sale are highly reputed, driving in hordes of fanciers from the world over.

I am back on the road for the 2021 Narbonne International Race, traveling over one thousand kilometers to transport truckloads of racing pigeons with my compatriot Jean-Philip during his 40th anniversary as a *convoyeur*. Jean-Philip has a demeanor that exudes compassion for pigeons. His life-long experience within the sport has almost weathered into his skin. He remains a bit aloof from the main crew, humble in his knowledge. Jean-Philip is not a *convoyeur* for the social aspects—he is there for the pigeons and for the pigeons only. His first forays into the folksport were fortuitous, for as a thirteen-year-old lad, he was beseeched by Albert Stocklet, a frail fancier at the time. As an archetypical tale I heard told by many fanciers, they were initiated into the sport by assisting elderly fanciers, transporting their pigeons to the local racing club every week. And so, Jean-Philip made his way into pigeon racing, alleviating Albert Stocklet of such cumbersome tasks. Through this weekly contact with pigeons, Jean-Philip's curiosity burgeoned. "Where were these pigeons being transported to? And for what reasons?" Invited by the club *L'Entente Belge* to join the Limoges race in 1981, Jean-Philip decided that very moment that he too would become a *convoyeur*. Unfortunately, *L'Entente Belge* could not hire him right away, for he was only fifteen years old at the time. And so Jean-Philip continued assisting Albert Stocklet, keeping one foot in the door, until those doors finally swung open for him one day. "Then, the magic truly began," Jean-Philip's lips brim, breaking the stolid austerity he adorned throughout the trip. Animals bring people together; they form *mises en rapport*¹², they enchant. These are transgenerational transmissions of social and physical contact that *touch*. Jean-Philip vindicates, "it needs to always remain magic. When it is no longer magical, the sport falls out of relevance. It signals that we are no longer in sync with pigeons."

Being in synch is a becoming-*with* (Despret 2013); it is a reshaping of ontologies that enthralls, captivates, enchants. Although Jean-Philip never became a fancier himself, he remains a surrogate, a caretaker for these sentient beings. When Stocklet's pigeons were released, Jean-Philip felt as though *his* pigeons were being released. There is a diffusion of knowledge, a transfer of emotions, as the fanciers' ontologies osmotically flow into Jean-Philip's. And yet, Jean-Philip marks a different position within the sport—he builds a different relationally with the pigeons. He accentuates that while "the arrival of pigeons is what matters to fanciers, for me, *the departure* is what is significant. You need to keep in mind, that if we release 30,000 pigeons for a race, then those 30,000 pigeons that belong to me. We, *convoyeurs*, treat these pigeons as if they were *our* pigeons. We take care of them as if they were our own. For a few hours, we are the biggest fanciers of Europe, of the world." Jean-Philip is situated within different coordinates, occupying a position that the fancier is not privy to. While fanciers do not know the exact release times of the race, he does. While fanciers can only surmise what happens at release sites, Jean-Philip is privileged with this information. He traces lines of flight, making calculations along the way: wind speed, wind direction, air pressure, cloud coverage, full moon, etc. He constructs timelines, estimating where the pigeons might be flying over, computing the pigeons' speed, adjusting his approximations based on weather conditions. These potential lines of flight, as we shall see, are drawn out by different *agencements*; Jean-Philip gathers knowledge from a different position, a different angle that fanciers are not afforded. *The cards have been reversed.*

¹² *Mise en rapport* is getting in touch with, in contact with; it is a connection, a link. *Mise en rapports* are points of contact, both literally and figuratively.



The Tides of Time

The Liège region was once the womb, the nest of pigeon racing as the nascence sport spawned adjacent to where I would serendipitously spend a year as an Erasmus student. The *court-bec* breed would become the prototypical racing pigeon, promulgated in 1783 in a village called Xhendelesse, situated between Herve and Verviers (Jarbinet 1974). It was a titillating discovery that I would be conducting my Anthropological research in the nativity, the cradle of pigeon racing's inception. I likewise had access to archival material housed in La Musée de Vie Wallon, La Musée de la Commission Historique de Grace-Hollogne, The Belgny Mines Archives, L'Institut d'histoire ouvrière économique et sociale (IHOES), as well as tying close relations with fanciers such as DJ, who actively practices in Herve, the trailblazing village that pioneered pigeon racing. The Liège region, provincially known as La Cité Ardente, remains littered with remnants of the Industrial Era strewn across its landscape—steel factories and coal mines remain, evoking images straight out of Emile Zola's *Germinal*. Mining galleries are cavities that have hollowed out the land, while *terrils*¹³ of coal waste paint the landscape with seemingly natural hills. Factory fire stacks exhale blue flames that alight the night skies, lending an additional nuance to La Cité Ardente¹⁴. Mining elevators, called *La belle fleur*, protrude out of Liège's terrains, where these blue-collared workers¹⁵ would descend into the pits to toil and sweat, ascending¹⁶ to pursue their passionate hobby of pigeon racing. One miner, whose words I dig up from the archives Grace-Hollogne Archives, resuscitates images of bygone breeds of pigeons, saying how “when you resurfaced from the bottom pits of the coal mines, you saw “*racing pigeons, not wood pigeons, not backyard pigeons, not even canes*¹⁷, no no. You saw *acsîs, des barbêts, des bédorés, des blancs vanês, des vîs bleûs, des bleûs-bîhe, des camus, des capucins, des tchênârdeûs, des tchèsturlêts, des bizêts, des cravatés, des culbuteûs, des floris, des frazètes, des hôt-volants, des hosselés, des mâyetés, des mouhis, des pièrbîhe, des surlets*”¹⁸

Pigeon racing was considered the poor man's racehorse, but this hadn't always been the case—the sport didn't always cut across class lines. The wealth amassed from the booming textile industry during the 18th century and the need to transport these materials abroad to France and Germany allowed pigeon racing to take flight amongst affluent groups (See figures 6 & 7). A well-known textile producer, Alexandre Hansenne, was likewise a proficient fancier during the 1800s, for which his family name became a renowned pigeon breed. Hansenne would

¹³ I opt to keep the term *terril* as it is referred to in both Dutch and French; moreover, the English terms *spoil tip* or *slag heap* are less known. *Terrils* are mining waste mounds of accumulated shale.

¹⁴ *Ardent(e)* means enthusiastic and passionate, as well as fiery, enflamed

¹⁵ Miners in the Liège region are called *houillères*

¹⁶ The steel cable suspension elevators would hoist miners down, called *couchée*, and back up, *levée*, whose descent and ascent is a reference to the setting and the rising of the sun. Miners would plunge into the dark abysses of the earth, resurfacing to open skies after a hard day's work, welcomed by pigeons and other birds that soared freely above.

¹⁷ *Canes* is Wallonian for ducks, as I heard being whispered at the Lier pigeon market, where these Wallonina insults were called *canâ di ti* to debase the quality of another fancier's pigeons.

¹⁸ Les Archives de la Commission Historique de Grace-Hollogne. Author unknown. Translation from Wallonian to French thanks to Francoise Lempereur, who emphasizes that I keep the Wallonian pigeon breeds in the original dialects, *to keep the original flavor alive*.



organize trips to Frankfurt and Paris, transporting by stagecoach¹⁹ not only fabric but, racing pigeons for upper-class fanciers. Since the dawn of the sport, until trains increased mobility, pigeons were carried by *hotteurs*, men who would travel forty kilometers a day on foot as messengers, strapped with a basket of forty to fifty pigeons saddled to their backs. In the early 19th century, A relay system was set in place, involving multiple *hotteurs*, transferring their load from one to another until the basket of pigeons reached its release location, often Paris or Orleans. While these transportations on foot lasted eight to nine days (Lempereur 2022), the pigeons could cover the same distance in only four to five hours. Early Belgian pigeon racing truly relied on *pedibus cum jambis*. Even upon pigeons' flight back to their lofts, runners called *coreûs d'colons* (See figure 8), would race—either on foot or by bike—to a designated landmark: a chair or table stationed on the corner of the road or in front of a house, a cafe, a church. These instances of handling pigeons, of passing them from hand to hand, are likewise moments of contact that drew in new fanciers, that *enchanted*. They are forms of transmission of culture *handed down* from generation to generation. Many of my participants in this ethnography recount tales of such *coreûs d'colons*, young neighbors or fanciers' sons who were paid 2 or 5 *francs* for their efforts. The winner of a race depended not exclusively on the speed of your pigeon, but contingently relied on the swiftness of your young *coreûs d'colons*, how fast their feet could carry²⁰ them. Early Belgian pigeon racing once again relied heavily on feet: *pedibus cum jambis*.



Figure 6, 10th anniversary of the La Société des Constateurs, Liège, 1896. Pigeon racing has been practiced solely by the upper class.



Figure 7, Pigeon racing cuts across all class lines throughout the 20th century, notoriously known as a blue-collar sport.

¹⁹ Jarbinet provides a newspaper announcement of the first organized races taking place August 26-27, 1811: "Pigeon fanciers are notified that on Thursday 29th of this month, they will leave for Frankfurt to release pigeons. Those who wish to send some are requested to be at Henry Pirnay, cabaret owner, faubourg Bonaparte, at four o'clock in the afternoon" [translation mine] (Jarbinet 227-8).

²⁰ Nico uses the expression *à tire-d'aile*, which literally translates as "the rapid flapping of a bird's wing." Figuratively, *à tire-d'aile* means "full steam ahead," or "as fast as one can carry their feet."



Figure 8, *Coreûs d'colon*²¹

Coreûs were often rewarded for their efforts with a shot of *pékèt*²² at the café, sometimes getting the better of them. Inebriated, these *coreûs* were incapable of returning to the fancier's loft in time for the next returning pigeon (Lempereur 2022). *Coreûs d'colons* ran with the pigeon in a basket, a briefcase, or an aerated fabric bag, remaining vigilant not to be deceived or sabotaged by stealthy tricks crafted by adversary *coreûs* out to dupe them. While the *coreûs* took their perfunctory pause at the café, a rival would cunningly place an old shoe or hat in the inattentive *coreûs*' carrying case, replacing the other's pigeon with a ploy. Interminable tactics spin tales, epic gems of Belgian folklore. Upon the invention of rubber rings²³ effortlessly removed from the pigeon's foot, countless accounts abound of these tiny rings disappearing in the most inconvenient moments. Some of these *coreûs* would race to the designated landmark, one ring in each hand, another in their mouth. *Gulp!* The ring would at times be inadvertently swallowed—the pigeon that would have been a trump quickly became the chump.

²¹ A. J. Ochs' poem accompanies a famous illustration of a *coreûs d'colon*, evincing the drive and momentum not only of pigeons, but this race-within-a-race : "Foaming at the mouth, fever in the soul, look at him running with his slippers! Wouldn't you say he wants to race against the pigeon who will get the first prize. Translation mine from Francoise Lempereur's French translation from the original Wallon.

French: L'écume à la bouche, la fièvre dans l'âme,
Regardez-le courir sur ses chaussons !
Ne diriez-vous pas qu'il veut rivaliser
Avec le pigeon qui aura le premier prix ?
Wallonian : « Li same à l'boque, li fivè è l'âme,
So ses chôssons louquîz-l cori !
Ni diriz-v'nin qui vout fer blâme,
A colon qu'ârè l'prumi prix ?

²² *Pékèt* is a local Jenever or Gin

²³ A rubber ring, called *gummiringetje* in Dutch and *une bague* in French, is slipped on the racing pigeon to identify it, as removed once it returns to its loft to clock in its time.

The tides of time had turned as Toulet *constateurs* (See figures 9 & 10) replaced *coreûs*, stamping an end to these folkloric tales; regardless, these stories remain imprinted upon fanciers' memories. Toulet *Constateurs* were devices built in the early 20th century, that inculcated new temporal regimes; these “mechanisms to control time,” (Larkin 2013, 332) replaced the irregularities and imprecisions that *coreûs* had imparted in the early stages of the sport. *Constateurs* were engineered with built-in clockworks that verified the time once the rubber ring was placed into the device, perforating a timecard down the precise millisecond; this allowed racing clubs to calculate the pigeon's velocity using a ratio based on coordinates and distances. The early 20th century was an era when pendulum father clocks were owned exclusively by a few households that could afford them and when wristwatches had not yet reached the general public market. Owning a *constateur* at the time was an unaffordable affair, so these devices were rented out collectively to several fanciers at a time, placed within a shared vicinity: in front of a house door, a chair on the corner of a street, a church stoop. It was only in the 1960s that individual fanciers started owning their own *constateurs*, kept at home. Unfailingly, every fancier will pull out their *constateur*, displaying it to me as if it were a relic, a true time-piece, wrought with tireless tales.



Figure 9, *Constateurs* owned by the local racing club to be lent out to fanciers.



Figure 10, *Constateur*

With the 2021 racing season kicking off on Easter Sunday, my eagerness fueled after a full year of pent up anticipation, a side-effect of lockdown syndrome due to Covid-19. I couldn't wait to lay my eyes on these races-within-races. Having transplanted myself and my research to Liège, I started scouting pigeon racing clubs with eyes peeled like a hawk. On the lookout with a list of racing clubs in hand, I make my way to Jupille only to find an empty football field and a local resident informing me that the pigeon racing club ceased to exist for a decade now. After an additional attempt further up the Meuse, I stumble upon yet another defunct racing club. Once more I tried my luck, biking all the way up the Meuse to the outer limits of Belgium within spitting distance of the Netherlands. In Visé, my efforts pay off, as I see fanciers with pigeon baskets pulling into the club, *Liberté Perron et Amis Reunis*, one at a time. Under Covid restrictions still in place, I am not permitted inside the club, abiding by their strict policy of one fancier at a time. And so, I meander outside. Across the street, I spot a pigeon's wing unfurl, gawked at in admiration by two fanciers. I make my way over to them, introducing my research

project; they immediately welcome me into their conversation and to the squab²⁴ that Henri Brouwers has just gifted to Louis Meyers. We rattle on about pigeons until Henri and Louis each take their allotted turn inside the racing club to basket their pigeons for that week's race.

As one fancier exits the Visé club with a manual *constateur* in hand, Louis takes his place, leaving me momentarily with Henri. I enquire if Henri too has one of these devices, having seen them in stacks of archival photos. Henri illustriously recounts an episode of such enthralling exigencies of bygone racing days that required manual *constateurs*: "Once, when I was a young fancier, I raced in Barcelona International. At that time, we [fanciers] didn't have our own *constateurs*, so normally I had to go early Monday morning to borrow one from the club. My mother asked me to drive her to the center of Liège to run some errands. But that morning, just as I was getting into the car, I saw one of my pigeons come home early. I grabbed the pigeon, put it in a basket. I then grabbed my mother, put her in the car, dropped her off at the nearest bus station. *Bye mom, you'll find the way*. She couldn't wrap her head around what was going on, but I was about to hit the pedal, racing to the club as fast as I could, even if my mother and I were heading in the same direction, downtown Liège." Henri wasn't ready to put his mother through a formula one race as he sped through the streets to arrive at his pigeon racing club to clock in his winning pigeon for the prestigious Barcelona International. Henri bursts through the club's doors, pleading, "have any other fanciers clock in yet? I remember quite well who it was: Leiners from Oupeye, a neighbor of mine. I urged the club to quickly hand over a *constateur*. I didn't dare go into the club with my pigeon that I still had basketed in the backseat of the car. Normally, that's not allowed. You can only clock in your pigeons at your loft, not *en route*. But I couldn't lose a precious second! I rushed back to the car, taking the pigeon's ring, winning second place. Not bad, but still beaten by Leiners."

I habitually make Fridays my routine bike ride to Visé for the basketing events, where one evening, Henri boasts about his loft: "you have to see my loft. There's not a single one like it in all of Belgium." The following week I arduously bike out of the Meuse's valley, up the steep ascent to Oupeye where I marvel at Henri's loft, idiosyncratically built from recuperated office materials from his former Colgate-Palmolive offices. Behind the pastiche of laminated sheet metal that Henri uses as his present-day loft, (hardly) stands a pastiche of faded wood, a weathered structure that is slowly decomposing into the land. He points over to what is his former loft, laughing back at how several decades ago he had concocted a gutter system from the upper floor. Henri recounts how, in the midst of a pressing race, he was swiftly sliding several pigeon rings down the pipe, one by one, not a single ring escaping the outlet. His friend is frantically screaming below, "What's going on up there?! None of your rings are making it down." The culprit was a spider web woven in the pipe's orifice, netting the rings and snagging precious seconds from Henri, who did not win the race, despite his ingenious drainage system. These memories spark other memories, inciting a flint of forgone tales that Henri strikes up. Henri adds how fanciers used to have a little box that they would put their rubber rings in, but sometimes that box would get knocked over in the loft and fanciers would scurry all day on their hands and knees looking for it, only to find them well after the race had finished.

²⁴ A squab is a newborn pigeon.

Belgian pigeon racing witnessed a sharp decline in the folksport once *constateurs* were superseded by electronic systems, necessitating a rewiring of not only the landing pad, the *spoutnik* (See figure 13), but that of the entire loft infrastructure. Moreover, the digitalization of lofts necessitated a computer-literacy, whereby such modernizing technologies aroused "disjunctive feelings," an "unease" (Larkin, 334) amongst many elderly fanciers. The trepidation that such fanciers dreaded was not only steeped in notions of *progress leaving them out*, but that time would be stripped from their hands, taken out of their control. The poetics of waiting for one's pigeon to land home in their loft incited a positive mixture of dread and yearning. Fanciers' awareness was keenly sharpened, honing an art of anticipation: the pressing need to know exactly when a pigeon arrived; the rush of emotions, the fuel of adrenaline. Time was thereafter rendered invisible, an unsettling unease that stirred a fear for the poetic loss (ibid.) of time. The manual Toulet *constateurs* rendered time tangible for fanciers who needed to palpably sense it. An apprehensiveness toward these electronic systems enhanced a disquieting wariness that they would make obsolete core elements of pigeons racing: *Would fanciers no longer need to stay vigilant in their lofts on racing days, eagerly awaiting the return of their racings? Would they no longer handle their pigeons immediately after a race? Would relations between fancier and pigeon dissipate?*

This fear was especially present amongst some of my subjects from the Liège region, fanciers who worked in manual labor: Industrial Factories, Forgery, and Metallurgy, many of them descendants of miners. I am at a basketing event at *L'Indépendante de Liège*, a tempo of beeps chirping, emitting from the electronic *constateurs* each time they transfer a pigeon into a larger racing basket. The tweet halts to a still as Nicolas Valentinetti enters the room with his Toulet *constateur*, his manual device requiring a stretcher and rubber rings (See figures 11 & 12). Nico's father immigrated from Italy to the Liège region to work in the coal mines, inheriting from him an appreciation for the hands-on knowledge that both he and his father acquired as a trade, a craft within their respective workplaces. He accentuates how manual labor meant that "men worked together, each equipped with their own knowledge. We each specialized in something and then came together to share and distribute those skills." Nico continues to vent his frustration about how the tides of time have washed away these tools, how electronic systems are closing down factories, supplanted by automation, centralization, homogenization.

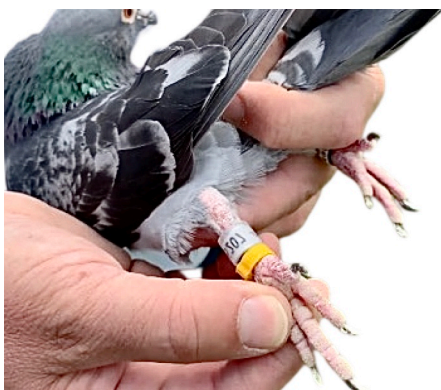


Figure 11, rubber ring that identifies the racing pigeon



Figure 12, Mechanical device that stretches rubber rings to place over the pigeon's foot.

Although the hands of time cannot be turned back, and fortunately the unease for the loss of poetics of time has since dissipated, it nonetheless took a toll on many fanciers who retired from the sport in the 1990s. The fear took a hold of fanciers who abandoned the practice entirely, but as Eddy remarks, “I do not know of any fancier who does not go directly to the loft to take the pigeon in their hands, to feel the state it is in, to check up on its well-being. These electronic devices actually freed the fancier from being cooped up in the pigeon loft, waiting to catch their homecoming pigeon in order to clock it in the *constateur* in time. Fanciers would actually miss the arrival of their *other* pigeons coming home.” Contrary to fanciers’ overriding fears, these electronic devices allowed them to sit back and marvel at the spectacular landings of their pigeons, one by one as they landed home on the *spoutnik* (See figure 13). Fanciers who stood the test of time were loosened of such pressures; they longer relied on a *coreûs* or a rubber ring, nor were they required to race with their *constateur* to the club during competitions. Technology is an actant that does not *replace* relations between fancier and racing pigeon. Rather, technology *alters*, it *re-arranges* agencements, permitting novel forms of becoming-*with*-pigeon.



Figure 13, Raf Herbots’ pigeon landing on its *spoutnik*, its racing results automatically clocked as it lands on the electronic plate.

In Tandem With

Additional fears have replaced those induced by modernization and technology, as many amateur fanciers forebode that professionalism is widening the gap between the two tiers. Pigeon racing may be the only sport where amateurs compete *against* professionals, often times beating them in competitions! Nonetheless, amateurs feel that they are increasingly being pushed out of the sport, inch by inch, slowly falling by the wayside. An admixture of fear and versatility is present throughout my field research, which will unfold throughout this thesis. Two weeks ahead of the Belgian National Award Ceremony, I receive a phone call from Henri—he asks if I could substitute for him, standing in as his wife to accept his awards. Henri is far from a professional fancier—he has a *small basket*, meaning that his loft size is quite modest. Yet, Henri remains an astoundingly audacious player—the awards that I will be receiving for him are more than a mere shred of proof. When I visit his loft the week before the ceremony to pick up his invitation letters, Henri shows me the chart of his pigeonholes nailed to his loft: “See that pigeon here? You are going to pick up a trophy for this one that incidentally never

flew back from a National race." I pay my dues out of respect for both Henri and his deceased pigeon, feeling as if I am receiving a medal of honor in place of a fallen veteran.

The following week at the ceremony in Ghent, my disguise as Henri's wife is ineffective, for I run into far too many familiar faces, fanciers whom I crossed all of Belgium for. The ceremony is a denouement, a reunion that reunites us: professional and amateur fanciers alike, the staff of the Belgian Royal Pigeon Federation (KBDB/RFCB), fellow *convoyeurs*, veterinarians. The event convivially wraps up the 2021 racing season and concludes the culmination of my field research, yet far from a final farewell. It is a ceremonial toast, an apotheosis to both my subjects on stage and the research we co-collaborated on. Amateurs fanciers join professionals on stage—together, they constitute the upper echelon of Belgium's finest fanciers. I commute back to Liège with Patrick Philippens, one of Henri's fellow fanciers from the *Liberté Perron et Amis Reunis* club in Visé. As we load his car with prizes, diplomas, and trophies, he shoves them off as shallow trinkets: "this trophy doesn't interest me in the least bit. The *pigeon* is what interests me. Henri too, you will see, he doesn't care at all for this trophy. That's why he didn't even go to Ghent to pick it up. You are doing a favor for him. That's not what the sport is about for us fanciers. As for me, I do not care about the trophy either. I care about and respect the bird. I drive all of these kilometers from Liège to Ghent simply out of respect for the bird who won. Yeah, *the first* trophy you ever win, *that* means something. Afterward, you end up with 500 trophies. And even when I received my first trophy, which is at my parents' home, I cared more about the bird. When you become a National Champion, it's already finished. It's when you are a novice waiting for your first prize. *That* waiting period is exciting. Once you make that breakthrough in the sport, from then on out you know you are a good fancier."

Back at the ceremony, I exchange stories with Rik Hermans and Mike Verbruggen, writers and editors for Belgium's longest-running pigeon racing magazine, *De Duif*. While amateur fanciers fear that professionalism is driving them out, Rik agrees with me that *tandems* formed between amateurs *and* professionals are the only way forward for the little leaguers to continue competing in the big leagues, to not be left behind the dugouts. *Tandem* is a *pidgin* that links people, knowledges, ranks, and varying tiers of experience. As pigeon racing is a laborious vocation that requires 365 days of care, joining another fancier *in tandem* is a communion, an exchange of experience and expertise, a sharing of tasks that lightens the load. *Tandems* are collaborations, co-operations that bring two fanciers *together*; it allows the sport to subsist for those who would otherwise have abandoned the sport, afflicted by allergies, breathing problems, or geriatric ailments. Likewise, younger generations who desire more autonomous lifestyles than previous generations feel tied down by the sport; novice fanciers will often dabble in the sport for a couple of years, quickly pulling out due to how demanding and restrictive the sport can be. *Tandems* prove beneficial for younger fanciers, offering them the feasibility of traveling, rather than being strapped down day-and-night with their hobby. Senior fanciers mutually assist younger fanciers by *taking them under their wing*²⁵, showing them the ropes of the trade, letting them in on their personal secrets.

²⁵ The French term, *entreprendre*, defines these undertakings, these commencements, while also connoting a "taking-between," that engages humans and animals in relations

Mike points out an atypical tandem who just took the stage to win a few top prizes: “Over there you have a brother and sister, fourteen and fifteen years old and they *really* play well. Adela and Daniel Filipovics, Romanian-Belgians from Liedekerke.” Mike chuckles, “and the children play better than the father! The father has to work. He holds a job in construction. He leaves at seven in the morning and comes home at seven at night. The children are far more often at home with their pigeons. They *know* their pigeons better. They can invest more time. And there are two of them, so they can share the workload. Their father [Zigfrid], on the other hand, has to do it all by himself.” Adela started taking care of her father’s pigeons during his sustained injury. Zigfrid mulls over the impossibility, “how could I dream of a big win if I can’t even beat my own kids? The last National flight, Adela clocked in seven pigeons before I even had one. I can’t wrap my head around it! I do all the things just as they do. They must be sabotaging me”, he chimes in tongue and cheek, “putting something in the water” (Verbruggen 2021). Mike reminds us of the tedious aspects of the trade: “Yeah, you find a lot of older fanciers in the sport because you need a lot of time to take care of pigeons. It’s easier when you’re retired.”

At the start of the 2021 racing season, I met Bernard Ancia, an amateur fancier who became a professional after retiring from his life-long career as a school teacher. Our acquaintanceship was brought together by a pigeon, *his pigeon*, whom I had found and rescued. One Sunday, I spotted a pigeon wearing a ring (See figure 11) ambling underneath a parked car. A trail of seeds left a footprint, walking me a few steps back to a barbershop, its door ajar, canaries chirping from within. The barbers had been feeding this strayed pigeon their canary seeds for a few days, they were telling me, as I was crawling under the greasy car, struggling to reach the pigeon. After a few attempts as I stagger, stretching under the front of the car to snatch the pigeon as it scurries to the back of the car. I make my way to the back of the car while it proceeds to the front. We play a game of cat-and-mouse until I finally manage to retrieve the pigeon. I immediately check its identification ring, telephoning its owner, Bernard Ancia. Bernard drives twenty kilometers from Remicourt to my home to pick up his *fifi*²⁶. As the fancier and pigeon reunite and rejoice, I take this opportunity to inquire about Bernard’s sixty-year engagement within the folksport, juggling a tight schedule of work and fancying on the sidelines. Just before retiring from both his profession and pigeon racing, Georges-Henri Bodson, a businessman, asked Bernard to take care of his loft of 400 pigeons, for which they now both play *in tandem*.

A few weeks after rescuing Bernard’s pigeon, I am invited to the *Union Wallonne* racing club in Ramillies where I will be filming the basketing events for the Barcelona International race, before heading off to Martens truck depot in Zomergem. Low and behold, organizers of the prestigious race serendipitously arranged for Bernard’s racing partner to drive me to the location; Georges-Henri comprises half of the Bodson-Ancia *tandem*. Driving an hour and a half with Georges-Henri from Liège to Ramillies, his allergies are reignited simply from having his pigeons in the back of the car. He suffers from Pigeon Breeder's Lung, as do many fanciers who become allergic to the dust in the feathers after extended periods of overexposing themselves to the pigeon’s microbial world. The Bodson-Ancia *tandem* allows Geroges-Henri to continue practicing the sport while delegating hands-on caretaking to Bernard. While many fanciers

²⁶ *Fifi* is an endearing term for someone

have retired from this sport due to the Pigeon Breeder's Lung, others stubbornly continue to practice pigeon racing even though they are afflicted and well aware that they can die from it. Stubbornness and passion are fine lines.

Creolizations

The title of this thesis is a nod to Eduardo Kohn's chapter entitled "Trans-Species Pidgins," referring to hybrids that effloresce into a "vast ecology of selves" (2013, 18). Belgian pigeon racing shares a "transspecies habitus" (Kohn 2007, 7) where multiple ontologies co-exist and overlap. This ethnography maps out heterogeneous epistemologies, charting a constellation of lay knowledges and expertise knowledges that situate subjects within *agencements*. *Pidgin* bridges relations—it hyphenates. *Pidgin* involves *partnering*, a recomposing of perspectives. My fieldwork positions itself amongst a diverse range of subjects who facilitate and navigate us through the ways in which ontologies and epistemologies mingle, mix, converse, and exchange. The “vast ecology of selves” includes the non-human and the inorganic within relational forms of thinking, sensing, feeling, knowing, and perceiving. Trans-Species knowledges are likewise transnational, and mobile—they move and are moving. Michael Hathaway aptly calls them “international winds,” (as cited in Tsing 2015, 206) that proliferate, move, re-model, re-articulate, and re-shape human relations to the environment. I aspired to develop methodologies of folding these frameworks within my research as core Anthropological inquiries towards Belgian pigeon racing: *How do fanciers forge novel ways of living in the world amongst their animal co-conspirators? In what ways do fanciers’ relations with racing pigeons amplify their awareness? How do fanciers learn to read the material-semiotic world otherwise, refining their literacy? In what ways do fancier and pigeon co-educate each other? By what means do fanciers and racing pigeons re-inscribe and re-articulate themselves within a shared milieu and what novel subjectivities are formed along the way?*

In 2017, I attended a book launch in Brussels where the authors and editors, Hand Ulrich Obrist and Asad Raza, organized a conference around the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s concepts of creolization. *Mondialité : The Archipelagos of Edouard Glissant* was the title of the event, held at the Boghossian Foundation Villa Empain. *Mondialité* is a perversion of the French word for “globalization,” a shift in nuance that lends a fresh air of meaning. What if *globalization* were considered *worldly* and *diversifying* rather than the platitudes that tritely paint it as *homogenizing*, Glissant provokes? At the time of this talk, I was already intrigued by creolizations; Glissant’s thinking further promulgated a chain of concepts, which connected with those Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret, a guest speaker at this conference. This conference was a primer, offering first glimpses into Despret’s thinking; her work would later play a pivotal role in my own musings on human-animal relations and inter-subjective experiences. As an Erasmus Exchange student at The University of Liège, I would be put into closer proximity with Despret, fortuitously allowing me to forge relations with this philosopher. Despret’s concepts of “with-ness,” (2004) would continually ferment and influence my methodological framework within the field, where I witnessed my subjects’ ontologies and epistemologies as relational, their knowledge and being-in-the-world emerging from a becoming-*with*-pigeon. These notions would provoke my own conceptualizations of what I have herein called *pidgin*. *Pidgins* are creolizations that proliferate our modalities of living in the world, that open up a panoply of *becomings*, that germinate novel socialities and subjectivities.

Pidgin is a plurality that enriches our ethnographies in sites where ontologies are multiple, not singular. This multi-sited and multi-vocal ethnography articulates differences within a shared and overlapping practice, taking an aerial view over Belgian pigeon racing; by the same token, these practices are discrepant and particular to each individual fancier—they are rooted and emerge from localities. My Anthropological research was multi-sited in that I traveled across Belgium to cover a diverse range of subjects, carving out multi-faceted angles and perspectives (See figure 14). Moreover, my ethnography was *already* multi-sited well before I entered the field as a researcher: the mobility of the racing pigeon draws together various geographies that overlap. This ethnography likewise vocalizes an array of subjects that articulated their realities in a multitude of languages and dialects. I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in French, the other half in Dutch, and a sparse remainder in English; I opt to include dialectical expressions throughout this ethnography to nuance subtle meanings embedded within the fancier's *habitus*. A salient trope threads throughout my research, as my subjects persistently fumbled when asked to verbally articulate their insights—this immediately pleaded that my ethnography adopt a Phenomenological Approach that reaches *beyond* spoken language. These moments of "destabilization" (Kohn 2013, 18) suspend knowledge, a lacuna of "not knowing" as Marisol de la Cadena professes, a space of "nothingness" (2021). Within these moments of suspension, we temporarily withhold our ways of thinking, rendering irresolute our steadfast assumptions. The absence of a conceptual model breaches an opening, allowing for spaces of *becoming* (cf. Stengers 2008; cf. Haraway 2008; cf. Despret 2013; cf. Deleuze and Guattari 2004) that concern not only our subjects within ethnographies but as researchers and readers.

These "destabilizing" forms of communication arrive unexpectedly—they astonish us. They render ontologies uncertain and invite us to seek meaning-making situated elsewhere: in the body, habits, social settings, materials, sounds, expressions, intuitions, emotions, impulses, reflexes. Both the Belgian fancier and racing pigeon transform each other in unforeseen ways, instructing each other to read, articulate, sense, and intuit in otherwordly manners, in what Despret would call "undetermined articulations" (2004, 131). *Pidgin* is not only a creolization of language but of epistemologies, ontologies, of ways of being and articulating in the world. *Pidgins* are partial connections (Strathern 1991) that compel co-evolutive *becomings*, forging novel relations between racing pigeons and fanciers. *Pidgins* are creolizations that are co-constructive. *Pidgins* are *processes*, not products. Nothing precedes nor antecedes *pidgin*. Haraway concurs that "beings do not preexist their relatings (2003, 6). Richer ontologies (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 484) have enhanced the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted amongst Belgian pigeon fanciers, subjects who enlarge our scope, widen the possible avenues of how humans and animals emerge *together* in the world, co-constructing knowledge and modalities along the way.

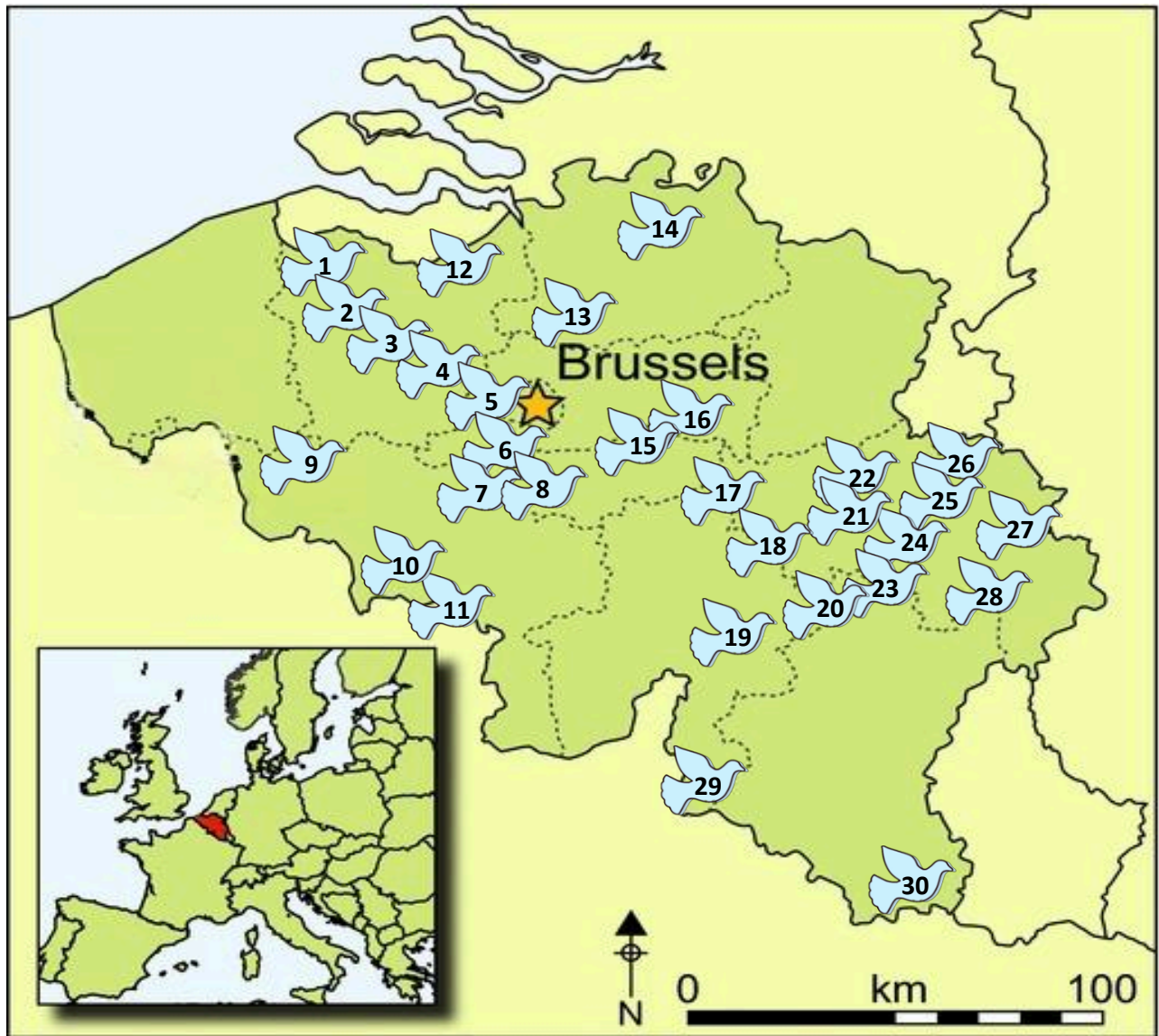


Figure 14, Ethnographic Field Sites

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| 1. Ruben Lanckriet, Maldegem | 17. Verbroedering Obrafo Club, Tienen |
| 2. Martens Truck Depot, Zomergem | 18. Filip, Raf, Jo, Miet, and Kobe Herbots & Geoffrey Janssens, Sint-Truiden |
| 3. Daniel & Helene Aerens, Drongen | 19. Union Wallonne Club, Ramillies |
| 4. Union & Liberté Club, Zwijnaarde | 20. Bernard Ancia & Georges-Henri Bodson, Remicourt |
| 5. Vereniging Racing Club, Liedekerke | 21. Nicolas Valentinetti, Grâce-Hollogne |
| 6. Marius Boboc, Lot | 22. L'Indépendante de Liège Club, Vottem |
| 7. Rudi Joosens, Buizingen | 23. Mohammed Beamine, Vivegnis |
| 8. Belgian Royal Pigeon Racing Federation (KBDB/RFCB), Halle | 24. Henri Brouwers, Oupeye |
| 9. Fugare, Kortrijk | 25. Louis Meyers, Oupeye |
| 10. Danny Leturcq, Wadelincourt | 26. Liberté Perron & Amis Reunis Club, Visé |
| 11. Quiverain Release Site | 27. Blegny Mines Archives, Blegny |
| 12. Bauwens Truck Depot, Stekene | 28. Didier Jacquemotte (DJ), Herve |
| 13. Lier Outdoor Pigeon Market | 29. Eddy Martinot Beauraing |
| 14. Tom's Pigeon Museum, Turnhout | 30. Claudine Hanzen, Arlon |
| 15. Albert Derwa, Herent | |
| 16. Emile Geuens, Aarschot | |

Birds of the Same Feather Flock Together

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him
And it was nothing more
~ William Wordsworth

James Gibson's Theory of Affordances (1979) and Gregory Bateson's concepts of "patterns that connect" (1979) are two influential communication theories that helped draft a line of thought throughout this thesis. My professor, Véronique Servais at The University of Liège, perpetuates these relational patterns of thought within the fields Human-Animal Relations and Anthropology. I have inherited this thread of thinking, my reference to Wordsworth's poem acting as yet another link within the chain. I align ideas, make alliances, and connect patterns between *my* concepts, my mentor's work, Gregory Bateson's concepts, and Wordsworth's poem. It is an evocation of and evocation of an evocation. It is a reiteration of a pattern, a pattern of relations. As I cannot express it any more eloquently nor succinctly than both Servais and Bateson already have, I resort to paraphrasing the two scholars: Wordsworth's primrose elicits a subject who is unable to relate to the flower, a mere yellow object sitting beside a river. In contrast with this person, stands the poet, for whom the primrose yields a richer palate than merely yellow. According to Bateson, "the primrose resembles a poem and both poem and primrose resemble the poet" (as cited in Servais 2018, 1). Servais espouses Bateson's stance in that Wordsworth's primrose plays a prominent role for the poet; the flower is rendered relevant in that it "stands as a self-reflexive recognition for the poet" (*ibid.*) "Something of the poet is perceived to be present 'in' the primrose itself," Servais expatiates on their relation, that "through this recognition, the poet discovers that he is part of the same story as the primrose" (*ibid.*). The primrose is a figure that I will narrate as a subtext, a trope that I will thread throughout this thesis. The primrose represents the relations that Belgian pigeon fanciers construct with their environment. These are correspondences, interactions that co-constitutively construct the racing pigeon and the fancier's world. They are patterns that connect subjects within shared milieus, within situated sites of *becoming*.

Early in the 2021 racing season, Henri invites me to drive to Sint-Truiden to meet with a well-renowned fancier, Filip Herbots, whose entire family is professionally involved in pigeon racing; they are fanciers, breeders, international sellers, pigeon veterinarians, health product manufacturers and suppliers. Filip is not only lauded as one of Belgium's finest fanciers but an intuitive pigeon auctioneer, a *crieur*, as they are called. His adept auctioneering skills stem from his perceptibility in reading others, just as he would read a pigeon. At pigeon auctions, Filip detects and discerns others' feelings, comparing it to meeting a potential partner: "You know when a fancier is interested in a pigeon up for auction because something *signals*. Immediately, something prompts me to say that this person has a strong or weak character or is overly dominant. The person's character speaks to me. And the same goes for pigeons. With pigeons, it's even more prominent." I extend Bateson's *dialogic structures* (1979) to include what I would call *emphatic dialogic structures* that *connect* subjects. Being able to send and receive subtle signals opens up possibilities for exchange—auctions are literally and figuratively a site of exchange. Filip reads the bidders' bodies, their interests, their personalities, knowing when to incite the

bids higher or to call it a sale. Learning to read pigeons, their bodies, and the *emphatic* patterns that connect, are matters that speak to the fancier. Pigeons educate their fanciers, honing their literacy skills in reading others.

During our interview, Filip tells me that after only 10 minutes of talking to me, he is able to ascertain a wealth about me. He notices that I am someone that goes further, deeper. Filip is reading me just as I am reading him. Filip sets up a shared milieu, a framework in which we are both engaged in common practices of observing others and paying heed to relations formed between subjects. Filip is subtly disclosing that he is not merely a subject for me to observe, but that he is observing along *with* me. Constructing frames of observation together—along *with* my research subjects—creates *dialogic structures* that *connect*. These are vital moments in Reflexive Ethnography that remind us that Anthropologists are making observations *with* and not *about* others. My ethnography is co-constructive in that it includes my participants as researchers just as they fold me into their own methodologies for observing. These are *pidgin* ethnographies concerning relationalities that connect, rather than divide (as cited in [de la Bellacasa 2017, 61](#)). An episode akin to that of Filip's unfolds during an auction held at the *Indépendante de Liège* club, where an anonymous fancier turns my research lens around, pointing it directly at me. He is reading me like a book: "I see you. You are constantly capturing events, on the lookout like a bird of prey. You fly above overseeing events, trying to paint a bigger picture of it all. You can see three kilometers away while everyone else can only see one kilometer. You are like a psychologist, trying to pierce inside people's thoughts, dissecting. You are both rational and relational. You and us fanciers come from the same family, the same roots. You are a keen observer like us, your eyes peeled, your ears perked, all-seeing, all-hearing in order to enrich your knowledge." Fanciers are conducting Participant Observation in the same manner as Anthropologists, attentive and perceptive of human behavior, both individually and collectively. My subjects and I are birds of the same feather that flock together—we create patterns that connect.

My subjects are well aware of when and where such forms of relationality blossom—they poetically point out the primroses along the routes we traversed together. Back in the car with Patrick Philippens, he offers me insight not only into relations that fanciers maintain with pigeons but amongst fanciers themselves: "Knowing who the other fanciers are is very important. You must first learn who the others are and behave according to them. This goes not only for fancying but for everything in life. Every fancier is different. So, if you want to understand us as a whole, it is impossible. You have to learn every fancier individually. If you can understand why this fancier behaves like this or that, then you will see different outcomes. And you will behave accordingly to how that person is. I have to know every fancier in the club and how they behave. You need to understand every person so you can know how to communicate with them. I need to see what they want out of our relationship so that they don't turn against me." Inter-relational subjectivities occur not only amongst fancier and racing pigeons but amongst fancier and fancier; furthermore, these relations arise between researcher and subject. I do not fall outside of the fancier's scrutinizing eye and become a subject of their own inquiries and investigations. Our two-hour commute from Ghent to Liège provides Patrick with a fresh understanding of my research. Patrick points out my positionality as a researcher

and the relations that I create between my subjects (cf. [Abu-Lughod 1998](#)). He conveys how the restructuring of our relationship has shed new light on the angle he sees me from: "I didn't get the chance to analyze you, to know about your mother and father²⁷. Suddenly I saw you one day coming with your bicycle to the club, and wondered, who is this lady? But now, I get a clear picture about what you are doing with this research and what motivates you and how important it is to you." Our interactions open the door to inter-relational *becomings*, whereby Patrick understands my interests and inserts himself into a *dialogic structure* with me. He participates along with my research question, understanding the root of it, feeding my inquiries; within this shared space of co-acknowledging, we co-construct knowledge. This is a field of primroses, a tapestry of *patterns that connect*.

Seeing Eye-to-Eye

The pigeon's vision surpasses our own, their candidacy employing them in various positions that render them more qualified than humans: hired by the U.S. Coast Guard to search for castaways as part of Project Sea Hunt ([See figure 15](#)); enlisted as gunmen by the U.S. Navy WWII Navy as part of Project Pelican; trained as Impressionist art-connoisseurs in Japan. Their vision is a *pattern that connects*, synonymously linking humans and pigeons as observant and intelligent. The fancier basks in the attention received by the pigeon who reciprocally admires human intelligence. John William Logan, a member of the British Parliament, wrote extensively on pigeon racing during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, describing his allure to the avocation, for racing pigeons "are not only deeply interesting for their extraordinary intelligence, which, in my opinion, ranks them very high in the scale of intellectual animals, but because *they call forth a man's intelligence* [emphasis mine] to a high degree in learning the secrets of their nature" ([Johnes 2007, 368](#)). A coal miner's account of the same period is similarly telling: "pigeons are very friendly and affectionate birds. I like to be in the middle of my animals in orders to be known by them" [translation mine] ([Frisch-Gauthier and Friedmann 1961, 115](#)). As one miner-fancier proclaims, "you must become acquainted with your pigeons and make *them* acquainted" (119). Acquaintanceships concern tying affective bonds, building trust, becoming familiar with, making *family*. The racing pigeon and fancier are complicity bound in acts of mutual recognition, of reciprocating gazes. These *regards*²⁸ are "co-constitutive naturalcultural dancing, holding in esteem, a regard open to those who look back reciprocally. Respecere." ([Haraway 2008, 27](#)). In order to be welcomed into the pigeon's world, you need to welcome them into yours. Reciprocity enacts relations.

²⁷ It is interesting to point out Patrick's perspective, that to know me as an individual is tied to my parents and my upbringing. This becomes vital as we better grasp Patrick's personal pigeon racing and breeding techniques, whereby he pushes the pigeon's genes and parents to the forefront. He understands human dispositions in the same way he understands those of pigeons, as a descent through lineages, kinship running through bloodlines. To understand me, Patrick needs to understand who both of my parents are.

²⁸ I opt to likewise keep the French term *regard*, for not only does it signify looking and looking back but in that it connotes the humble acts of being concerned for another, of giving one's regards to another

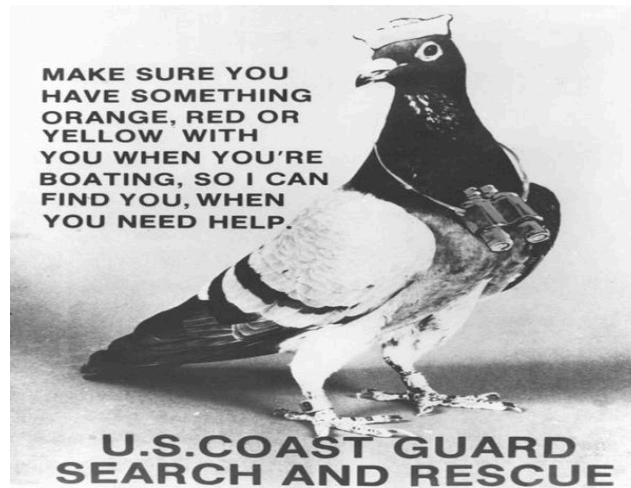


Figure 15, Project Sea Hunt

Reciprocal and mutual acknowledgments are affective affairs whereby subjects are afforded opportunities to speak intelligently. Both pigeons and fanciers' gazes are mutually met; they are looked *back at* and *regarded* as intelligent subjects. As I dig through the archives, gleaned what I could concerning mining-fanciers, I gather that mining conditions impoverished the worker's individuality; they were robbed of their voices, their opinions detracted, rendering them silent and *inarticulate*. Pigeon racing afforded them openings, opportunities to reign, to be their own bosses. Beneath the mines, their voices were silenced, their faces blackened, concealing their individuality, their subjectivity; above ground, their pigeons freed them of society's shackles (See figure 16). Coal miners labored and toiled at the bottom of the pits. They were socially disparaged and demoted to the lower social ranks. Their social worth discredited, their intelligence unrequited²⁹. Pigeon racing dignified mining-fanciers, restoring their value and the intelligence that was stripped from them. The pigeon was the miner's primrose that afforded them a voice, ways of (re)articulating in the world. The single in-depth survey of miner-fanciers is a Sociological study funded by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in the 1950s and published in 1961 entitled *Colombophilie Chez les Mineurs du Nord*. Frisch-Gauthier and Friedmann's study pigeonholes³⁰ the miners, reducing their complexity by categorizing these blue-collar workers as uneducated, inarticulate, and suffering from social inferiority. This narrow perspective not only clumps miners into the same category and universalizes subjectivities, but it silences miners' true and profound motives for racing pigeons. The underlying grounds for racing pigeons run deep, however these Sociologists depict the miner's interests as shallow: "it is important to note that the search for fame and the desire for social the desire for social revenge is more frequently found among those who do not have the primary school certificate...lead[ing] to a certain feeling of inferiority" [translation mine] (22). While the pigeon sees the miner-fanciers as intelligent, the Sociologist cannot—the miner-fancier is the primrose for which the Sociologists see "nothing more."

²⁹ The French expression, *tu me prends pour un pigeon*, meaning "you take me for a fool," is a hackneyed platitude, a trite misconception of pigeon and miner's intelligence, labeling both as gullible. While both the pigeon and the miner are stripped of their intelligence, they redeem each other's worth, respectively endowing the other with the esteem they deserve. Fancier and pigeon deem each other intelligent just as the poet and primrose mutually recognize their poetics.

³⁰ "To pigeonhole" is *catalogué, étiqueté* in French; *in een etiket op plakken* in Dutch



Figure 16, Miner holding his racing pigeon.

Relationality within the scope of this thesis is not solely concerned with interpreting the world and seeing oneself in the other. Relationality is active, it affords subjects to *become* otherwise. This ethnography is intrigued by what *makes do*, how relationality *enacts*. I lend an account of another coal miner whose experience with racing pigeons transformed a reticent fancier into a loquacious speaker, for it afforded him “a language and means of expression” [translation mine] (Frisch-Gauthier and Friedmann 130). The pigeon literally made this miner-fancier articulate differently. More-than-human encounters are mutual flourishings—the pigeon sees the fancier as intelligent just as the fancier regards the pigeon as intelligent. The animal, the pigeon, the miner, and the fancier are all underdogs within this ethnography. There is more than meets the eye. Fanciers and racing pigeons are the underrepresented who herein “*get a chance*, between those that “articulate successfully and those that have been poorly articulated” (Despret 2013, 38). This miner’s account of finding back his opinionated voice is amplified within more-than-human encounters and exemplifies spaces for articulating differently. Pigeons, like rats or dingoes (cf. Edelman 2002; cf. Peace 2002) conjure contradictory images of love-hate, intelligence-stupidity, filth-purity, a pendulum that swings across contexts, frames that are wholly hinged upon the relations we make with these animals. We *enact* relations that literally render these creatures intelligent or stupid (cf. Despret and Meuret 2016), enabling or disabling their ways of becoming. Belgian pigeon fanciers and their animal counterparts unbracket the impasses that would hinder their capacities for *becoming*—their relations reveal and manifest novel dispositions. The underlying reasons for why fanciers engage in this folksport have more facets than the eye can see.

A pigeon’s cunningness makes the cut for fanciers who have an eye for spotting those that are incisively apprehensive of their surroundings. Fanciers seek out sophisticated pigeons who are able to better find their bearings, remember landmarks, mark coordinates, and build their own mapping systems based on an assortment of assemblages. These are prerequisites for *cracks*, prodigy pigeons that are one in a million. Victor Andot, or better known as Vicky, is auctioning pigeons at *Indépendante de Liège*—he is a *crieur* as was Filip Herbots. Together, we look at fanciers looking at pigeons for sale, inspecting what they inspect, as they hold the pigeons, spread their wings, caress their feathers, glance into their eyes; they get a feel for these birds hoping to land

upon a *crack*. Vicky exclaims that “having a *crack* is like winning the lotto. A fancier may have only one or two cracks in their entire racing career. Maybe not even a single one. A *crack* has to have an intelligent look. They are observant, attentive, curious.” Fanciers seek out pigeons who are deft, that scrupulously inspect their surroundings, just as the fancier must equally have a discerning eye. *Patterns that connect* are matters of seeing eye-to-eye, of tying affective bonds that sharpen both the pigeon and the fancier acute awareness for noticing. They inculcate each other to be more heedful, informing each other how to be more perspicacious.

Hadrien Marsille, a young 23-year-old fancier from Ophain who I meet at the National Award ceremony, further illustrates this point: “sometimes at a sales event, I can simply look at a pigeon and immediately know, *now, that pigeon there has something*. It has a certain *look* in its eye. It’s difficult to describe. It’s an intelligent look, a curious look that hits you like a flash. It’s intense. The pigeon captures your eye with a certain allure. It stands out from the crowd. The pigeon tells you, *take me*.” Hadrien continues to describe how this intelligence is a crucial asset in racing: “a pigeon has to be intelligent enough to know how to take the lead, to see better when it flies *en masse*. If there is an obstacle, it will be the first to dodge it, unscathed. The others won’t be able to see those obstacles if they are trailing behind amongst the mass. It has to be a leader, not a follower. It has to be independent, apart from the rest. It has to say, I’m going *my* way, doing it *my* way.” This individuality is reflected in the fancier who develops their own unparalleled practice, their distinctive hybrid approach that sets them *apart* from the rest. Particular relations created between fancier and pigeon allow them both to stick out from the mass and take the lead. These are *patterns that connect*.

I had met Ruben Lanckriet, a veterinarian and pigeon DNA researcher who had a booth set up at the largest pigeon racing fair, the 2020 edition of Fugare held in Kortrijk (the 2021 edition did not take place due to Covid-19 measures). At Marten’s truck depot, as we *convoyeurs* are attending to the pigeons the day before departing for Barcelona International, Ruben is called in as the official veterinarian who runs a thorough check, an audit evaluating the well-being and health of the pigeons. This serendipitous encounter prompts Ruben to invite me to his loft in Maldegem after I return home from the race in a week’s time. At Ruben’s loft, he avows in a similar vein: “fanciers with pigeons who clock in faster are fanciers that can *read* pigeons better.” Ruben attributes his ability to read pigeons more aptly than his father, even though they race together as a *tandem*; Ruben wonders if perhaps the difference is his upbringing, for he grew up taking care of pigeons alongside his father from a young age. Let us not forget that Ruben chose to become a veterinarian by profession, which speaks to his abilities that he incessantly hones, that of reading all animals.

DJ depicts a similar childhood upbringing, having delved into the nooks and crannies of the sport at the age of twelve, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, August Godard. DJ’s discerning eye has been acclimated since adolescence. He confirms that “*cracks* have to have an intelligent, alert, vigilant eye. They are telling you something when they look back at you. They are showing you something. They are saying, *I am a master*. They have qualities that I cannot describe. You have to simply be a fancier to know, to *see* [emphasis mine]. A *crack* has something different in the way they observe.” All fanciers will highlight the pigeon’s inquisitive eye and

sensible intelligence, its gripping regard that snares the fancier. The eye captures and is captivating. Looking around the Ramillie racing club at the pigeons up for auction, DJ tells me how the most adept fanciers don't even need to hold the pigeon: "A skilled fancier will simply observe the pigeon observing. They will notice the one which stands out, the way it behaves, its mannerisms, its quirks. A proficient fancier will notice the pigeon who actively observes *other pigeons*." I witness fanciers *observing observe, seeing see*³¹. These are *patterns that connect*, the primrose that creates relational rapports.

Somatic Modes of Attention

To lend one's body to the world and accept its complexities, tastes, structures, and smells.

~ Paul Stoller

Rudi Joosens is a board member of the Belgian Royal Pigeon Federation (KBDB/RFCB), alongside his role as Secretary of *The Cureghem Centre* racing club. He invites me to Lot, a small city just outside of Brussels one fine Sunday, to his friend Marius Boboc's house as I watch him and Rudi chirping away all day, the two ping-ponging their perspectives back and forth. Their fervent ebullience for pigeon racing effervescently fills the air with vivacity as the two fanciers feed off and nourish each other's enthusiasm. They are handing out compliments about the other's pigeons like there was no tomorrow. Their friendship is warm and reinforcing, welcoming me into that open space. Not only is this my first fieldwork conducting Participant Observation at a fancier's home and loft, but Marius and Rudi have me handle their pigeons, teaching me how to feel the way that fanciers feel. Participant Observation quickly became *participatory*: pigeons are caressed, their feathers stroked, their supple wings spread, their underbellies rubbed, the width of their heel bones gauged, their musculature, build, and bone structures analyzed. "The bird must slip through your hands," Rudi shows me, as we softly run our fingers across the pigeon's sleek satin of a coat. Touching and holding pigeons are literally and figuratively means by which fanciers *grasp* meaning. Bodies that touch and are touched *by* form affective correspondences (cf. [Gell 1998](#)).

These are there poetics of noticing, of regarding the other—they are acts of care that involve attention, of attending to. Fanciers and racing pigeons interrelate, "attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" ([Csordas 1993, 138-9](#)). Rudi highlights how the pigeon's awareness sensitizes and sharpens the fancier's perceptiveness: "Once we start owning pigeons, *we* start feeling more." Fanciers often speak of a felt connection, an elation, a tingling, a flash that "speaks to us," informing them which pigeons are winners. The staunchest of pigeons will "tell us fanciers" that it is more willing, more alert, unflinching, forthright, resolute. They sense a pigeon's characteristics through *multiple* somatic modes of attention, rendering knowledge palpable through the poetics of touch. Although fanciers are incapable of articulating this knowledge through words, it reaches beyond verbal language; rather, it speaks *through* the fancier's body, fervidly. Rudi repeats several times throughout the course of our discussion, "it's a full package: their character,

³¹ *Observing observe* and *seeing see* are nods to Bruno Latours *make do* [faire faire].

strength, genes, physical build, intelligence, willingness. If one element is missing, well, that pigeon isn't going to be a winner. That's a surefire bet." Paying heed to the fancier's phenomenological experiences, as well to their pigeon's experience, unleashes a wealth of somatic modes of attention (cf. Mauss 1973, cf. Csordas 1993, cf. Gibson 1979). As Csordas reminds us, "we are not isolated subjectivities trapped within our bodies, but share an intersubjective milieu with others, we must also specify that a somatic attention means not only attending to and with one's own body but includes attention to the bodies of others. Our concern is the cultural elaboration of sensory engagement, not preoccupation with one's own body as an isolated phenomenon" (139). Paying heed to another subject requires embodied experiences, for beings are *in* and *of* the world.

Back at the National Belgian Award Ceremony, I am conversing with Rik and Mike, our writers and editors for *De Duif*, who share a kin practice with my own, having traveled far and wide across Belgium to interview an array of winning fanciers. "But there," Mike points out, "is Albert Derwa,³² the best in all of Belgium. He's a really big champion. We say he has a small basket, meaning he doesn't race many pigeons. But to be able to win like that you really have to have an eye for picking the right pigeons." While some fanciers wait their entire racing career to hit the jackpot, landing upon a *crack*, Albert is sitting on a goldmine—he has a smattering number of *cracks* in his loft amongst a modicum of pigeons. Lauded as Belgium's best, I am quickly put into contact with Albert—his humbleness immediately lowers his reigning stardom down to earth. He tells me, "everyone comes up to me saying *you're the best fancier ever*. But no. I am just lucky. I have good birds who are in good health. My strength is that I have a small loft with not a lot of pigeons. That way, I can visit every bird, every day. I can hold each one in my hands. I can tend to their needs. In big lofts, you cannot do that. The fancier must be able to *see* and *feel* their pigeons. They must be able to *sense* what their pigeons need. Sensitivity is key." The scale of one's loft and the amount of pigeons one cares for is not trivial—size *does* matter. For Albert, this is his secret weapon: he is able to build tighter bonds and kin formations. "I have no secret in the sport. I have good pigeons and a *feel* for pigeons. You have to be born with this feeling." I hear in the background someone saying, "don't tell her all your secrets," reminding me that even though fanciers do indeed have a secret or two, they are not going to unveil what is privy to them, let alone to a researcher who might leak their stories. The best-kept secrets remain tightly sealed.

Secrets aside, Albert states the obvious: top-quality pigeons are paramount. But, you also need a top fancier to steer the helm and run the deck. "It's just a feeling we fanciers have. It's an intuition that guides us towards the winning pigeons. I have to pick up the pigeons and feel it. But, what feels like a good pigeon for me, might not be a good pigeon for another fancier." These are not matters of opinion, they are relational rapports, *pidgin* pairings that couple individual fanciers with distinctive pigeons. I ask Albert my hypothesis, "So, it depends on the relation you create with each pigeon? Not the pigeon itself and not the fancier alone are what

³² Friends call Albert, *Berreke*. He plays tandem with his wife, tandem Derwa-Luxem. Francine Luxem. Albert cheekily jests with an innuendo, chuckling, "I play with my wife."

makes a winner, but it is the pigeon *with* the fancier?" Albert concurs, "yes, yes, that is so. It is the pigeon and the fancier *together*. Maybe I wouldn't play well with someone else's pigeons and they wouldn't race well with mine either. It's hard to explain why." One cannot attribute a winner to a pigeon nor a fancier alone but must consider the combination, the confluence of the two. These are hybrids, encounters that emerge from relations. Our young fancier, Hadrien, who is standing by at the award ceremony, concurs: "when you hold a pigeon in your hand, there is something sentimental in touching the bird to feel if it's right for you, but there's also the aspect of gauging its physique. It's both. Take any other fancier and compare our judgments of what constitutes a good pigeon. Our opinions simply won't align."

Every fancier sets up different relations with their pigeons—their perceptions position them with alternative sets of assessment tools. A pigeon's personality, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses are traits that are embedded, incarnated in the body; fanciers read pigeon bodies, movements, feelings, and dispositions. Fanciers bridge what is typically disjointed in Western notions of knowledge, mending the schisms that would separate cognitive *and* somatic awareness. Fancier imbue meaning in sensorial phenomena, putting these experiences hand in hand with cognitive processes. They thus construct hybrid ways of reading the pigeon that is intuitive, visceral, *and* cerebral. These are *pidgin* knowledges and are shared within the fancier's habitus, forming what I will call a *sociophenomenological constellation*. Handling the pigeon is a transformative means of knowing, as DJ aptly calls it, "finger sensitivity;" it is a form of embodiment whereby the fancier "*become[s]* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other and one in the other" (Deleuze 2003, 35). Sensations are the human *touching* the pigeon and being *touched by* the pigeon. These are affects, sensations that traverse species, that travel and make meaning travel, that *move*. The sensitized fancier who is well accustomed to these somatic modes of attention is able to foresee what a pigeon will feel like in their hands, merely by looking at it. Such fanciers touch with their eyes (cf. Marks 2000), or to extend DJ's neologism, they enhance their "eye sensitivity."

Feathers as Soft as Down

When you witness a fancier marveling at the silkiness of a pigeon's feathers and their satin delicacy, they are transfixed, enraptured in the poetics of the pigeon's bodily materiality. DJ shows me how smaller feathers need to seamlessly overlap, "like the slate of a roof." Feathers likewise are sites where impairments leave their marks or where health and hygiene shine through the feather's sheen. The "palpability of the sign" (Jakobson 1985, cited in Larkin 2013, 334-5) contains qualia, poetics that are simultaneously informant and qualifying aesthetics that "emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function" (328). These signs are clues, indicating what events might have ensued when the fancier was unaware: during a race; while being basketed with other pigeons; inside the loft. Some fanciers will toss the entire pigeon into the air, listening to the sounds it produces when taking off in flight; this I shall call an "ear sensitivity." Vicky extolls, "A light pigeon is brisk, alive. A heavy pigeon will just flop to the floor. It doesn't have the agility and responsiveness of a racer. You also have to *listen* [emphasis mine] to how the pigeon flies. If you don't hear a sound, it signifies that the pigeon

is supple. It flutters off softly like a butterfly.” A winning pigeon needs to be as light as a feather, serene; silence speaks volumes, for which fanciers are subtly attuned to hearing. Vicky continues to convey that if a pigeon’s wings “go *whoof, whoof, whoof*. That hints that something is wrong—it is stiff in the wings.” Feathers act as arrows, directing one’s attention; they are indicators of a multitude of information—they point. The quintessential image of the fancier inspecting their pigeon’s wings and feathers is salient (See figure 17): when gifting pigeons, basketing, purchasing, and most importantly when a pigeon returns home after a race. A fancier’s first reflex is to shrewdly assess the pigeon’s wingspan, how tight they hug against the pigeon’s body when shut, its suppleness when spread, the aeration between the feathers—they are discerning the aerodynamics of their racers, like an aerospace engineer.



Figure 17, Fancier spreading a pigeon wing

Nico removes a feather from his shirt pocket as if it were a spare pen he kept handy when needed. He reenacts a stealthy rat sneaking into the pigeon loft, nibbling away at their feathers before smuggling off with a few tufts to stash away, tucked into their nests: “rats love soft pigeon feathers. It’s a duvet, really, soft bedding that the rats build, but at the expense of the pigeon’s wings, which are damaged.” Nico, having plucked away at his feather to illustrate his point continues, “look here. There are holes. See how if I flap this damaged feather? It is no longer air resistant. The pigeon loses tract. And imagine an entire wing with holes!” Most fanciers’ seal any open crevices in their lofts with makeshift devices to prevent intruders from invading: rats, cats, weasels. Chapuis advises that lofts be meticulously cleaned and the door sealed with a wood plank so that no feathers escape that would signal to predators that pigeons are inside (1865, 11-2). Feathers are sites of material semiotics, read not only by fanciers but other animals who act in relation to the pigeon. Behind Nico, a bundle of pigeon feathers hangs inside one of his lofts like a first-aid kit (See figure 18); these feathers act as back-ups, allowing Nico to take on the role of a surgeon, splicing, sewing, and suturing wounded feathers. Using the same feather that Nico had maimed like a rat, he now plays the part of a nurturing nurse as he grafts two feathers. He delicately splices the shaft of the pigeon’s feather with an ancillary one, stitching in a sewing needle that will remain to reinforce its structure. A bit of glue binds it like gauze. This operation saves Nico precious time during the racing season if a feather goes missing in flight. While a felled feather will take three weeks to grow back, Nico’s procedure takes a mere minute or two.



Figure 18, Behind Nico is a stash of feathers that he stores, hung up inside the loft

Let's take a stroll back to Eddy's loft in the Ardennes, in the middle of wilderness, where he teaches Ecological classes amongst primary school students. Eddy fosters an environment where somatic modes of attention flourish and thrive. His pedagogical methodology eschews rigid classifications that systematically inventory species and materiality within static repositories. Rather than classifying feathers within taxonomical charts that pinion and peg them in compartments, Eddy guides his children's gazes to the ways in which feathers *dance*. The children elevate their height, hoisted by a chair as they release pigeon feathers from above, marveling at the figures they make mid-air. Pigeon feathers slowly tumble down, swaying, waltzing, twirling. If the feather rows like a boat ore, those are the ones that assist in flight, paddling the pigeon forward through the wind. Those that cradle back and forth protect against harsh weather conditions. Those that spin are either tail or wing feathers, acting as brakes, used as a parachute to soften the landing. Eddy's pigeon feathers are not collected and pinned, labeled with a name. They are not feather names consulted in books. Eddy remarks how his reclassification system "redistributes the cards,"³³ it reorders, allowing us to marvel through different modalities. He renders them dynamic, fluid, where meaning moves corporeally across bodies. They connect through forms of *engagement* that place materialities in what Haraway aptly calls a *dance of relating* (2008, 25), whereby subjects are "redone through the patterns they enact" (*ibid.*). These forms of classification relate the bird to its environment and the human in relation to the pigeon's world.

Poetic movements are fully fleshed out when the pigeon soars, flapping its wings and fluttering its feathers. Unquestionably, every fancier will emphatically mimic these poetic gestures, emotions that contagiously co-habit the fancier's body. Marius, for instance, spreads his arms unfurled like a pigeon's wings spanning the skies. He tilts his body side-to-side as if breezing in the wind. Suddenly, he sees his loft, and *snap!* Marius' arms spring shut. His head juts forward, aimed at its target: home. The poetics of movement become palpable and perceptible

³³ I relish concepts of "redistributing the cards," of *detournement* that allow us to ask differently. "Redistributing the cards" re-arranges the assemblages we make and meanings we construct--it reorders *agencements*, relations.

throughout the fancier's body. Take Eddy, for example, who similarly claps his arms closed, buzzing his lips like the motor of a jet plane. He then darts his body like an arrow, shooting like a bullet, landing like a jet. To reference once more Jakobson's concepts of poetic speech, language's "referential function (what it means) is less relevant than its homophonic relation to another word (how it sounds)" (as cited in [Larkin 335](#)). Homophones are *patterns that connect*, they form relations; they are also poetic materials that bring matters into play. These are feelings that mimetically jump from the experience of the pigeon to that of the fancier: the pigeon's body makes the fancier's body speak. Nico is similarly exalting with emotions, nearly bursting at the seams, as he erupts, "the pigeon snaps its wings, *pssht!* It nosedives³⁴, *peww!* Then lands on the *spoutnik*, *prrrt!*" ([See figure 19](#)). Despret speaks from a similar vantage point, addressing homonyms as "breaking from the literal [...] an action that, in one context, translates fear, aggression, or a relation of forces, in another context rearranges, unmakes, and remakes itself " ([2016, 80](#)). These re-agencements liberate beings and re-form relations; they redistribute agencies within choreographies of motion and meaning. They are emergent and animated sites that re-figure. These are poetic sites of *becoming*.



Figure 19, Newspaper clipping *Le Sport Colombophilie* 1938: "Look over there, he notices, this strapping young chap is going to land like my pigeon, straight and flat on the board" ³⁵ [Translation mine].

³⁴ Nico says *plonkê* in Wallonia to describe the pigeon's nosedive, meaning *plonger* in French ([See figure 19](#)).

³⁵ In this Newspaper clipping from 1938, the fanciers analogously parallels the racing pigeon to the youthful, athletic body. The diver darts, landing straight on the board just as a racing pigeon does as a final maneuver to end the race. The athletic body, the speed of airplanes and those of darting pigeons, of take offs and

A Scrutinizing Eye

Fanciers are assiduously aware of the pigeon's movements, what motivates them, what they are *asking of you*³⁶. Movement points the fancier's attention to matters that call for attention. Vicky accentuates that "you need to pay attention how they are flying, which ones have strayed off, and which ones are solitary flyers. If a pigeon makes only two or three rounds and then lands home in the loft depressed, you need to notice those signs. Those that don't fly amongst the others in the flock are the ones I will basket. You need to observe, *listen* to the pigeons who are *telling you* about themselves." The scrutinizing eye of the fancier is like that of a hawk, always alert. If the pigeon is solitary and soaring, the fancier will seek out what motivates it, looking to further enhance its proclivities with incentives. I am observing Nico train³⁷ his pigeons as I follow both of them with my camera's eye—Nico is stationed below as the flock flies several laps in unison. I notice one straggler abstaining from the group. Nico points out that this pigeon is not stagnating but accelerating faster than the others. This pigeon is a lone-soarer, parading that he is a steadfast winner as he outshines the other pigeons. His volition to fly longer rounds independently from the others makes him stand out as an unfaltering racer, for which he unabashedly flaunts. Unfailingly, fanciers will investigate their lofts with a scrutinizing eye, reading signs in the pigeon's health, their movements, their emotions, the relations it forms with other pigeons, its placement in the loft, investigating why a pigeon might be underperforming.

Fanciers treat their pigeons as individuals and dedicate extensive amounts of time to knowing each one independently, noticing and attending to their moods. Eddy insists, "it's unmissable when the pigeon you know and studied so well is feeling dispirited or brimming with joy. Take for instance, one of my pigeons who perches on the neighbor's chimney when it feels in top shape. That's that particular pigeon's quirk. Or another pigeon of mine who flies most unusually, darting vertically upwards 1.5 meters and shooting back down. These are particularities belonging to each pigeon, who asks you to know them in their own particular mannerisms." These quirks³⁸ speak to Eddy who is well-versed in intimate forms of communication that tie affective bonds, attuning to the pigeon's emotions. Fanciers can detect and read subtle signs that tell them when a pigeon *feels at home* or when it is *not comfortable in its own skin*. Pigeons thus communicate their willingness and their physical and emotional states to their fanciers, if they are capable of racing that day or hold out for another time. Pigeons that are in top shape and prime for competition are those that soar, that aim high³⁹. Movement bespeaks amusement. Conversely, pigeons read fanciers' bodies: they commune-*with*. Pigeons are shrewdly aware and attuned to their fancier's movements, *their* habits, *their* quirks. It is not

landings, of choreographies in the skies. Original French : "l'amateur qui se promène a la long du bassin de natation : "Tiens, remarque-t-il, ce gaillard vas tomber comme mon bon bleu, droit sur la planche."

³⁶ Nico tells me in Wallon, *Li colons dimandèt-st-a èsse sovint r'nètîs*, meaning that the pigeons *ask* [emphasis mine] their fanciers that their hygiene is often maintained

³⁷ Nico uses the Wallonian term *antrin'nemint* for "training."

³⁸ Signals of happiness manifest in forms of what Eddy calls "quirks." Likewise, Eddy uses the terms "manies" which are habits, but they are also particularities for each individual pigeon, quirks, manners, small obsessions, little "manias").

³⁹ Nico uses the Wallonian expression, *plakî âs nûlêyes*, literally meaning that they are stuck or plastered to the clouds high above.

the fancier nor the pigeon alone who call the shots, who determine if they are willing and ready to race; rather it is the pigeon-*with*-fancier who take command, *together*.

These are partnerships that are in-tune with each other that implicitly co-sign agreements; if pigeon-fancier accords are out of tune; one quickly notices that they are out of key. Touching are matters of *handling* situations that testify to how a fancier and their pigeon's relationships are *composed*: in or out-of-key. I witnessed some fanciers chasing after their pigeons, intractably, grabbing them as they wriggle and squirm. "That is not a real fancier," Patrick professes. While these fanciers need to check the pigeon's ring number, tossing it back as the hunt continues for the intended pigeon, I watch as Patrick gracefully catches his own: one under his armpit, another in the crevice of his inner elbow. He bends his arm toward his body, leaving a wedge between his forearm and upper arm, squeezing in yet another pigeon. The last pigeon he holds in his hand. "Four pigeons in one arm, all calm. I know how other fanciers struggle. I've seen them try to catch their birds. They have no *feeling* [emphasis mine] for their pigeons." He shows me how such fanciers will approach a pigeon with their hands spread apart, as if they are trying to swat a fly as the pigeons fret around the loft, amiss. Fanciers *feel* the pigeon visually, haptically, and through other phenomenological sensoria; they educate each other to become more literate in reading semiotically somatic modes of attention.

Eddy elucidates how growing up in nature and around animals—especially pigeons—has refined his sensibilities; he is more perceptible, aware, articulate, keen⁴⁰ and curious about his pigeons' worldlihoods. Eddy is able to make connections *in* nature, not *about* nature: "I learn from other experiences and observations within nature, making links, relations." Fanciers engage in forms of dialogue, of *pidgins* that bridge sentient realms *between* species, that require making yourself vulnerable to caring about what an animal cares about. Eddy will notice a behavior in another animal and then remark a telling resemblance elsewhere; these are initial threads he uses to weave together relations⁴¹. He comments, "when we are in nature, we are highly perceptive, perceptual. We are constantly observing, always on the lookout⁴². Nature helps me transfer something from one realm to another. It allows me to make translations." After inquiring what Eddy meant by "translation," he provides me an analogous term from mathematics whereby "translation" the displacement of a geometric form along different coordinates. It formally remains the same but moves, or as Eddy eloquently says, "translation is sliding, shifting from one world to another⁴³." I take up Eddy's elegant analogies and extend them into Annemarie Mol's concepts of *coordination* (2010), whereby different methods create different relations. "Translation" is moving between realms, coordinating between them, connecting intersubjective and phenomenological experiences that make both the fancier and pigeon's sensoria more sharply acute. These are *patterns that connect*, coordinates that intricately weave a tapestry of relations that tether pigeon to fancier to world-at-large.

⁴⁰ *Keeness* is a sharpened awareness, the senses heightened. It likewise connotes having an interest in another.

⁴¹ Eddy thinks through the same terminology concerning weaving relations and connections when he uses the French, *tisser les liens* to convey similar concepts.

⁴² Eddy says *à la recherche*, which connotes an investigation. Here, he takes on the role of a researcher. These are the *patterns that connect* researcher and subject. Both my subjects and I are looking for (*à la recherche*) for relations.

⁴³ Translation mines. I opt to likewise include the original term used by Eddy, *faire glisser*.

Filip's story is likewise telling: "What is important for being a skilled fancier is that you *notice* and learn to be *attentive*. One day, I noticed a particular pigeon being bullied by the others in the loft. It became nervous and isolated. It started retreating over into the corner of the loft. The other pigeons felt that this pigeon was *different* than the others." Filip realized the tension and so he put this pigeon in his own separate cage, with its own separate food and water. The next competition, this pigeon triumphantly won the race. Filip remarks that "a good caretaker can see the state of a pigeon *in advance*. They can see if a pigeon will be sick *before* it is sick. They notice when something is *off*. I cannot see what is churning inside of a pigeon's head. We fanciers cannot read their minds. But there are a lot of other details that we *can* see. Every single pigeon is different and a good caretaker detects those differences and acts upon them." Eddy is one of those fanciers that can identify every individual pigeon in flight, something that not all fanciers can do, especially professional lofts. Operating a small loft allows Eddy to exercise his keen observation skills, detecting any foreign pigeon in the vicinity of his loft during a race. While Eddy's pigeons glide gracefully around their loft, utilizing the entirety of their wings, unabated, a foreign pigeon feels unsettled. Its flight restrained, using only the tips of its wing: "Foreigner pigeons are never at ease. They literally don't *feel at home with themselves* [emphasis mine]. They don't feel comfortable in their own skin." As Eddy often has crowds of onlookers at his loft attending his Ecological classes, turning to Eddy agape and stunned by his ability to identify each pigeon in flight, at such a great distance. Eddy remarks, "for them it appears to be magic, whereas for me, it's blindingly obvious⁴⁴."

A story akin to Eddy's transpires at Ruben's veterinarian office, his loft which he shares *in tandem* with his father sits behind the building. His father is taking care of the pigeons in the garden while Ruben and I set up my camera indoors. Something bemusedly catches Ruben's eye outside the window, his gaze darts upward. "It's just a reflex" Ruben assuages the agitation that stirred him, in suite affecting me. Having been involved in pigeon racing since he was child assisting his father, everyday habituation sharpened his awareness towards other animals. Like his pigeons—as do other birds—the moment a shadow is cast on the ground, Ruben glances upward, surveilling the skies to see if it is a bird of prey that might rapaciously pillage the loft. Ruben has *become pigeon* alerted by signs such as shadows, his gaze and attention attuned to the pigeon's world. The affective nature of shadows cause reflexes in both Ruben's pigeons and in the fancier himself. They are *patterns that connect*. On racing days, fanciers spend their Saturdays perched on the upper decks of their lofts, often accompanied by friends who are sensitized to movements such as shadows, watching the skies like a screen (See figures 20 & 21). Outside of Filip's loft, his closest friends join him on racing days as they scan the skies for homecoming pigeons (See figures 22 & 23), sitting for hours chirping away like birds. Engrossed in their own conversations, a shadow cast on the ground will jolt their sight upwards towards the sky, spotting their pigeons landing safely on the *spoutnik*. As a research, I become more attuned to my fanciers' various forms of awareness. My gaze followed their gaze. Shadows too pointed my direction elsewhere, within *their* frame. *I followed in my fanciers' shadows*.

⁴⁴Eddy used the expression, *Ça me saute aux yeux* literally translating as "it jumps out at his eyes," referring to the obvious.



Figure 20, A Crowd of onlookers awaiting racers to return home from the Bordeaux race in the 1930s



Figure 21, Fanciers, friends and family looking up at the sky as pigeons come home from a race



Figure 22, Henri pointing to the sky spotting a homecoming pigeon



Figure 23, Filip and friends scanning the skies, their gaze redirected by shadows.

My own perspicacity was sharpened, attuned to and aligned more closely with my subjects' *habitus*—I learned by observing my fanciers observe. My discerning eye was polished, allowing me to identify individual quirks more clearly—those of my participants and their pigeons alike. Biking through the fields of Flanders as well as the Meuse valley, I mapped an informal topography of the Belgian landscape, my eyes peeled for pigeon lofts. I would spot their peaks slightly protruding from the backs of gardens or detect the gait of fanciers. Something in their postures, their attire begged me to brake for a minute, inquiring if they practiced the folksport. I noticed this very habit amongst fanciers as well—whenever we commuted by car together, my subjects would similarly point out a pigeon loft: “look, look, quick, over there! A fancier lives there! See their loft sticking out?” Once, I came across a lustrous metallic orb in a fancier's garden, lured in by its shine and the sheer size of it. These fanciers used it as a sort of panopticon of the skies, allowing them to survey a full 360 degrees, affording them the widest purview to observe all their pigeons in flight; the orb simultaneously acted as a means of keeping guard of any lurking predators. Such all-encompassing⁴⁵ vantage points are advantageous for fanciers who use these prosthetics to better learn about their individual pigeons; they attune to the pigeon's ways of surveilling the skies by becoming shrewd onlookers themselves.

⁴⁵ The English term “encompassing” etymologically points us to how racing pigeon and fancier determine boundaries *together*.

A Wind's Eye View of the Woods

If winds, currents, glaciers, volcanoes, etc., carry subtle messages that are so difficult to read that it takes us absolutely ages to decipher them, wouldn't it be appropriate to call them intelligent? How would it be if it turned out that we were only the slowest and least intelligent beings in the world?

~ Michel Serres

We arrive in Narbonne on 29th July 2021, greeted by the infamously turbulent Mistral winds that billow through the Alps, pummeling anything that stands in its path. It was unfathomable how pigeons could fly in such wind, for we *convoyeurs* had been accosted by its harsh blows, nearly knocking us off our feet. If winds are excessively turbulent, the pigeon's wings can buckle under the pressure, propelling them eastward to Marseille and sucking them straight into the Alps where the Mistral winds came from. Flemish fanciers don't fancy The Narbonne International, nor any other race that follows *La Ligne du Rhone*: Marseille, Valence, Lyon, Dijon. For Wallonian fanciers, the Mistral winds are propitious, for they act as tailwinds that drive their pigeons through the valley, homebound. I am seated with Claudine Hanzen who won in the top 20 Nationals for Narbonne, having raced one sole pigeon at her local club, *Le Rapide Arlon*. Claudine informs me that different pigeons can handle different types of wind: "Pigeons who can ascend above such strong winds are the ones who climb in racing results, winning top prizes. Our pigeons are not the same as Flemish pigeons, for they read winds *differently*. And we [fanciers] too, react differently to what the wind is telling us." This ethnography is less preoccupied with speaking *about* weather and more concerned with *making weather speak*. It is about giving weather authority⁴⁶, agency, a voice. Wallonian fanciers address the Narbonne winds through different epistemological tools, for they are put into relation [*mis en rapport*] through alternative *patterns that connect*. The wind, geographical location, lines of flight, and pigeons are enmeshed in relationalities, contingencies that weave together ecosystems in what Anna Tsing would call "ecologies of encounter" (218). Wind moves matters, it re-assembles *agencements* and re-distributes knowledge. Non-human agencies such as the wind redirect how fanciers witness *within relations*, maintaining "a wind's eye view of the woods" (Ingold 2013, 88).

On racing days, fanciers tune in to weather forecasts, at the same time tweaking them, appending their own observations. Some fanciers, such as Eddy, are so attuned to the wind that they feel it through their skin, gauging the wind like a barometer. He proclaims that he is able to predict when his first pigeon will arrive home from a race simply by reading the semiotic signs that the wind leaves behind—his *forecasts* are never off by 5 minutes, he extols. Other fanciers read wind patterns in the rustling of leaves and branches, while others have a weather vane installed outside their lofts. These are weather veins⁴⁷ that circulate knowledge through what Ingold coins as *the weather-world*, the "walking, breathing, knowing" (2010). When fanciers make such forecasts, they use *pidgin knowledges*, assembling hybrid forms of technologies (weather

⁴⁶ In French, the poetic expression "faire la pluie et le beau temps" signifies deeper strata on meaning: *to call the shots*. Weather *calls the shots* within pigeon racing; it is given agency, a voice.

⁴⁷ *Weather veins* is a play on words with wind vanes, devices installed in gardens that act as wind compasses. *Weather veins* are likewise directional in that they are semiotic devices that point our attention; they are simultaneously vascular veins that act as conduits, channels that circulate knowledge.

satellites, wind vanes, algorithmic computer systems of probability, telephone weather applications, television broadcasts, anemometers that measure wind speed and wind pressure) as well as their own techniques of embodied, sensorial knowledge. To paraphrase Eddy, these hybrid methods of knowing are enmeshed within ecosystems, networks that weave relations of various kinds⁴⁸. *Pidgin knowledges* re-orient the ways of knowing the world; they necessitate different types of epistemological lenses that enact alternative practices.

Claudine further elucidates how the wind dishevels matters, it entangles agencies hybrids: “When the heat rises from the wheat fields below, the warmth thrusts pigeons upward. Pigeons soar above the harvests, elevated by the emanating warmth. It’s exactly how gliding [unpowered aircrafts] works. The heat makes the wind rise, elevating the pigeons up without an ounce of effort.” The heat gives the pigeons a hand, a lift, a boost forward. According to Claudine, wheat fields are found only in Flanders, geographically advantageous for her competitors where the radiating heat propels their pigeons higher and thus faster. Moreover, Flemish fanciers are given the upper hand when the sun sets on the Belgian coast, light that proffers their pigeons extended minutes of flight time.” According to Claudine, wheat fields found are only in Flanders, geographically advantageous for her competitors where the radiating heat propels their pigeons higher and thus faster. Once the pigeons land to rest, they have a hard time getting back up,” she distinguishes. Wind direction is likewise a key determinant: Southwest winds are the most auspicious; however, when the wind blows from the North, pigeons fly lower to shelter themselves behind obstacles provided by the terrain. Thierry Defrene lives in Onoz, another hilly and forested patch of Wallonia. If a Northwind blows the day of a race, its strength severely thwarts his pigeons who will shield themselves behind dense foliage as a windbreaker. They squander precious time and energy descending and ascending to ward off the wind, whereas in Flanders pigeons simply skim the low lands. If clouds lay low, the pigeons will likewise fly lower, seeking out objects and pathways that will damper blows to the face, hugging against the reliefs of the landscape⁴⁹. This will not only slow them down but redirects their lines of flight. Thierry notes, “all of these elements leave their marks⁵⁰ on us.” The assemblage of wind, weather, forestation, geographies, and terrains leave vestiges, they etch into bodies; they are embodied knowledges, incarnated through habituation.

Pigeons construct strategies, drafting maps that are normally invisible to us. Belgian fanciers make *apparent* these pathways as they attune to the senses of the pigeon's experience, reading their material-semiotic surroundings. Fanciers and racing pigeons dwell-*with* and -*within* temporal⁵¹ matters in what Ingold coins as *taskscape*s (1993). Fanciers render these maps perceptible by detecting drops in air pressure, following the wind direction, tracing lines of flight in wind patterns and flows of rivers, listening to other bird calls of alarm, lit highways,

⁴⁸ Eddy uses the *on tisse des liens*, meaning “weaving links, relations.”

⁴⁹ Eddy used the term *épouser les reliefs*, which means “to fit snug against.” It likewise signifies being molded by the landscape. Pathways are molded by the terrain and wind together. Moreover, *épouser* connotes marriage. I cannot escape from seeing these interactions between the pigeon and the exterior world as hybrids, marriages, of relations that mold, that shape.

⁵⁰ Thierry uses the french term *trace*, which signifies traces, markings, scars.

⁵¹ *Temps* is French means both weather *and* time; it compounds the meaning I wish to convey here concerning temp(s)poral phenomena

sensing heat and humidity, sniffing out scent markers, estimating the heights of clouds. Some fanciers keep cheat sheets with charts of wind directions, distances, and times in their pockets to allow them to predict up to the minute when their pigeons should be returning home, while other fanciers constantly update the pigeon's predicted schedule by reading and re-reading these sensorial semiotics. The height of the clouds is yet an additional determinant, as pigeons too will fly lower; this causes pigeons to follow rivers and valleys, which assist in guiding them home. During hot temperatures, Eddy has noticed flocks of racing pigeons skimming the surface of the Meuse River in Dinant, hydrating themselves mid-air in flight, as swallows do. Hadrien has similarly spotted his own pigeons gliding along rivers, simultaneously guiding their routes home and as sources of drinking water. Rivers are landmarks that trace vestiges into *taskscape*s but are inextricably entwined into complex ecologies that include conventionally unnoticeable materials—clouds, humidity, air pressure, wind, etc.—that affect flight patterns and remap orientations.

In nearly every fancier's loft, I spotted various types of maps pinned up: lines of flight maps, river maps, terrain elevation maps. It is also important to note that each pigeon follows different lines of flight, respective to their loft and that geographical variations create *multiple* lines of flight—there is *singular* means of orientating. Multiple modes of orientation are hinged upon the different assemblages that coalesce: the individuality of the pigeon, loft location, weather, temperature, pressure, wind, landmarks, sound, rivers, incentives, relations with their fanciers will all determine the various possibilities for *how* the pigeon performs. My fieldwork throughout Belgium localizes vantage points, it situates assemblages and experiences. My empirical findings are thus *grounded* in particularities, not generalizations. My subjects' realities thus are *enacted* in relations, within contexts. For instance, French fanciers in Limoges will race and train their pigeons, releasing them from Brussels to travel Southbound, and yet, these French fanciers still race the Barcelona International Competition, which are South-to-North lines of flight. These are reversed lines of flight and offer different assemblages than Belgian ones. They will nonetheless gather alternative knowledges of the weather, they will follow divergent currents of rivers and flows of winds, they will construct disparate *pidgins*. The plenitude of fascinating perspectives and facets await to be carved out; they are the fodder that would only enrich and nourish our ethnographies, feed our conversations, and cultivate ways of perceiving the world as dynamic, yet *grounded*.

Eyes Like a Hawk

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a Northwind will cause pigeons to fly low, for which they shield themselves within valleys, wooded foliage, and behind natural barriers. Often, when the pigeon flies over hedges, an electric wire snags them; these thin, nearly imperceptible cables are used as borders, enclosures to confine farm animals, especially cows. Ruben remarks that the majority of his pigeons are either afflicted by such electrical wires or attacked by birds of prey. Various actants are dragged into the politics of pigeon racing creating “uneven topographies” (Bennett 25) that include non-human actants such as power lines, wind, fog, highways, hawks, cow herding, the avian flu disease, radio towers, wind turbines, solar storms, global warming, etc. Such diverse arrays of actants are heterogeneously diffused across such

"topographies." Ruben directs my attention to how inflected wounds that he inspects in his veterinarian office are not entirely caused by birds of prey: "in many cases, pigeons' legs become broken because they fly at full throttle into low power lines. If they are lucky, only one side of the chest loses feathers or is maybe a bit bruised. Sometimes, yes, the pigeons die due to such accidents. But because many birds of prey circle around power lines, it is possible that the pigeon flies into a power line, gets injured, and then falls victim to a bird of prey." As I revisit Henri's loft in March 2022, the city of Oupeye was removing all above-ground power lines to run electricity underground. Henri was at that moment exasperated, outraged by the hawk who had snatched three of his pigeons that week. This irrevocable loss hindered me from observing Henri train his pigeons that day, having kept them locked up until the coast was clear. With a breadth of relief, a bit of solace comforts him that at least the power lines are being removed. "One less worry for my birds," he sighs optimistically.

Henri idiosyncratically built his loft from recuperated office materials salvaged from his former Colgate-Palmolive offices where he worked as a mechanic. Most of the material is lightweight, laminated sheet metal, which prevents stealthy predators from creeping in, such as weasels, rats, and cats. Henri shows me, "there is no loft like mine." While Henri's loft has defended itself for two decades against tarnishing weather and prowling assailants such as weasels and rats, those who have built their lofts out of wood are beset by weathering, tear-and-wear. The wood eventually rots out, whereby cunning predators bore holes and sneak in, undetected. Sometimes 80-90% of entire lofts are wiped out in one fell swoop, a single weasel slaying them all, heads decapitated. Henri had one of his former pigeons mangled, having given it to a friend, who had inadvertently left the pigeon outdoors in a cage. A cat jumped on the cage and ripped its leg off. "Cats are not fanciers' friends, and weasels are our enemies." During a race, pigeons will often land on a roof or fence at night to rest along their route, but that home may have a cat lurking. Those pigeons never find their way back home. I revisit Henri a half a year later to find that the roof of his loft had just blown off after a series of severe storms that lasted a week in February 2022: "Monday morning, I came back after grocery shopping and found my roof sitting in the garden. My pigeons got a little wet, you could say." The damage was swiftly rectified by the time I revisited his loft the week thereafter. Indeed, Henri's loft was a far none other could match, but after twenty years of having constructed his loft out of original materials, it needed makeover. His loft needed a bit of a facelift, you could say.

The most menacing birds of prey are the Peregrine falcon, the Sparrow hawk, and the Northern goshawk⁵². Their ability to soar far higher than pigeons and their impeccable vision elevates their vantage point. These birds of prey pinpoint pigeons from a great distance, nosediving down like an attacker plane, plummeting upon the pigeon's backs. They plunge with utterly remarkable speed and agility, a strikingly graphic portrayal that fanciers starkly portray—my subjects slightly quiver, their eyes are agape as if reliving the trauma. These are fears deeply embedded in the fancier's body—they are cold-blooded murders that make fanciers shudder.

⁵² Henri uses the Wallonian term *mohèt* to generalize all predatorial hawks, stating how there are many kinds to be cautious of. Some are smaller and less dangerous, but the Goshawk is larger and the most menacing of all hawks, whose name in French is *l'autour des palombes*, literally translating as "encircling pigeons."

Henri, a hunter, simmers with contempt at having lost his best racer last season to a ravening bird of prey. As I am surveilling the repairs that Henri made last week to the roof of his loft—dislodged in a tempestuous gale—his own temper flares up and boils as yet another problem hovers over him. A peregrine falcon has been paying his loft a visit throughout the week, preying on his pigeons. A falcon swoops over the very roof he just repaired, plunging in an attempt to engulf his pigeons. Imagining his loft without a roof while the Peregrine falcon wolfs down his pigeons further galvanizes Henri's avenger, a fit of insurmountable anger that this hunter can hardly hold back. Henri, however, restrains himself, for it is illegal to shoot these protected species. The morality of killing straddles fine lines in such instances of multispecies interactions, for we can see that these are contradictory cases of who kills who, who domesticates who, who cares for who. As Haraway concurs, these are sites that force us to “face nurturing and killing as an inescapable part of mortal companion” (2008, 105).

When we consider how birds of prey, pigeons, and fanciers are entangled in ways of observing each other, their gazes are not only unilateral but affect in an array of directions. Some fanciers will change their hours of release in an attempt to dupe the bird of prey, who shrewdly lurks amongst several lofts, learning the habits of each fancier. Birds of prey keep a close eye on fanciers and their habits, memorizing the times each of their training schedules. They literally and figuratively have eyes like a hawk—nothing slips out of their line of sight. If you keep a strict schedule, the bird of prey will make its rounds to all the fanciers' lofts in the neighborhood, paying a visit from one house to another. Some fanciers are aware of being watched by birds of prey; together, fanciers join forces to discuss how to rotate their schedules in order to trump these lurchers. Here, the birds of prey act as observers, as researchers—they too, have an agentive role, altering the habits and behaviors of their subjects. The tables have been turned once again, as animals observe humans and their behaviors. Fanciers may even release their pigeons later in the day, hoping that the bird of prey has already made its attack on another pigeon from a neighboring loft. Pigeons, fanciers, and birds of prey educate each other; each employs various techniques to elude and countervail the others' techniques. Material semiotics shuttle back and forth, meaning made and remade along the way, leaving traces for others to track and read. As Anna Tsing contributes, “tracking means following worldly entanglements” (137). These techniques trace how multiple spaces overlap and coexist simultaneously, unremittingly inscribing themselves in remarkable ways within the world.

Between the 1970s and the turn of the century, birds of prey nearly almost extinct due to the herbicide DDT. Environmental Protection Agencies have since obliterated the use of this toxic pesticide, which has spawned what fanciers consider an over-population of birds of prey that pose a threat to their pigeons. As birds of prey are protected animals who cannot be hunted, fanciers must skirt methods of eliminating them while finding novel ways of preventing their own pigeons from being slain. Some fanciers have filed a dossier with the Belgian Royal Pigeon Racing Federation (KBDB/RFCB), requesting that they lobby against Environmental Protection Agencies in an effort to abate the over-proliferate of their populations. Skeptical of any concrete legal reforms, fanciers employ a number of *diversionary* tactics: some paint the tail of a pigeon so that it resembles a bird of prey; others attach an additional white feather to the pigeon's rump to dupe the bird of prey; others spray a washable pink spray on the wings (See

figure 24) As prior illustrated, many of my participants' lofts are situated in forested areas throughout Wallonian where they find themselves particularly infested with birds of prey. Vicky's two grandfathers who were both fanciers would not only spray pink paint on their pigeon's underwings but sometimes blue. Paint was rumored to be used to easily spot one's pigeons during basketing events, facilitating a deceitful fancier to easily identify their own pigeon. Such fraudulent fanciers would gain access to the basket and slip off their pigeon's ring, clocking them into the *constateur* well before the pigeon even arrived home. Vicky attributes paint as a form of recognition that turned into a preventive measure, safeguarding their pigeons from birds of prey. Sometimes material semiotics used in one context translate into another.



Figure 24, Underwing painted pink to dupe birds of prey

Ruben uses a plastic owl that rotates in the wind to ward off birds of prey who fear them as their own predators. Pigeons are well-aware that owls are not their enemies, inadvertently forming allies with these plastic creatures. Every fancier employs their own techniques to deter birds of prey: hanging compact discs, laser lights, ultrasonic sound systems, opaque wine bottles. Eddy listens to the environment rather than looking out for birds of prey, tuning into each different bird's sounds they make in different situations: "the best signaler for danger is the scream of a crow. This we can be certain if a predator is lurking in the vicinity." Sounds are the threads that connect wider webs of interspecies networks, in what Csordas would say are instances of "culturally *elaborated* attention *to* and *with* the body in the immediacy of an *intersubjective* milieu" (138-139). Polemical debates concerning care and animal welfare require that we attend to the lives of others. Ruben anguishes at the number of maimed pigeons in his veterinarian practice inflicted by birds of prey: "Most of the time those wounds are either on the back or very often on the belly. When the pigeon spots a bird of prey, it reacts instinctively by dropping in tumbling movement, like young pigeons do when they are flying. The moment they turn around, the predator has a hold on the pigeon, piercing into its breast. Sometimes they are stab wounds that need sewing up and sometimes they are superficial lesions. Most of the time, the birds that do not make it home are victims of birds of prey." Thom Van Dooren expatiates matters of care, how our interdependent subjectivities implicate us to bear the burden emotionally (2014, 4); care summons us to engage in ethically responsible relations of being affected.

In Holland, fanciers face the same problem, many of them quitting the sport entirely due to these menacing birds of prey. Ruben vindicates, “the Pyramid Falcon is *really* a pigeon catcher. It’s faster than the fastest pigeon, so it’s really difficult for our pigeons to outrun them and escape their grip. Pyramid Falcons feed their nestlings one pigeon a day. And so, some fanciers lose a pigeon a day, which is quite a hefty toll, especially for amateurs. In Holland, fanciers keep their pigeons indoors, not releasing them until the end of March. And by that point, those pigeons don’t have substantive energy to race since they should have started in January or February. The same problem is quickly creeping up in Belgium. The problem is also quite big in France. It’s really a worldwide problem, spreading even to Australia!” To paraphrase Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren (2011), the difference between loved and unloved others, between being an object of conservation or of (lethal) control creates tethered relations that draw human politics into configurations, entangling multiple species in conflictual knots of care. Belgian pigeon racing brings together multiple mappings of how multispecies sites bring together either alliances or adversaries; they superimpose contradictory socialities within the same sites that reframe relations within broader political economies. These are politics that summon different multispecies assemblages in discordant directions, of “contested worldings” (Haraway 2008, 39) that can never be easily *untangled*.

By shifting our regards from an objective perspective towards a subjective one, we render non-humans agency and engage *with* them in a web of relations where those beings are conscious and intentional, sharing a socially ethical ecology. It is being engaged and entangled in such affective states that obligate our awareness of others albeit lacking in any “smooth harmonious world” (de la Bellacasa 2012, 197-199). As María Puig de la Bellacasa succinctly states, “relations of thinking and knowing require care” (198), they include both humans and pigeons in knowledge-making, *acknowledging* the other. Such intersubjective experiences remind us of Ruben’s becoming-*with*-pigeon, when he instinctually reacts to a shadow of a bird, his attention redirected upward to see if it is a bird of prey. Nearly every loft I visit, I witness pigeons tilting their heads to the side, peering upward when they notice a bird of prey lurking above. They are gestures that signal to the fancier to similarly look upward, that redirect the fancier’s attention, that point. Interspecies becomings afford unprecedented forms of communication and socialities. Gaze and movement mediate relations, they afford opportunities of attending to the other, of caring.

Home is Where You Hang Your Hat

Some fanciers routinely conduct a thorough spring-cleaning of their lofts using boiling water and bleach to disinfect, blowtorches to burn any parasites to a crisp, or hosing it down with a pressure cleaner. Not a feather out of place. Others will whitewash the interior with lime, an odorous calcium carbonate that acts as a natural repellent, safeguarding the home. Lime is easily concocted by diluting it with water so that the soluble can be painted onto surfaces; its aesthetic white was a fashionable exterior paint that protected Belgian homes for decades, many of which I spotted on my bike routes as I searched for similarly whitewashed lofts. Whitewashing is a natural technique that has since faded out of widespread use, replaced by chemical products such as fumigations and sprays. Alongside eliminating any pestilent

intruders, pigeon lofts must be properly ventilated, devoid of drafts and dampness. Some professionals go to great lengths to install electronic systems in their lofts to auto-regulate any ounce of humidity. DJ relies on more natural methods, admonishing overcleaning as unintentionally producing deleterious effects: “You must leave spiderwebs if there are any. Not only are they natural insecticides, but they also indicate that the loft is dry. Lofts can never be humid. Spiders will only spin webs in dry conditions. What is good for the spider is good for the pigeon.” These are signs that fanciers learn to look for to inform and improve their practices—they are *patterns that connect*. They are folkloric tales that spin stories, that gather multiple species in *agencements*, caught in webs that weave relations⁵³. DJ adds, “You never knock down a spider web. It *tells you* [emphasis mine] that conditions in the loft are favorable.” These material semiotics are given agency, a voice—they speak to the fancier. The hygienic state of the loft is vital, but its upkeep must not impinge upon the time the fancier’s time spent with their pigeons, observing and learning about them. Fanciers admonish perfunctory behavior, as the aphorism illustrates: *observe more, scrub less*⁵⁴.

Pigeon-fancier relations are matters of trust, of habituating, of making the other feel *at home*. Numerous manners abound for making another feel accustomed⁵⁵: behaviors, gestures, voice, tonality, postures, dressing⁵⁶. Bernard for instance unflinchingly wears darker colors when entering the loft: gray, black, or blue, but never white or bright colors. The dress code that he strictly abides by is likewise the uniform he dons on racing days. Belgian collective consciousness holds a distinctive memory of such fanciers out in the streets on Sundays, sporting their blue lab coats and worker’s caps⁵⁷. This color plays a crucial role for the pigeons not for its blueness, but for it being *reliably* blue. Daniel Aerens, on the other hand, sports a white lab coat, the material semiotics which play a performative role for this professional fancier; white lab coats enhance an objective and scientific demeanor (cf. [Goffman 1959](#)) as opposed to the emblematic blue of working-class Belgian fanciers. Clothing act as costumes that accustom; they are customs that drag the pigeon into our social world, into the realm of shared culture. I wish to keep Bernard’s original words here, “*il faut être en maître*,” for being in control is a taming of one’s own body, a *master* in command of one’s own body. While being a *master* connotes the possession of another subject, this thesis is concerned with how the pigeon is the master of the fancier’s body just as much as the fancier habituates⁵⁸ their pigeons.

⁵³ I find it relevant to include Eddy’s terminology in French, *tisser les liens*.

⁵⁴ Translation mine. Original, *observant, pas grattant*

⁵⁵ To accustom someone is familiarizing the other, acquainting the other, making one feel like family. Accustoms require exercises, training, habituations.

⁵⁶ “Dress” is a play-on-words with the French term *dresser*, meaning “to tame,” and is normally used when training animals. My stance is that animals also tame *us*, they train us to position our bodies differently, to alter our speech, to literally *dress* differently.

⁵⁷ The quintessential image of the Belgian fancier wearing a blue lab coat and a blue-collar cap, in Flemish called *een stofjas en een vlaamse klak*

⁵⁸ The French term *les habits* or *habiller* signify clothing and dressing, but they likewise mean “habits” in its most literal sense. I progressively unearth the etymological roots of “habits,” “customs,” “costumes,” and “culture,” to surface relations forms of making others *accustomed*, of building bonds, of *patterns that connect*. Moreover, *les habits* and other shared customs are what make up a social group’s *habitus*. This harks back to footnote 45, where I likewise create a play-on-words with the French term *dresser*, meaning “to tame,” and the English term “to dress.” I reiterate my point that it is the animal who tames *us*, trains *us* to position *our* body differently, to alter *our* speech, to literally *dress* differently.

Most fanciers concur that habits must be maintained unwaveringly—attire, pitch, gait, pace, position—to assure that the pigeons remain unfettered. Contrary to the habitual⁵⁹ regimes that most fanciers adhere to—their clothing, postures, body gestures, positions—Eddy indiscriminately wears *any* attire, finding that his face is a good enough recognition for his pigeons. He defies other fanciers’ unerring *ghost gestures* (Warkentin 2010, 112-3) as unsubstantiated. While most fanciers resolutely uphold remaining mute, predictable, and unnoticeable, he plays football outside the loft even on racing days, has visitors carrying on conversations, animals creating a cacophony of sounds when normally complete calm is enforced nearly out of jurisprudence. Eddy’s deviations from such inculcations remind us of Barbara Smuts’ anecdotes of her fieldwork with baboons, her animal subjects provoking her to re-emerge out from under her invisibility cloak for which she initially considered “neutral” (Despret 2013, 68). Just as Smuts’s unflinching body gestures beseeched her to respond unliterally with her baboons, Haraway asks us to consider what “bodily postures and visual entanglements might mean and might invite (2008, 22). Eddy articulates his body in manners that differ from other fanciers, building particular bonds with his pigeons; both he and his pigeons invite and inculcate each other in alternative entanglements. Interspecies communication unfurls across a variety of paralinguistic pathways of communication, for which this thesis seeks out how *dialogic structures* (Servais 2018) form amongst Belgian fanciers and racing pigeons. My postulations concerning communication are that such dialogues are never concerned solely with what is stated explicitly; rather, they spill over and address the *relationship between* two subjects. These are sites of social semiotics that refashion, that reformulate and reinforce *ways of relating*.

The body unconsciously creates sonic rhythms. Pigeons are fluent and familiar in detecting their fancier's voice, and so any change in intonation will signal alarm, breaking the patterns of habituation. Fanciers utilize a number of acoustics that communicate to their pigeons when to exit and enter the loft: whistles, school bells, the rattling aluminum cans, glass bottles, the mixing of grains, a call. Wallonian fanciers can be boisterously heard yelling "aie aie" or softly murmuring "fifi"⁴⁹, while Flemish fanciers can often be heard gently summoning their pigeons with "kom kom," as they pace back and forth gingerly in their gardens. Fanciers maintain rhythms to maintain trust, consistency, a sense of home and security. These are rhythms that orchestrate movements and rearrange relations: Sound moves bodies at a distance. Gregory Bateson calls such affective bonds the “contingencies of relationships” (367) as he sketches a detailed outline that includes “bodily movements, involuntary tensions, of voluntary muscles, changes of facial expression, hesitations, shifts in tempo of speech or movement, overtones of the voice, and irregularities of respiration” (*ibid.*). The illustrations that I draw upon from my fieldwork exhibit how such paralinguistic communication are forms of interspecies engagements that are made meaningful, that affect, that *move* the other. These co-affective forms of communication literally move the body, they *make do* (Latour 1994)⁶⁰. They re-

⁴⁹ *Fifi* is an endearing term for someone

⁶⁰ *Make do* is a reference to Bruno Latour’s *faire faire*, the affordances that agencies incite, that offer potentiality, that move matters.

articulate bodies, subjectivities re-shaped in the process. Interspecies communications are *patterns that connect*.

Some fanciers profess that out of all of your ways of instrumentalizing sonic rhythms, you must remain steadfast to *one*. Here, it is the pigeon who habituates the fancier in order to establish thicker relations. If a whistle is your choice of instrument, you must staunchly use *that* whistle as your tool, unfailingly. Any other whistle with a slightly different sound is distinguishable to the pigeon's keen ear and will break the habits you have built with your pigeons; your racers will not safely land on their *spoutnik* with full conviction and trusted faith but will shudder in trepidation. When calling your pigeons, adhere to *one single* word, as Bernard does, endearingly calling his pigeons 'fifi'. "If I don't call out *fifi*, my pigeons literally won't come home," he stresses. Ruben shared something with me that seldom any other fanciers were aware of, having noticed it himself only ten years ago: pigeons read your eyes. If you want a pigeon—either your pigeon or even a foreign pigeon—to come into the loft, you simply need to look it in the eyes and then have its gaze follow your gaze into the loft. *This is truly seeing eye-to-eye*. While Tomasello states that pointing indicates the implicit intentionality of another, that one can fathom the interior states of others (2010), I extend this author's illustration of finger-pointing to include Ruben's example of eye-pointing. Such observations testify to how interspecies communication creates a common conceptual ground, shared terrain where intersubjective experiences take place within co-constructed frameworks. Although Tomasello's hypothesis questions how language may have evolved through pointing and gestures, Ruben's example of mimetic eye gazes vivifies how interspecies socialites are *becomings* that afford unprecedented forms of communication. Gaze and movement mediate relations, they afford opportunities of attending to the other and likewise attune behaviors. Merleau-Monty would agree, that "to pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as figures" (2005, 35). Both fancier and racing pigeons are modified within the act; they *enact* behaviors and novel forms of communication. Sonic and somatic rhythms re-shape subjectivities, forming what we have witnessed as *becoming-with-pigeon*.

Despite Eddy's previous remarks about fanciers' unwavering rhythms and habits being superfluous, he does vouch that maintaining a specific call allows for clear lines of communication to be maintained. Eddy's pigeons will not leave the *spoutnik* even if left gaping open—he must first *tell them* to fly. He whistles a tune he heard as a child from an animated cartoon, which he has used ever since to release and beckon his pigeons back home. However, Eddy keeps a discerning eye as to *how* his calls change behaviors and under what conditions. For example, he no longer whistles during short distance races, for he notices that his pigeons come home so invigorated that the moment they hear the familiar toot, they pride themselves in elation, putting a feather in their cap, as we say in English. Seeing their loft and hearing Eddy's whistle signals that they have successfully ended the race; with excess energy left over from such a short distance race, the pigeons will revel in their success by taking a few more victory laps before finally calling it a day. His pigeons will thus not immediately land on the *spoutnik* if the whistle is blown, losing precious seconds in a tight competition⁶¹. Eddy's

⁶¹ DJ says *i pièdu du d' tins* in Wallonian for the precious time lost frivolously in a race.

discerning eye differentiates observations, for no longer are sonic rhythms *dialogic structures* (Servais 2018) that merely relate the pigeon to the fancier but they weave⁶² emotions such as pride, elation, and energy into sites of social semiotics that enact different behaviors.

Undoubtedly, every loft I had entered inside, a rousing commotion disturbs the pigeon's peace—a clambering of wings aflutter and a fracas rips through the loft. I am thus prevented from witnessing how fancier's describe the love, affection, and play that ensues the moment a fancier enters the loft. Fanciers revel in the affection their pigeons feed them, swirling around their legs, cooing, a loving tap with their wings, a nibble on their shoulders, the two tousling each other around. As I climb the stairs to Nico's loft, he warns me that his pigeons are familiar with him but that my presence might be disconcerting. Indeed, Nico and I open the loft door, and thirty pigeons are now scattering about mid-air, shuddering in fear. They had an intruder in their loft. They no longer *felt at home*. Nico opens the release window allowing the pigeons some fresh air to cool down after a moment's excitement, and we too descend, leaving the loft. In the garden below, we admire the birds at a distance; however, even thirty minutes after the pigeons have blown off steam, one pigeon in particular refuses to re-enter the loft with the others, struck by a terror that I might still be lurking inside. My position is made present (Abu-Lughod) in ways that extend beyond the researcher-participant relation to include my animal subjects' acknowledgment of my presence and the affects it brought to the dynamics of the situation. My positionality was most certainly brought to the fore.

One day, during the height of Covid-19 restrictions, I rent a GoPro and bike out to Aarchot; unable to conduct field research in closed corners of a cramped loft with elderly fanciers, I ask Emile Geuens, a small amateur that I had found biking the week prior if he would be willing to strap on the camera and film inside his loft for me. Emile agrees, offering me a peephole, a glance into these intimate encounters, which my presence and Covid had substantially impeded upon. The tables have once again turned, as one of my subjects has now assumed the role of a filmmaker. Emile's footage provides me with wonderful moments of him playing with his pigeons⁶³, intimate instances of a fancier building relation ties with their pigeons. Play changes the environment. Play deviates meaning. Play is devious. Despret writes that "playing can only exist on the basis of an agreement and attunement" (2016, 78). Bernard tells me how spending time in his loft with his pigeons is a form of *dépayser*, which means a change of environment, a change of scenery, a break from the usual routine. *Dépayser* likewise illicit disorientation. It disorients meaning, it transgresses and opens up spaces for *becoming* in what Despret calls *lieux-ludiques*: playgrounds that liberate the fanciers and the pigeon's *devoir-être* (2021). Play, *dépayser*, and *lieux-ludiques* liberate subjectivities from what is expected and required of them; they allow for intersubjective *becomings* that break away from routines. *Dépayser*, however, can only emerge from having a home, feeling at home, feeling at home in one's skin.

⁶² I find it relevant to include Eddy's terminology in French, *tisser les liens*, meaning "to weave relations."

⁶³ Fanciers will often say that they play with pigeons, meaning that they race them. *Spelen met duiven* in Dutch and *jouer avec des pigeon* in French. These instances of play are more devious; they shift meaning and relations. Play's deviations function like word plays, also known as *double entendres*. It defamiliarizes meaning, releasing it to allow for new forms of *becomings*.

Hadrien recounts when one of his best pigeons never returned home after a race: “See this pigeon here who is receiving several prizes tonight. Well actually, he got lost in July 2019. He finally came back one day in March the following year, with its feathers all ruffled and ravaged, burnt by the sun—a filthy mess, really. Two years later, this pigeon is winning all the prizes. I think it’s the fact of having already been lost once. He doesn’t want to repeat *that* again. I think it’s from having strayed from home for two years that he is more motivated to come back even faster. Pigeons know how pampered they are at home, and they feel the special attention given to them. They feel when they are the favorites. This pigeon may be a more extreme case, but I find this the same with all my lost pigeons, even those that disappeared for only a week or two. When I go into the loft to pay this pigeon a visit, we play-wrestle.” Thierry concurs, “this type of rough play is a form of incentive. The pigeon nibbles on your ear or your shoulder. You take its beak and toss it around a bit. You push it away and it comes charging back. A little tap on its tail. Generally speaking, those turn out to be the good racing pigeons. It shows strength in character. It is showing off its presence, that it is the boss. That’s how the best male pigeons will often behave. As for my top female pigeons, they are attracted to me, they spin around and coo, parading around with mating calls when I enter the loft. The females are running the show.” These incentives are mediating forces that create relations, that *incite*, Despret tells me (2022). They put matters into action, encourage, *make do* (Latour 1994)⁶⁴—they articulate bodies and restructure relationalities. Incentives are cultivated bilaterally in what Despret would say, “expand[s] the circle of those to whom they attribute intentionality, including humans, within this game of sociality” (2016, 128). As my two mentors Vinciane Despret and Véronique Servais concur, incentives should be considered “*in situ*, connected by specific motivation modalities towards their fellow-creatures” (Servais 2014).

Whereas a Behaviorist Approach would witness such techniques as conditionings reinforced by stimuli, I depart from B.F. Skinner’s (1976) widespread assumptions. My thesis ruptures these monolithic perspectives that promulgated notions of automated responses. Rather, my research witnesses how Belgian fanciers refine rhythms and distribute rewards in order to form personal relations with their pigeons: incentives tie *relational bonds*. Fanciers are diligently attentive to what motivates each pigeon, detecting the slightest variation in their mannerisms, “quirks,” habits, emotions, gestures. Each pigeon has its own individual incentives that *drive* the pigeon home: an egg, its partner, a perch, a water trough, a pigeonhole, a nest, a window, the fancier. Fanciers possess a remarkable eye that can detect the most minute details, as Vicky scrutinizes every inch of his loft, noticing the smallest of slits: “you need to notice what is incentivizing or upsetting the pigeon. Perhaps there is a small crack in the wood in the pigeon’s personal pigeonhole and they see another male there, becoming jealous of its neighbor. You need to notice the pigeon’s behavior and then see what is happening elsewhere, perhaps in the loft.” Bernard’s top winner, Papy Jack grew fond of the pigeon hole next to his; rather than allowing Papy Jack to over-dominate the loft by taking multiple pigeonholes, Bernard played with this incentive, seeing how it interested Papy Jack, who had formed an attachment with it. Prior to being basketed, Bernard would open up this second pigeonhole, allowing Papy Jack to fly

⁶⁴ *Make do* is a reference to Bruno Latour’s *faire faire*, the affordances that agencies incite, that offer potentiality, that move matters.

around as king, incentivizing him to come home to retrieve his reward. I refuse to call rewards mere conditionings, commands of the master dominating over an animal; rather, incentives are positive reinforcements that tether interspecies in relations of trust. Co-constructing bonds include training, touch, emotional care, and labor derived executed by *both parties*. These co-effective forces are connections that reinforce inter-species relations while simultaneously shedding light on the undertones of animal behavior, elements that are overlooked within classical Behaviorist models that depict animals in broad, monochromatic strokes.

Vicky and José illustrate how some fanciers place a mirror in the pigeonhole before being basketed, its reflection appearing to be an intruder. The pigeon will attack its own image, a pent-up fury that percolates while the pigeon is bottled-up inside the basket. Its outrage explodes the moment the baskets burst open as the protective pigeon races back with exhilarating speed to evict its trespasser. However, Vicky highlights that “in the beginning it works, for the pigeon doesn't know what a mirror is. But the trick won't last for long. Pigeons are excellent observers and will soon learn that the mirror is reflecting its own image.” DJ validates that “every pigeon has a different incentive⁶⁵ and so you need to pay attention to each individual one. You need to mix up the incentives for each pigeon throughout the racing season, for they learn fast. Something motivating will soon become *unmotivating*. They will come back of course, but not as fast. It's a matter of varying.” Pigeons quickly catch on if you persistently try to dupe them with the same technique; if you consistently tease your pigeons by offering and then taking that incentive away, your tricks will quickly run dry. Pigeons force fanciers to empty out their toolboxes and start afresh, to reassess their techniques, their epistemological tools that they put into practice, that *enact* realities.

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Rules the World

Fanciers are amateur researchers—they set up frameworks, investigate, hypothesize, inquire, probe, create conditions, draft theories, and experiment with trial and error. They come together to share experiences, accept or discard practices, and scrutinize published literature in order to make better judgments that better inform better practices. Every fancier concocts their own hybrids, their own secret recipes. Fanciers know by doing and by observing⁶⁶; they deftly exercise their skills by literally and figuratively *trying their hand* at different methods. Fanciers approach their practices from diverse angles, they turn them on their axes to engage with other facets. Fanciers *mind* each other—they listen, communicate and exchange perspectives, which are thereafter weighed, verified, tested, and contested. Knowledge is distributed and traded. Marius emphasizes how “we fanciers are really privileged to have contact with other fanciers all the time. We are really in contact with the entire world thanks to our pigeons.” Pigeon racing makes fanciers wordly—it brings together people, pigeons, and knowledge; the sport relies entirely on hybrid approaches, *pidgins*.

⁶⁵ If your pigeon wins, another fancier will say, *ta fê sacvè às colon* in Wallon, meaning you incentivized them and other fanciers are curious to know your techniques.

⁶⁶ The French expression, *se faire la main et l'oeil*, conjures knowing by doing better than in English. *Se faire la main et l'oeil* engages the hand and the eye in bodily forms of knowing, somatic forms attention.

Mike's journalistic practice writing for *De Duif* covers endless facets of practices and perspectives in ways that strike the same chord as my own ethnography. When Mike first stepped into this spectacular world of pigeon racing, he was as perplexed as I was: "When I first met Rik's sister, who is now my wife, she took me to a pigeon auction. I expected to see a bunch of old Belgian guys. I walked in and was like, *what is this* ?! Chinese, Japanese, Americans, Germans, English, Portuguese. You name it. Farmers, surgeons, Lawyers. In the pigeon world, you find everything! The first thing I noticed when I started interviewing fanciers was how wide and diverse the sport is. I cover stories from all types of fanciers, both professionals and amateurs alike." Covering an array of stories about fanciers from all over Belgium, Mike accumulates a ceaseless compendium of perspectives: "Every fancier has something particular, unique to their practice that no other fancier does. One will say you don't have to drive your pigeons out to train them, or you have to do this or you don't have to do that. And the next week we drive out to interview another National winner, and that fancier will tell you the exact opposite. And they are all right. They are all National winners." These multiple perspectives are inexhaustible and shirk any minimalization of the sport down to a *single* methodology; otherwise, the sport would simply belong to the professionals who have the money and means to buy out the amateurs. Marius, who is an amateur fancier, accentuates that "the sport would no longer interest me if I owned the best pigeons, if I could beat every other fancier. I want that others have good pigeons as well. I want to not only play against other fanciers but *with* them."

Belgian pigeon racing disseminates knowledge, it creates connections between other fanciers who seek to test out another's practices, especially those that have shined a bit of glory. Sometimes, fanciers are led astray by conjuring tricks and deceptions. DJ tells me how in the 1990s when he was triumphantly vanquishing the sport—race after race—how other fanciers would flock to his home, sleuthing for clues that they could glean for their own success⁶⁷. "I completely fooled them. For instance, I would cut up a leek and put it in the pigeon's drinking trough. They would marvel at this thought. When they went home, I would take out the leek, laughing." While some information *leaks*, at other times it misleads, and at other times it is securely locked behind the vaults. A few times, fanciers have shut their medicine cabinet doors, not wanting my camera's eye spilling their secrets to the public. Although fanciers will take their best kept-secrets to the grave with them, their knowledge produces social sites of exchange. They are always inquisitive, yearning to improve their own practices by trying others' methods out with their own hands, and just as eager to share their knowledge with other friends.

During my first forays conducting Participant Observation at Nico's loft, he had just dismantled his CB (Citizens Band) antenna that week, the aluminum pole stretching across his garden while the parabolic satellite dish remained hanging from the exterior of his pigeon loft. CB radios are communication devices typically used by police officers, truck drivers, hunters, and a frequent mode of communication amongst fanciers who installed these devices in the early 2000s. I notice a working CB radio transmitter when I first visit Henri's loft (See figure 25), who picks up the line, connecting with another fancier in France. Henri says how he even overhears

⁶⁷ DJ tells me in Wallonian "ta fé saqwè às colon," meaning you must have motivated your pigeon with something. Other fanciers are then curious to find out what that motivation might have been so they can try the ropes out themselves.

Italian and Polish tying up the lines, using CB radios as group chats that connect international communities. CB radios bring these non-fanciers together to communicate socially along expansive bandwidths that would normally divide them geographically; these radio waves conjoin communities by chance and transnationally. As Henri highlights how CB radios "allow for a larger pool of communication rather than simply fancier exchanging information with another." These lines of communication stir matters, creating "international winds [...] that proliferate, that move, re-model, re-articulate, that reshape human relations to the environment" (Michael Hathaway as cited in [Tsing 2006](#)). Fanciers become familiarized with certain cities throughout Belgium and France, memorizing the distances of other fanciers' lofts to calculate the time, distance, wind direction, and speed. Henri makes such estimations within a heartbeat, knowing when his pigeons would be arriving in his own loft. For Henri, Olivier Pousart's loft in northern France is a landmark, a name that he has become familiar with over the years. The moment Henri hears Olivier Pousart's name on the CB radio, he knows precisely when his own pigeons will arrive in his loft in Oupeye.



Figure 25, Henri turns on his CB radio transmitter in his loft, putting him in connection with a fancier in France

After thousands of years of relations that humans have maintained with pigeons, fascinated by their orientation and homing abilities, there has yet to be found the exact explanation for *how* they orient. Eddy compares the pigeon's brain to a cockpit of a plane, its interior tools already built-it, pre-programmed, simply waiting to be switched on. A few leading theories persist to this day, all of which have undergone objective research that seeks to pinpoint a singular cause: a magnetic piece in the pigeon's beak, their sense of smell, their vision, sense of air pressure, a magnetic compass, a solar compass, and infrasound that allow them to pick up low-frequency resonances that detect atmospheric conditions. While elephants can hear as low as 2 hertz whereas humans can only hear as low as 20 hertz, pigeons are even more receptive, hearing as low as .2 hertz. Pigeons are able to hear ocean waves and the winds that blow between chains of mountains, which they utilize to construct their own geographical maps. Climate Change and Pollution are disconcerting factors for some fanciers who consider the influence of air pollution not only for its toxicity caused to the pigeon's lungs but also because it causes "traffic

jams in the ocean,” Eddy says, “disturbing sound waves⁶⁸. This disturbs the pigeon's auditory sensibility, for they are receptive to low frequencies of the ocean kilometers away; this creates deviations⁶⁹ in navigations.”

During the 2019 Barcelona International race, Belgian pigeons disconcertingly deviated from their normal flight paths, veering westward through Germany before circumnavigating back to Belgium. Ruben finds this anomaly inexplicable, for not only did they stray from their lines of flight, but they were traveling *against* the wind, head-on that day. Ruben unfathomably evinces, “that didn't make *any* sense!” Not being present during the race is a suspension of knowledge for which fanciers gather available knowledge, postulating possibilities. Speculations⁷⁰ generate a wealth of conversations whereby fanciers produce varying versions, a multitude of hybrid indeterminacies. As Geertz reminds us, “cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape” (1973, 20). I proclaim that Belgian pigeon racing is “more than a game” (cf. Geertz 1972), where meaning undergoes continual re-mappings; these are unfinished terrains, processes, continual co-evolutions. Belgian Pigeon Racing is a multi-valent social arena that gathers human and non-human actants to converse and exchange versions, attempting to make better guesses that inform better practices. It is precisely the plurality of methods that perks a fancier's interest, that keeps the folksport alive and proliferating. In the Liège region, a fancier is colloquially called a *colèbrève*, carrying with it multiple meanings: the entire colony of pigeons living together in a colony; the hobby of pigeon racing; a group that comes together to chat away, gossiping (Lempereur 1999, 66).

Eddy admits that fanciers have trouble admitting that they simply do not know what transpired and so conduct detective work, gathering every shred of evidence they can find. Other fanciers, such as Ruben, are content with not knowing and do not seek to find the missing pieces of unexplainable events that ensued. The pigeon's internal compass remains a mystery; insofar as their orientation tools remain, fanciers will continually look for evidence, experimenting, conducting trials, exchanging information, connecting new chains of cause and effect. The mysteries of what ensues when a race goes wrong or when pigeons do not return home, drives conversations, it sparks questions, cultivates curiosity, entices indeterminacies, and propels fanciers to comprehend events better. *Not knowing* is conducive to reconstructing ontological conduits; it opens up passageways and new conduits for understanding other ways of reading the world. Suspending ontological stability aligns with what Marisol de la Cadena calls *the Anthro-po-not-seen* (2021). I extend such phenomenological experiences of inter-species exchanges

⁶⁸ Eddy uses the term *devier le son* means to stray off course, to wander, to drift. Here he is talking about sound straying. It is interesting to note how sound going astray correlates with pigeons going astray, for the two are coordinate *together*, sound and pigeons travel *together*, or in this case, both led astray together.

⁶⁹ Eddy uses the term *deboussoler* to describe such disorientations. *Boussole* is a compass, for which the pigeons are naturally endowed; *deboussoler* is a way of undoing the compass, of making it spin in another direction, pointing attention elsewhere.

⁷⁰ Let us not forget that *to speculate* is seeing, observing from a *specific* vantage point. Inter-species relationalities are of chief concern for witnessing how rearrangements in vantage points offer new epistemologies and novel forms of becoming-with.

as forms of *not-knowing*. Interspecies becomings allow us to *defamiliarize* our understandings of the world, rebuilding our onto-epistemological tools within relations we build with our animal co-conspirators. Rather than claiming that the animal's biosemiotics—its *umwelt* (von Uexküll 2010)—is impenetrable, unfathomable, experienceable, becoming-with-pigeon straddle these boundaries rather than partitioning them with schisms. Orienting the world occurs interactively amongst fanciers and pigeons; they re-orient themselves *together*.

As DJ exalts, “there is no exact science to the sport. The pleasure of practicing both pigeon fancying is that it allows us to conduct experiments, to make trials, and to see what the outcomes might bring.” Fancying is not only playing with pigeons, it is playing with evidence, making trials, putting to the test, examining. Trial not only stems from *trying* but from French, *trier*, meaning “to sort out.” Trials are means of gathering and sorting out evidence, weeding out what is fitting, making new assemblages, and bringing in new observations. Finding evidence relies on making observations and putting them to the test. As DJ also remarks, “you cannot try out every method and so you stick with the one that suits you the most.” Patrick adds, “the sport is already complicated. You can complicate it further by adding even more parameters. But as in everything else in life, the easiest way to succeed is to make it easier. The people who complicate things look at the wrong parameters and whip up a plausible theory, but in the end, it doesn't work in practice. You should look at what is essential in the sport.” Many fanciers simply believe that “the best test is the basket,” as Henri professes, meaning that you only know after basketing and racing the pigeons—the best pigeons are those that win prizes.

Henri discredits and scoffs at other methods, incredulously deriding them as delusional: “even all the literature that proclaims to be scientific,” he scornfully stresses, “these theories and methods are merely to sell books and fill the pages, milking it for all its worth under the pretense of being objective.” Patrick's metrics for measuring quality in pigeons are idiosyncratic—he describes what could be called a Throat Theory: “smaller pigeons, like hens [female pigeons], have smaller breathing trachea, and so they fly better longer distances and in hotter weather. I have one pigeon named Ben after Ben Johnson [Canadian Olympic Sprinter]. What a fast pigeon that was! This pigeon had a wider throat and so it raced better in short distances. You can ask other fanciers about this. No one will tell you it.” It is rumored that some fanciers used to administer laxatives to their pigeons, to make them lighter on racing days, similar to how horse jockeys are also known to apply various techniques to manage their weight: males should weigh between 420-530 grams and females 380-480 grams (cf. Nouri-Mangold 2019). Although such regimes of weight management are not practiced by most fanciers, some professionals—who wished to remain anonymous—do indeed weigh their pigeons before deciding which ones to race. Patrick continues to explain that larger throats are not only propitious for short distances but excel in colder temperatures. His experience is informed by what he observed abroad in Taiwan, where tepid climates generate different races, different practices. He continues to illustrate how alternative climates and geographies produce different pigeons: “My friend imports racing pigeons from Mexico where racing pigeons fly at a high altitude. And they are smaller pigeons. What can we do with these Mexican pigeons here in Belgium? Nothing.” Here, the fancier's assemblage concerns not only size and weight but draws

together altitude, distance, geographical terrains, temperature, and respiratory tracts into hybrids, *pidgins*.

Jorji Ferrari leads Pipa's DNA research division, *Pigene*. When I inquire about different epistemological tools that fanciers use to determine what might be a winner, he proclaims, "every fancier has to choose what he thinks of all the theories: the wing theory, eye theory, muscles theory. I, and a lot of other fanciers, think the most prominent aspect is how a pigeon performs. When they perform well, the wing, the eye, the muscles no longer matter. That's also the beauty of the pigeon sport—no one knows what's inside the head of a pigeon, or how they are capable of finding the shortest way back home." I claim that the *Pigene* DNA laboratory produces 'facts' just as much as Wing Theory, Eye Reading Theory, Bone Theory, Throat Theory, and other theories that abound. I profess that a pigeon's results cannot be objectified as its genetic abilities; as Vinciane Despret reminds us, the same species of rats—those bred from the same lineage—will produce different results in different laboratories (2021). Rather, it is the relationship between animals and caretakers that *produce* different animals. The fancier's epistemological tools and frameworks *enact* realities: they select and sieve, they transform relations of care, they handle pigeons differently sometimes with special treatment, they regard and observe from specific angles, they form different types of bonds, they breed with specific methodologies, they train with specific techniques and incentives, etc. Interspecies ethnographies reveal how relations produce coordinations between materials, animals, and humans that *enact* realities.

A Bird's-Eye View

We are not in the world, we become with the world. We become in contemplating it.

~ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

September 11, 2021 marks the season finale where I am sitting with Filip Herbots discussing matters while the rest of his family—all of whom are involved in pigeon racing—and Geoffrey his pigeon caretaker, are out celebrating Filip's grandson's bachelor party. Filip and I are caught unaware as a pigeon comes landing on the *spoutnik* hours before any pigeons were expected to return from Chateauroux. Geoffrey comes racing to the loft, laptop opened to compare the results with the other racers. Coincidentally, the pigeon is named Free Maarten⁷¹ after Filip's grandson, who is celebrating his bachelor's party that very Saturday, places first, becoming a 1st National Ace pigeon. The thrill of winning a race feverously ran through my body as I witnessed Free Maarten soaring into the loft and clocking well ahead of any other pigeon. This was truly a moment of *countertransference* where my subjects' emphatic experiences were *in tandem*, *in tune with* each other. I had felt as if *my* pigeon had won first place. Filip's children—Jo, Raf, and Mitte—successively start showing up at the loft. Work is to be done, amid celebrations of various kinds.

⁷¹ Free Maarten is later nicknamed The Bachelor. Maarten Herbots, who was celebrating his *vrijgezellenfeest* is unintentionally reflective of the 1st National Ace pigeon, Free Maarten.

Kinship charts are verified, printed, and sent across the world as live video calls to Chinese buyers (See figure 26) attempt to solicit sales to swipe up Free Maarten. Davy Triest, a photographer for The European Pigeon Website (EPW), is setting up a miniature lighting studio to photograph Free Maarten and capture a close-up of his eye (See figures 27 & 28). Filip announces, however, that Free Maarten will not be sold; however, he will be retiring from racing, finding a new career as a breeder. Nonetheless, Davy Triest continues photographing the pigeon eye, which will prove essential for any offspring the Free Maarten produces. I am filming Davy photographing Free Maarten's eye, a vertiginous *mise en abyme* of gazes. There is a pervasive and periscopic presence to pigeon eyes, magnified images printed all over leaflets, auction books, kinship charts posters. There is not a single image of a pigeon that does not include a close-up of its eye (See figures 29 & 30). While Chinese and Taiwanese fanciers rely heavily on reading the pigeon's eyes to determine racing capabilities, health, and dispositions, this folkloric tradition is fading amongst Belgium fanciers. My fieldwork showed that roughly half of my participants found absolutely no "factual" weight to eye readings, pushing this practice into the realm of "myths." The other half held on to the tradition.



Figure 26 (top), Jo, Geoffrey, Filip, Mitte, Raf, Geoffrey's daughter pose with Free Maarten on a live video call with potential Chinese buyers.

Figures 27 & 28 (bottom), Davy Triest photographs Free Maarten for The European Pigeon Website (EPW).

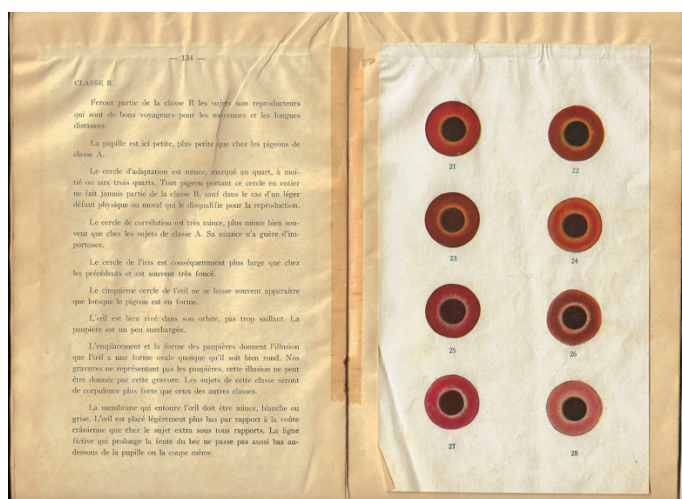


Figure 29, Rare manuscript dating from WWI of The Eye Theory with oil paintings of pigeon eyes.



Figure 30, Close up of a pigeon eye

As DJ, José, and I return to Herve after our Sunday excursion to the folkloric Lier pigeon market where DJ acquired three new pigeons, the two open up the baskets to have a closer look at his new acquired additions to the loft. DJ turns around, unearthly, as blue lights are beaming out of his eyes. He is bespectacled with specially tailored magnifying glasses that gleam. His vision is magnified as he peers into his pigeon's eyes: "Looking into a pigeon's eyes tells you a great deal about it. It has to be rich. The eye needs to pull you in. They must have character, life. They must be mountainous, rich with ridges. It must have a soul⁷². The eye must look back at you. Bland is bad." These readings refer to what is known as The Correlation Circle⁷³, one of the five rings that mark a pigeon's eye. I have my Pipa Collection Edition Catalogue on hand as I had intended to discuss such matters in the car with DJ—what flawless timing to peer through a range of eye-close-ups. DJ exclaims, "those are *all* top pigeons and you can see how many different eyes there are. Quality goes in all directions, you see. DNA research on the pigeon's innate faculties and aptitudes may have started shifting current beliefs and practices, yet fanciers continue to uphold their own versions. Fanciers resist dogmatic and incontrovertible claims that reduce pigeons to any singularity; they continue witnessing with their own eyes and making their own empirical truths. Belgian fanciers reveal how their various relationalities multiply the eyes of the beholder: herein lie *multiple* poets and *multiple* primroses.

Ruben, our veterinarian, is likewise half of the *Pigene* research laboratory. Although he expresses that "not everything genetically can be found in the eye," Ruben tactfully points out how it may indeed elicit hereditary characteristics, intrinsically linked with chromosomal traits. The Correlation Circle, he postulates, might exhibit chromosomes characterizing homing abilities amongst other racing characteristics. For Ruben, reading the eyes are *rough readings*—they are sketches of indications, whereas his quantitative accuracy will paint a more detailed description.

⁷² In the last nineteenth century, Georges F. Twombly writes that the human eye was considered the "mirror of the soul," and should be considered as such for the pigeon's eye. It is the "seal of authenticity of the race. It is the image in which is found written the genealogy of a subject, and it is principally the eye that will give information as to the origins" (2013, 55).

⁷³ The French term *cercle revelateur* connotes new knowledge, *revealings*, and findings, as would an explorer or experimental scientist; in Dutch, *verkenningcirkel* likewise bespeaks exploration.

Ruben recounts how he found an online posting of a fancier who uploaded pictures of a certain pigeon's eye, lauding it as a remarkable eye that would perform well in hot weather and long-distance races. Low and behold, this turned out to be Ruben's pigeon, who jarringly remarks, "that was my pigeon! And they were spot on! Perhaps when we do more genetic research, we will find the genes. We are currently looking for such chromosomes that would express the ability to fly in hot temperatures, amongst others. We have already discovered the LDHA gene, which produces lactate for strong pigeon muscles, as well as another gene that indicates a willingness to *home*. Other genes are out there waiting to be found." Ruben is on the lookout to uncover pigeon characteristics within gene sequences, whereas some Belgian fanciers and the majority of Chinese and Taiwanese fanciers don't need to look any further—it is staring at them right in front of their eyes! It is only when genes can be *seen* that they gain their validity; otherwise it is considered a mere conviction under the scope of Enlightenment. Until it's written in the scientific literature⁷⁴, it isn't "real" for most Belgian fanciers. Scientific literature is key for this community to make "facts" visible, while other fanciers can simply see it with their naked eye. While DNA research may seem to replace folkloric eye readings, my research sheds light on how new assemblages create hybrid forms of knowledge where the pigeon's eye and genes communicate through creolizations. These are *pidgin* epistemologies.

Rather than isolating genes as facts, genes are agents in reconfiguring hybrid relations between other subjects and the ways in which we relate to them. They are fluid and relational. By attaching a fixation on genes as "natural," we eclipse the full spectrum of how our relations with these pigeons invite them into our social world. Genes are framed as irrefutable "facts", incontestable, immutable, so that "the result of the construction of a fact is that it appears unconstructed by anyone" (Latour, Salk and Woolgar 1986, 240). By infinitesimalizing qualities down to their submicroscopic level, the "molecularization" (Rose 2007, 44) of DNA sequences attenuates, shrinks the types of relations we build with these birds, and redirects our regards towards them. Racing pigeons are subjects that perform and whose performance is evaluated and *enacted* through various techniques; these observations unfurl across multiple scales: the microscopic eye, the naked eye, the subatomic, and phenomenologically. Each method offers different relations and insights that in turn affect the handling, care, attention, breeding methods, training, feeding, rewarding, etc. I gather these stories to *converse*, to exchange versions. My conclusions prove that the undercurrents of Belgian pigeon racing entail the incessant yearning to learn from observations, experiences, and experimentations. The art of observation has not been rescinded in the wake of genetic research—it has merely assembled "facts" differently, creating novel hybrids.

⁷⁴ This reminds me of Haraway's retelling of the C. A. Sharp's struggle to convince the Australian Collie community of a genetic disorder caused by inbreeding purebreds (2008, 107-115). Veterinarians and ophthalmologists refuted autosomal recessive genes until Sharp created her own advocacy group that raised funds and awareness for genetic research. It was only after Sharp hired a "professional" to publish the results that it then became a fact. I say "professional" here because lay knowledges the such "amateurs" correlated abnormalities with Australian collie's eye, were simply a different type of diagnosis. Dog owners were denied their perspectives by the scientific community until they could *see* it as a "fact" within the dog's genes. In fact, once this information was printed in scientific literature, the straightforward, "naked" diagnosis of reading Australian Collies' eyes became the widespread method for detecting these "deficiencies" (115).

Conclusion

This multivocal ethnography has articulated differences within shared and overlapping social strata. *Pidgin* allows for a plurality of heterogenous praxes—it decenters homogenized coagulations of knowledge. Rather *pidgin* is a creolization that fosters an exchange whilst preserving the integrity of each individual’s identity, position, and particular perspective. This ethnography has steered away from any objective or reductive depiction of Belgian fanciers. These are profuse perspectives culled from all corners of Belgium, amassing narratives that are highly localized and firmly situated—they portray particularities, not universalities. If I were to point this lens elsewhere, I would find different interpretations, different practices, different beliefs, different *enactments*. This ethnography has proven to be theoretically challenging and complex and yet highly grounded in empiricism. This situated ethnography has allowed us to examine how animal and human livelihoods generate novel assemblages and new ecologies of care. Rather than removing non-human entities from the relational fabric that composes human sociality, these actants form allegiances that are re-stitched back into this fabric as cultural co-conspirators. The plurality of reconfigurations produces a heterogenous world within Belgian pigeon racing, whereby alternative realities and multiple versions come together to converse, to exchange, to confer⁷⁵. *Pidgin* reveals how differing epistemologies produce multiple ways of knowing and living in the world, simultaneously opening up Anthropological inquiries: conceptualizations of life, nature, sexuality, family, gifting, conservation, health and sickness, and welfare are espoused by fanciers and embodied in beings and materiality. The breadth of this thesis has proffered breathing room for eclipsed stories, underrepresented voices, and the underdogs of ethnographic representation to speak.

Just as my field research took place in a plurality of sites, my methodology likewise multiple. My ethnography adopted a Reflexive Approach that redirects our attention to how my very presence altered the way my participants engaged with me, for we too were knotted in relations of third-subjectivity formations. I have revealed how different interactions and relations transform Anthropological methodologies, inviting me as a researcher to engage differently and ask questions *otherwise*. As Geurts contends, “although Anthropology claims Participant Observation as its major methodological tool, the “participation” side of the equation is often suspect” (499). By participating among my human and non-human subjects, we collaborated in learning to witness each other’s worlds, redefining and refining our perspectives and modes of attention. Not only do I unearth intersubjective becomings amongst fanciers and their pigeons, but I am likewise enmeshed in these relations, entanglements that unintentionally ask me to re-conduct myself and my methodologies. And so, my ethnography has been two-fold in that it investigates how my own epistemologies are shaped by the very subjects that I seek to witness in how I was made to *articulate* differently: my body, my sensorial modes of attention, my methodologies, and my writing.

⁷⁵ *Confer* connotes and shares its etymological roots with *conferences*. These are social milieux where discussions take place, where perspectives are exchanged, where versions are shared allowing for heterogenous becomings.

The multi-sitedness of my Anthropological field research has allowed for the unfolding of fragmented, conflicting truths, for a polyphony of voices. Belgian pigeon racing is a heterogenous practice that affords diverse subjectivities, that allots concurrent and contestable ways of practicing, observing, and articulating without any dominant authoritative inculcation. This ethnography engages precisely with the exchange of stories; it metonymically reflects the practice of fanciers whose epistemologies and observations rely on contamination. *Pidgin* avoids clear-cut categorizations; it blurs concise divisions. *Pidgin* is *connective*, not *dissociative*. *Pidgin* is a plurivocality that draws together variegated relations and *agencements* to create polysemic rapports. Interspecies encounters allow for hybrids to redistribute relations relentlessly. The indeterminate becomings proffered by interspecies relations redirect our attention to “the here and now of encounter, in all its contingencies and surprises” (Tsing 46), to encounter’s open-ended unfoldings. My ethnography shuttles between variegated versions of epistem-ontological frameworks that are opportunistic, heterogenous, additive. Every interview, discussion, and observation shed new light on practices, beliefs, ideologies, judgments, and perspectives; every fancier lent a different perspective, a facet to an interminable ethnography. There is no ultimate finish line. An ethnography can never cover all aspects; rather ethnographies are *evocations*.

Interspecies Ethnography is valuable in that it reorients our attention as to how shared spaces within humans and non-humans are co-affective. Fanciers reorient their way of being in the world, their epistemologies are redirected and their methodologies and tools are retransformed. Fancier's knowledges are co-animated, contaminated through its becoming-*with*-pigeon. By investigating intersubjective experiences, we witness how cognitive contaminations unfold across species, ascribing and distributing agency not simply amongst humans and animals, but the inorganic as well. Fanciers re-negotiate understandings and knowledges alongside, *with* their animal counterparts, by recreating correspondences. These narratives recount how human-animal relations impinge upon the lives of the other, nourishing the insatiable desires to enhance their understandings of the world; there is a quenchless thirst for knowledge to feeds into both the fancier and pigeon’s ways of navigating their experiences and expertise. These are truly Trans-Species knowledges that travel, that move, that *make do*.

Fanciers consider their racing pigeons as subjects that inform them through embodied and interrelational experiences that respectively transform their knowledges, ways of being and articulating in the world. Embodiment within this thesis considered phenomenological and semiotic readings of other bodies, of witnessing how *withness* amongst fanciers and their pigeons enable novel articulations that are rendered culturally significant. I can conclude that the various ways of practicing pigeon racing in Belgium create a wealth of correlations, aggregations, and constellations that connect and converse. Praxis within this folksport of Belgian pigeon racing is *plural*. As a final note, I quote Donna Haraway in that “the point is not to celebrate complexity but to become worldly and to respond” (2008, 41). The question never comes to a full stop, for human-animal relations are perpetually flourishing, indeterminable encounters offering new forms of engagement, in what Isabelle Stengers touts as cosmopolitical becomings (2005), spaces that offer the possibilities for new articulations, of novel *patterns that connect*.

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