Articles

Homing in on Etymology in the Writing Classroom

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This essay illuminates adaptable and multimodal ways of teaching with etymology and idiomatic origin stories in the composition classroom. I model my pedagogical approach with a topic central to my rhetorical research—pigeons in histories of human communication—and the rich etymologically-linked concepts of homing in, pigeonholing, and dovetailing. While orienting my exploration around this model, I invite instructors to travel with these ideas, to migrate and adapt these approaches to the thematic and topical foci in their own teaching and research.

"The word *ecology* is derived from the Greek *oikos*, the word for home."

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (85)

The Chinese character for mouth is 口. Sometimes I look at it and see a tiny pigeonhole, sometimes the throat of a baby bird gaping to be fed. It is pronounced *kou* in Mandarin, my first spoken language, my family's home language, and a language I have all but lost in terms of visual literacy but can still understand by sound alone. My mother's father, who I have no living memory of having spoken to, raised pigeons in Taiwan (albeit not in holes). They were free to roam and return home, and they did (or so I've been told). The simplicity of 口 is one I retain amid the gaps—an opening into my origins, into the roots of my relationship with language. The architecture of Chinese characters, built on form, semantics, and phonetics, means words involving mouths often have a 口. In Chinese history, there is a tradition of pigeon whistling, *geling* 鸽铃 or *geshao* 鸽哨, full of 口s. This is where I want to begin: with an opening like a pigeonhole, an embodied opening to language, to a literacy narrative—the messy sort we might invite our students to free-write around a word.

In *Bestiary* (2020), fellow Taiwanese American writer K-Ming Chang incorporates the 口 character in macaronic, poetic form in her multispecies-rich fiction. Mysterious holes "mouthed words that hadn't yet given birth to their meanings" in the narrator's yard, and one such opening "was squared off and looked more like a window, like a word for mouth: 口" (60-51). The mysteri-

ous holes in her novel are fierce, agentic, and multigenerational: they gag and spit up letters, swallow birds, leave bones. They feel important to mention, to excavate, in my own meditation on the lives of words and birds alike.

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Much of the work of composition and rhetoric, of writing studies broadly writ, is built on words. In my experiences as both a student and professor, the first day of any composition class often opens with some definitional aspect, often a dissection of a specific concept in a course title or description. Students may be asked to articulate, say, how "rhetoric" is defined or what "composition" means. As an administrator, I regularly attend writing objectives assessment meetings which open with conversations on how to define a term and its lineage of use before delving into how to assess it in the present day. Sometimes, we call on the roots and stories of etymology to reflect on our current understanding of terms and practices.

It is a common move in humanistic writing—so common some may call it cliché—to invoke and integrate the etymology of any central term in an article, and introduce or hinge some aspect of an argument on its etymology. Yet even if etymology is a commonplace, it's a grounding and satisfying one—coming to know the histories and definitions of a word can help us trace our theoretical and semantic roots and find our place in the world. For instance, in a definitional discussion of "rhetorical situation," Jenny Edbauer (Rice) tracks "the Latin roots of 'situation'…to the key words *situare* and *situs*," which share definitions linked to "location, site, and place…," to locate "a connection between certain models of rhetorical situation and a sense of place" (9). Indeed, there are internal and external dimensions of a word, further complicated by context, function, form, and more. Words have histories and stories—etymologies and/or folk etymologies—uses and misuses. Words are further complicated by intentions, inventions, and interpretations.

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In her formative animal studies text, *When Species Meet,* Donna Haraway begins by "Gorging on etymologies" related to companion species to taste "keywords for their flavors" (17). She considers the origin of *companion* (*cum panis,* "with bread") and *species* ("to look" and "to behold") as a way to lead readers in a "dance linking kin and kind," to "make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind" (17-19). Part of this mess, I am inclined to consider, is how humans often cannot resist breaking bread with non-human animals, in a gesture of symbolic care and to show kindness to kin, when bread is so nutritionally empty, even toxic, to so many non-human species. While I could go on at length about my fascination with Haraway's ways with

words, her provocations and the productive messes she has sown through her theories, I will save this for another project—and return here to the points of etymological kinship.

Etymology is a companion to writers, a way to attend to micro and macro narratives, to senses and sensation(s). The noun "etymology" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the facts relating to the origin of a particular word or the historical development of its form and meaning." If I were a linguist or philologer, I might discuss in more depth how "etymology" is a multi-rooted term drawing from French and Latin. As a messy rhetorician, I'm ultimately less interested in dissecting the "facts" of formal roots than in the generative constellation of possibilities that may arise in illuminating word origin stories more holistically in our teaching. In classrooms, I use etymology loosely as a keyword to signify any number of endeavors linked to a fluidly narrative approach to discovering the origin stories and migrations of the meaning of any number of individual or connected words, idioms, concepts, or phrases.

As a multidisciplinary scholar whose work spans from animal rhetorics to the broader environmental humanities, my research revolves around how material elements and natural and cultural narratives are embedded in our everyday figurative language. My goal here is to braid together my research, theory, and pedagogy while illuminating portable, adaptable, and scalable possibilities of teaching with etymology and idiomatic origin stories in the writing classroom.

Homing In

Consider the model phrase of "homing in" as a figure of speech—the "action of going home"—which found its way into common parlance in the 18th century, by way of homing pigeons returning to their home coops, bringing messages back to their places of raising (Harper). As writing instructors, we often guide our students in critical and creative ways of homing in on texts to make meaningful sense of writing. We navigate global and local concerns, from analyzing rhetorical modes across contexts to parsing stylistic forces down to punctuational choice. "Homing" is a concept I often ask my writing students to dwell upon early each semester when I teach my environmentally-themed first year writing courses at Emory University. It's a term I think about a lot—as an Asian American professor who has called the Northeast home for most of my life, and then moved south to teach environmental and place-based writing in a region entirely new to me. My students are often grappling with a similar struggle of trying to build a home in an unfamiliar landscape, so it helps us to think through this together. We contemplate what we call home, and what "homing" might mean to us. As our students move through college to declare majors across the disciplines, we all hope they will transfer the writ-

ing knowledge they gained in our classes, and bring that knowledge home, whatever that means to them.

In reading this piece, I hope you will find something useful, perhaps even nourishing, to bring to your own classrooms and home contexts. To map my flight path here: I begin by defining my approach to etymology in the context of rhetorical education and weave in a model to demonstrate this in a more tangible narrative with material form. Then, I discuss ways to draw attention to word origins in writing courses, whether as a standalone activity or in longer sequences throughout a syllabus. I close by inviting readers to brainstorm on productive ways to continue this perpetual work-in-motion, and I welcome stories, in response, of how fellow instructors are integrating etymology and historical explorations of idiomatic expressions into your teaching of writing.

Figure 1: Racing pigeons perched in the pigeonholes of a coop belonging to a Pittsburgh-area racer, Dave Corry. (Personal photograph by the author)

Pigeons and Doves

Shown here is a photograph I took in a pigeon coop belonging to Dave Corry, a Pittsburgh-area pigeon racer I interviewed while seeking local knowledge for my dissertation. It stands as a reminder that pigeons—the dark street birds marginalized as "rats with wings" today—are the same species as doves, the white birds commonly celebrated as spiritual symbols of peace and love.

Pigeons and doves are interchangeable common names of the species scientifically called *Columba livia.* The main difference between them, as it turns out, is etymological. While "dove" rose from Nordic origins, "pigeon" came to English through French.

This disparagement of the darker creature as a pest juxtaposed with the celebration and affection for the white bird is a problematic pattern of culture that emerges across our treatment of natural entities in the world. J. Drew Lanham, best known for his memoir, *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature* writes about this evocatively in several pieces. In Kelsi Nagy and Phillip David Johnson II's edited collection *Trash Animals: How We Live With Nature's Filthy, Feral, Invasive, and Unwanted Species*, Randy Malamud introduces a "range of nonhuman animals who are despised or feared or mocked because we have constructed them as the disgusting 'other' in our anthropocentric fantasies of existence," and the pigeon is, predictably, a prominent example of this (ix). More recently, in *A Pocket Guide to Pigeon Watching: Getting to Know the World's Most Misunderstood Bird,* naturalist and artist Rosemary Mosco explores this topic in a comical but serious way, addressing the history of "rats with wings" alongside a sketch of a pigeon and rat seeing eye-to-eye across an equal sign, agreeing they "resent this comparison" (58). Both are intelligent and resilient synanthropic animals who have succeeded in not only living alongside humans but in using our built worlds to their advantage, and perhaps this is a comparison they would appreciate.

The goals of my writing and rhetorical research include reinforcing and resurrecting the positive reputations of pigeons and analyzing human treatments of birds who are both poeticized and rendered as pests. Given this, I often draw attention through language to the critical role pigeons have played in the history of human communication when I ask students to "home in" on a text. I remind them of how pigeon posts were established in every major ancient empire, and pigeons were the fastest mode we had of sending messages until Samuel Morse developed his code in the 1830s. I connect this to a broader context of pigeon-human relationships and reliances, drawn from nonfiction (by the likes of Blechman; Hansell; Humphries, etc.), academic texts (notably, Colin Jerolmack's *The Global Pigeon*), and others. The language of "homing in" as traveling to figurative contexts seems to have gained popular usage in the 19th century and continues to be used despite the pigeon connection often going neglected. The etymological work I am doing with figurative terms around pigeons in my own avian research is something I have tried to encourage my students to do in a range of assignments, certainly not limited to birds.

Indeed, key theories of academic writing have long been inspired by organic metaphors—from Deleuze and Guattari's entangled rhizomes to Anna Tsing writing with the flushes of matsutake mushrooms that come up after a

rain, "mimicking the patchiness of the world I am trying to describe" (Tsing viii). Rhetoricians, too, have long been listening and modeling their ideas around environmental and nonhuman engagements, from George Kennedy's landmark "A Hoot in the Dark" through Debra Hawhee's *Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw: Animals, Language, Sensation*, to Marilyn Cooper's often ecological engagement with compositional enchantment in *The Animal Who Writes: a Posthumanist Composition*. Branches of this work extend to Madison Jones's "Sylvan Rhetorics," Jennifer Clary-Lemon's work (also filled with birds and dwellings), such as in "Examining Material Rhetorics of Species at Risk," and more. Together, these flocks of teachable texts move across ecological and multispecies landscapes, often dovetailing with and inspiring the growth of the work I am invested in through my writing and writing pedagogy.

Pedagogy and Possibilities

As writers, we devote intense scrutiny to word choice, and as instructors, we model this care for language in our teaching, beginning with our syllabus. We can bring attention to etymology from the first day of the course, by introducing stories around a key term or concept on which our course is hinged. Etymology can be an overt theme or an undercurrent articulated on the syllabus. Or, it can appear simply in standalone assignments that may inform critical research and thinking across the term.

In my own teaching introductions, I often reiterate my aim to immerse students in a fully embodied compositional crafting with the simple but central tenet that "writing must appeal to all the senses to be deeply felt" (this line is copied from my teaching philosophy statement, with gestures to Sondra Perl's *Felt Sense*). I often begin by sharing how the etymology of "text" is linked to "texture," to the haptic contours of woven cloth, and "sentence" from *sentire*, "to feel" and "to be of the opinion." The word "pen" is linked historically and etymologically to the French word for quill feather (*penne*), another writing instrument derived from an avian source. Etymological invocations like this are often reified through discussions and activities that emphasize description, circulation, materialities, and embodied investigation. In a memorable lesson when I was completing my PhD at the University of Pittsburgh, Professor Thora Brylowe asked us to physically carve quill pens from craft feathers in a seminar on book history. While I haven't asked my writing students to do this (yet?), I do sometimes introduce them to 18th-century it-narratives from the perspective of quill pens and the ways these object stories inform present-day artifacts, such as Bloomsbury's *Object Lessons* series and Ian Chillag's object interview series, "Everything is Alive." The names of objects often end up connecting to plenty more words worthy of investigation.

Even if etymology doesn't fit naturally into a course's introductory materials, it can be readily integrated and adapted into existing assignments. In surveying my own department's teaching materials while I was at the University of Pittsburgh, I found many assignments involving etymology—sometimes spelled out as such, but often not. One example is a prompt written by Professor Jean Carr in 2016 for a shared first year writing staff syllabus. Students were asked to select a specific term or phrase used across five contexts, from campaign literature to media coverage, and to trace the term through "several dictionaries (a current general one, the historical *OED*...a dictionary of slang)..." to analyze "how this current moment is shaping its meaning or import." The objective was for students to "understand what words and their mode of expression mean, about the potential violence or divisiveness of terms or styles, about how to trust what people say and claim" (Carr 2016). This type of assignment is at once powerful, timeless, and endlessly adaptable; and through it, we can teach students to engage with any number of pressing issues in a contemporary moment through close investigation of linguistic elements, and word histories can play an illuminating role.

There is also the possibility of critical, creative, and technical assignments focused entirely on analyzing the genre of reference entries in dictionaries and encyclopedias. In the first year writing classes that I teach now at Emory University, I assign keyword entries, where students must braid narrative and research to illuminate the definitions, dimensions, and dynamics of a word of their choice. Since my courses are environmentally themed, we use the 1,000-word "Living Lexicon" series in *Environmental Humanities* as models. In the upper-level "Bird by Bird: Writing with Animals" seminar, my students study medieval bestiary entries and contemporary spins before composing their own research-based creature features and fables. I encourage them to study the histories of the names of the species they choose to write about and go from there. Scaffolded with readings from Aimee Nezhukumatathil's *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments* and other poetic essays as well as academic articles, students go on to consider the histories of themselves, of their relationships with language and how all of this connects to the ways they make sense of the natural and cultural worlds they inhabit.

In investigating how a term manifests across reference entries (whether mythic, scientific, historical, and/or modern), students gain the genre knowledge to then do the work of inventive mimicry by writing their own entries. From there, students can develop more theoretical long-form or lyrical essays exploring word histories, hinged on concepts, terms, or phrases of their choice. These types of projects are readily transferable into multimodal forms—and so I ask my students to compose a multimodal remix of their essays.

To share one example of a successful "keyword" paper, a student reflected on the meanings and interpretations of "Camouflage" as related to both concealment and change. This piece, drafted by Lexy Campbell for a section of my "Composing Environmental Change" course, won a first-year writing award at Emory in 2021 (and is currently posted on our Writing Program's Eagle Awards page). In this essay, Campbell latches onto the OED definition of "camouflage" as tied to "misleading someone or disguising from the truth" as the root of her segmented essay—and the different ways this is used for survival. Her piece covers ambitious ground: from how peppered moths evolved specks to blend into a sooty post-industrial environment, to how fake news and politicians disguising the harm of climate catastrophe create a false sense of security. In her subsequent multimodal remix project, Campbell collaged a large moth from newspaper clippings, scientific papers, and recycled materials. Her work considers the complexities of camouflage while alluding to the moths in her paper and in our course materials, where we studied essays on the deaths of moths from Annie Dillard and Virginia Woolf, juxtaposed with Stan Brakhage's "Mothlight" film. My insistence on homing in on language in its polyphonic, multimodal, and materially embodied capacities has led many students to craft a creative range of works. For an essay exploring the language and sounds of the wind, another student composed an experimental musical score to mimic the directions in which the wind blows. For a project considering cultural histories of rain and rainbows, a student collected rainwater to paint a watercolor mosaic.

There are plenty of teachable and entertaining etymologically-infused media to support students in modeling their own work whether they want to work on physical collages, conceptual art, or digital media. When I assign podcasts, for example, I share episodes of Helen Zaltzman's "The Allusionist," an accessible program where the host interviews writers, linguistic experts, historians, and other guests about etymology. Another project I frequently teach is the classic short video assignment, "Techne in 60," developed by Scott DeWitt et al. at the Ohio State University. I initially completed this assignment myself at the Digital Media and Composition Institute (DMAC) led by Scott DeWitt and Cynthia Selfe in 2015—it's a simple but challenging prompt, asking students to select a concept and create a 60-second video showcasing some dimension(s) of the concept. When I teach it, I ask students to select concepts that spark a strong affective response, whether it be curiosity, confusion, joy, or anger—ideally, a term they've grappled with in our course that they would like to explore more in-depth. In doing these projects, I encourage students to examine the origins of their selected concepts, which they can elaborate upon in project proposals and artist statements.

Learning and Objectives

Throughout English courses, when we ask students to consider close readings, we often begin by inviting them to identify elements that stick out—and repeated discourses, motifs, or symbols may emerge. We also invite etymological inquiry from here. Regardless of what they are reading for class, there are key ideas they can select for inquiry. It can be a productive exercise to explicitly ask the students to look up a term (even if they are already familiar with it, or think they are), and look up the word's histories, different meanings, variants, related terms and usages, etc.

The story the word itself tells may or may not be intentionally connected to what they're reading. The word may be connected to a set of terms or phrases, all worth exploring—such as the interrelation between homing in, pigeonholing, and dovetailing. This invites an expansive way of making meaning that is anchored in research and inquiry. It can also lead to connections, mysteries, and narrative inventions—and fun discussions on subjects such as folk etymologies, backronyms (e.g. "SPAM" claiming to stand for "something posing as meat"), and mountweazels (or fictional and often humorous entries in reference books used as copyright traps). Light-hearted anecdotes (sometimes from my own published work on the etymology of "jizz" as both American slang term and British birdwatching lingo) can lead the way to more serious conversations on how knowledge is manufactured. From there, we can grapple with the messy rhetorics around fake news and alternative facts in the political realm today.

In addition to improving close reading practices, homing in on etymology may support instructors and students in:

- Inquiry-driven learning and evidence-based research, by asking students to identify and engage with reliable references, including primary and secondary sources.
- Seeking and identifying connections and patterns in texts and language.
- Recognizing the genre of definitions, and how to do the work of defining.
- Analyzing and appreciating narratives rooted in language.
- Attending to the nuances of meaning and how meaning travels.
- Learning how to tell their own word-based stories with nuance, and more.

Furthermore, this focus on language can draw attention to the importance of multicultural and multilingual awareness. Etymology in any language necessarily draws from a range of different languages, so understanding the power dynamics, aesthetics, and politics behind the ways in which diverse languages hybridize also comes into play.

Pigeons and Pidgin

When I taught my first conversation class to English language learners in South Korea, my students and I once spent a good part of a class session sharing with each other how we transcribed the onomatopoeic sounds of animals in our respective native languages. It was a surprisingly enlightening conversation, which I am reminded of every time I see this "Pigeon Sounds in Other Languages" comic:

Figure 2: "Pigeon Sounds in Other Languages" comic by James Chapman features cartoon pigeons on a city street with speech bubbles of how their "coo"s are transcribed in other languages (reproduced with permission and with gratitude to the artist)

In a more serious area concerning multilingual learning, there is the presence of pidgin languages to attend to—the name "pidgin" in this context is arguably derived from a Chinese mispronunciation of the word "business" in the 19th century. Sources suggest that there are folk etymologies connecting pigeon to pidgin—but even if those stories are false, there are some unmistakable links between the two. One fundamental trait shared by both the pigeon bird and the pidgin language is multicultural hybridity. Pigeons can be found worldwide, and different variations of pidgin languages exist as different populations interface across the globe. When I first delivered an early version of this essay as a pedagogy talk at Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric, I met Professor Kathleen Tarr, who shared with me a classroom activity where she asks students to translate and analyze the BBC Pidgin. Through this exercise, students examine their reactions and approaches to a parsing a marginalized and hybridized language. Examining the margins and meshwork of language through the development of words in histories of contact and conquest further complicates relationships with rhetoric and composition.

Defining and Naming

Regardless of what specific themes or topics are being taught in a composition classroom, it is essential to scaffold etymological assignments with texts. Many readings deal explicitly with defining and dwelling on specific words, perhaps most famously in the tradition of cultural studies staples such as Raymond Williams' *Keywords*. Other teachable projects in this vein include Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* and the more field-specific suggestion, *Naming What We Know* by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, which connects core concepts through key terms in composition. Eley Williams's *The Liar's Dictionary* is a queer, absurdist novel that circles around mountweazels, fictitious entries planted in dictionaries, and it delights in etymology and paronomasia. There is an endless and ever-growing list of poets who draw from etymology—such as Monica Youn in *Blackacre*, with her title term referring to the generic name for a fictitious estate (as with mountweazels, these terms can have legally salient uses).

The terrific poet and literary animal studies scholar Joshua Bennett's collection, *Owed,* whose title gestures at once to reparations and odes, engages powerfully with semi-etymological polysemic wordplay. This could mesh well on a syllabus with Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with a Dictionary*; both are Black writers who contend with language and dictionaries as complex tools of liberation and control, of equity and inequity. In nonfiction by lexicographers, Kory Stamper, author of *Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries* is another teachable text—and as a bonus, students may already be familiar

with her from "History of Swear Words," a show that trended on Netflix in the first months of 2021.

Of course, the exact text(s) taught will depend on the specific agendas of the course and assignment sequences, and the limits of temporality. Thankfully, most words have origin stories of some sort, and the origin of the words which will serve as the starting points of different students' inquiries can be found in an infinite array of texts, materials, and situations.

In the years since I initially drafted this article, put it on the back burner, and returned to it, I designed and taught a themed section of a composition seminar on "Naming Nature," a course with the same name as Carol Kaesuk Yoon's 2009 book, which investigates complex taxonomic histories of how human and cultural biases impact scientific names of species in the natural world—leading to the famous debate over the existence of fish (a topic Lulu Miller and Kate Samworth scale in *Why Fish Don't Exist*). My own course draws from these books and other readings to examine how humans use language to culturally construct the natural world—exploring, for instance, how in the recent "Bird Names for Birds" movement, to change the scientific and common names of birds who were named after white supremacist men and other problematic figures. We consider the legacy of Audubon's violence in relation to his art—and in controversial ongoing efforts to rename the National Audubon Society. Debates over eponyms continue to be so fraught that on the same day I am proofreading this piece in May 2023, Pulitzer winner Ed Yong released a new report in *The Atlantic* on how "The Fight Over Animal Names Has Reached a New Extreme." Naming takes on increasingly complex connotations and valences every day, in a moment when "Say Their Names" has also become a repeated utterance in protests, a reminder to voice the names of the victims of hate crimes, whose lives were lost to racial violence. So many aspects of naming can be explicitly addressed in the classroom in conversation with one another. Together, we can analyze how histories of etymology and onomastics have interconnected and powerful impacts on the present and future.

Etymology and Carpentry, or: "Why is a pigeon like a writing desk?"

In my writing courses, which tend to center on topics of environmental humanities and animal studies, and thus topics of social and environmental justice connected to this, I often return to my original model organism: the rock pigeon. Beyond "homing in," this bird is arguably responsible for "pigeonholing" and "dovetailing"—terms which are both concepts in mathematics and computer science, as well as in furniture carpentry. Pigeonholes were originally structures in dovecotes and columbaria designed to raise and breed pigeons for meat, dung, and more. The name of the pigeonhole migrated to cubby mailboxes and to the nooks in Victorian writing desks. Another ele-

ment of pigeon-inspired language and carpentry is the dovetail joint, a joint some say come from the resemblance of the design to a spread bird's tail.

I also love pigeons as a model because they're messy. As Courtney Humphries writes in *Superdove: How the Pigeon Took Manhattan...And the World,* these "notoriously sloppy" nest-builders often create homes in the wild that are "slipshod affairs" made "with whatever materials are available" (119). On the chaotic "bird app" of Twitter, science writer Ferris Jabr assembled a comical thread titled "BIRD NESTING STYLES: A CRITICAL REVIEW." For the pigeon, he includes an image of a rock dove sitting on a few twigs on gray cement, with a single egg sitting on the cement adjacent to the bird. His three bullet points say the pigeon:

"-Rejects the extravagances and hypocrisy of late-stage capitalism

-Doesn't care what you think anyways

-The only god is chaos"

Pigeon expert Dr. Elizabeth Carlen posted a thread on a similar theme in late April 2021, telling the story of her cousin coming home to find a pigeon had dragged one stick onto her bed and laid an egg there: "Pigeons are notoriously terrible nest builders so this one stick constitutes her attempt at a nest." Despite nesting strategies that seem, to human viewers, to be comically lacking, pigeons are enormously successful breeders. Likewise, plenty of writers are generative with a strong dose of chaos in their craft—this is true of my own approaches to and understanding of techne and true of countless writing students I have taught over the last decade.

Here, I want to share two intentionally messy projects I created as material iterations inspired by my own pigeon explorations—the first is a poster fashioned from found and original pictures:

Figure 3: A blurry photograph of a colorful poster tied together with string: "Project Pigeon[hole]: Marginal Animal, Craft Material" (by the author)

Given the commentary on mess, it is perhaps appropriate that the only photograph I have of this project is blurry—and excavated from the Tumblr account of the 2015 CCCC in Tampa, where my whimsical pigeonhole poster, twined with string and bursting with glue bubbles, won Most Creative Poster of the conference. The second is my pigeonhole mailbox presented as an interactive sculpture component for a seminar in "Materialities of Writing" led by Professor Annette Vee. During our final meeting, I solicited pigeon messages from my classmates which were all integrated into a resulting paper as marginal notes—in a comment, of course, on the marginality of pigeons through pigeonholing.

Figure 4: A reproduction cardboard pigeonhole with a collage of black-and-white moments in pigeon history, filled with messages on neon green post-it notes (by the author)

Since playful, experimental, and interactive multimodal work is often what I found most exhilarating and productive as a student, I heartily encourage my own students to craft compositions with non-traditional textual materials, from handmade zines to collages to games. I always keep in mind Jody Shipka's words in *Toward Composition Made Whole,* where she asks: "Yet as we begin considering other…forms of representation, how do we choose what to include? What to leave out? Who does the choosing? And based on what grounds?" (17).

Endings and Openings

From centuries-old manuals to contemporary nonfiction, books centered on the topic of pigeons tend to open with disclaimers justifying their choice of subject in some way. Included here are defenses of pigeons paired with indignant notes such as in the 1735 opening of John Moore's *Columbarium: Or the Pigeonhouse*:

> Many subjects the naturalists seem to have exhausted. Horses and dogs, and most of the animals that serve for the conveniences or amusements of life, have undergone the nicest enquiries; while the pigeon, that contributes in some measure to both, a domestic as it were of ours, has been totally neglected. With a partiality usually shown to the victor, the hawk has engaged the pen of many a writer: But his prey, that seems to fly to us for protection, has scarce met with that, which even the wisdom of the legislature has allowed it. (1-3)

A century later in 1851, E.O. Dixon maintained in *The Dovecote and the Aviary*: "And yet, at the present day, a love for Pigeons is considered rather low" (2). Now fast forward to 1920, when Arthur Cooke begins: "For one apology at least the author of *A Book of Dovecotes* has no need; he is not called upon to find excuses for producing 'yet another volume' on the subject chosen for his pen" (vii). In contemporary texts, Barbara Allen notes in *Pigeon*, how "Similar to many in society," pigeons are "on the edge, unnoticed, yet vital in the history of civilization" (10). She echoes the foreword of Carl Albert Naether's *The Book of the Pigeon and of Wild Foreign Doves,* which cites yet another unnamed pigeon fancier, who warns:

> Don't you know that no pigeon book has ever become a best seller?... Most of your effort and time will be thrown away. I have never seen a pigeon book that paid for its printing and effort…I have seen many start pigeon books but precious few finish them. (7)

When I began writing about pigeons, I was stunned by how many writers felt the necessity to write disclaimers offering a pigeon *apologia*—so I am pleased to report that in recent years, there has been heightened attention to the possibility of pigeons in theoretical realms, with less apology attached. Indeed, the year after I crafted my first messy seminar paper on pigeons, the great Donna Haraway published a chapter on "Playing String Figures with Companion Species"—in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

In 2019, after completing one of my pigeon-centric projects, Jon Day published *Homing: On Pigeons, Dwellings and Why We Return*, leading me back to them. Then, at a 2020 pedagogy roundtable hosted at Emory, I learned our guest speaker, Audrey Watters, was writing on "Pigeons of Education Technology" in an ongoing project as well. In 2021, I was asked to review Rosemary Mosco's *A Pocket Guide to Pigeon Watching: Getting to Know the World's Most Misunderstood Bird* for *Birding Magazine*. Indeed, a new pigeon project in some discipline seems to crop up so frequently now it is becoming more difficult to keep track of them all.

Perhaps the rising success of pigeons in humanistic spaces isn't surprising, given how successful they proliferate in human-created environs as invited, then feral, synanthropic species. The words they bring with them, to circle back to etymological pedagogy, are ones we can linger on to more fully understand—and teach—contexts, histories, stories, and more.

To end, I imagine many of you composition instructors reading this are already integrating etymology in your classrooms, whether you have pet projects and specific words and avenues to do so, or through implicit embedding in the texts and projects you assign. Articulating etymology more explicitly and bringing it to the surface offers an endlessly generative way to get students invested in inquiry-based learning around a concept they are befuddled by or excited about. Whether they choose a familiar term that they find appears a lot in a reading or a term they looked up that was new to them, they will certainly learn something new, and likely, you will as well. To end, I want to invite you to meditate on how you are actively and/or accidentally integrating etymology into your pedagogical repertoire—and don't hesitate to send words and birds (especially messenger pigeons) my way in response.

□

> If we take a pigeon as an example…' Even Aristotle used pigeons to illustrate the four causes of existence: the motive cause, the material cause, the formal cause, and finally the fourth and final cause: the perfected pigeon whose perfect ending was her benefit to Man.
>
> —Thalia Field, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* (5)

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