

A Place at the “Pet Shop”: Status and Sociability among Brooklyn Rooftop Pigeon Flyers

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This paper examines the social life of a group of working class men who breed and fly pigeons from their rooftops in Brooklyn. I focus on a particular pigeon supply store—what the men call a “pet shop”—where all of the men gather on Sunday to hang out, swap stories, and offer evidence of who is the best pigeon flyer. I show how the men form a unique peer group and collective identity that is strongly rooted in their animal practices but given meaning and reinforced within social networks. Their solitary rooftop activity is almost always oriented toward their social standing in the group. The men gain status from successfully “stealing” other flyers’ birds that come over their rooftops; and the visits to the pigeon store are opportunities to “be somebody” vis-à-vis one’s birds’ performance compared to others. Like the men of Elijah Anderson’s “A Place on the Corner,” the pigeon flyers engage in a type of competitive sociability. Yet in this case, the pigeon becomes a vehicle for the formation of enduring social relationships that cut across racial and age divisions that mark the other spheres of these working class men’s lives.