

# THINKING LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION WITH PIGEONS IN CAIRO

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I propose to think about pedagogical practice, notably liberal arts education, with pigeons. My aim is to introduce the metaphor of a pigeon tower in an effort to gesture towards a preferred learning environment for higher education. The metaphor came about as a reflection on the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS). A non-degree granting micro-liberal arts college, CILAS invites adult learners to engage with liberal arts education from below. What has become noticeable over the six years of its existence are three qualities that are reflected in pigeons. I therefore write of a pigeon-inspired critical pedagogy. Pigeons re-member, self-recognize and 'clock-shift'. In so doing they uphold positionality, self-reflexivity and structural flexibility. To me these are ingredients to promoting a place-based, inter-epistemic and de-colonial liberal arts education as is manifested in CILAS' location, methodology and curriculum.

## **Key-words:**

Liberal arts education from below; Cairo; pigeon tower; infrastructural intervention

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## THINKING LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION WITH PIGEONS IN CAIRO

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### *Introduction*

There is a history of looking at the relationship between pigeons and pedagogy. I first began to notice pigeons and their relationship to the work of pedagogy in higher education when searching for a name to give to the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences' (CILAS) newsletter. Inaugurated in the summer of 2013, CILAS was set up with the intention of inviting adult learners to engage with the tradition of liberal arts education. The vision was to co-create a learning environment that would be conducive to critical inquiry, self-reflection and civic engagement. The first cohort enrolled in a loosely structured, yearlong study programme. This programme was divided into trimesters: a first trimester served as a foundation that exposed learners to various histories and philosophies in the arts and sciences, some of the more prominent – isms of the modern age as well as the ongoing debates around them. The second and third trimesters were dedicated to 'matters of concern' to learners, which could be further studied under the guidance of teaching fellows. Students would engage in community service in parallel to their intellectual training.

Over the past five years, students have come to CILAS from all walks of life, disciplinary backgrounds, and have ranged in ambitions from shifting careers to developing a wise appreciation for the complexity of the world. Many, if not all, students that found their way to CILAS felt that university had been a hardly memorable, if not entirely futile experience. CILAS invited students to participate in discussion – both intuitive and theoretically-informed discussion. Classrooms, of which initially there were two, hardly resembled conventional classrooms. Taking its first steps in the side alleys of Islamic Cairo's al-Ghuria neighbourhood, CILAS

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occupied a space that previously served as a scholar's residence. The space did indeed display both scholarly and residential qualities. It was an unusual location sitting on the second floor at the end of a narrow alley. Everybody in al-Ghuria got to know of CILAS: from the shop owners to the pushers of the wheelbarrows transporting incoming goods from al-Azhar street into the deep veins of al-Ghuria, to the bicycle riders carrying stacks of bread on their heads. It was amidst the turmoil of al-Ghuria that the metaphor of a pigeon tower emerged. A pigeon tower has since come to serve as a guiding metaphor gesturing towards a preferred liberal arts education as exemplified by CILAS. In this paper I think with pigeons about pedagogical practice and liberal arts education.

### *Thinking with pigeons*

To evolutionary theorist Charles Darwin pigeons were interlocutors on the power of natural selection. Darwin dedicated the first chapter of *Origin of Species*, published in 1854, to the genealogy of the pigeon. In his study of various breeds of domestic pigeons, Darwin found that all pigeons share similar coloring and body structure. After cross-breeding several types of pigeons, he discovered that the resultant hybrids were 'perfectly fertile', which indicated to him that they descended from one parent species. This finding suggested that all types of pigeons must have descended from the rock pigeon. Darwin concluded that most species types may, in fact, have descended from one parent, rather than multiple parent species, as breeders had previously believed. Darwin's close observation of pigeons and discussion of selection in the first chapter of *Origin of Species* laid the groundwork for the crux of his evolutionary theory: his argument for natural selection.

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To behavioral psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner pigeons were psychological test subjects. Skinner wrote – a hundred years after the publication of *Origin of Species* – in *The Science of Learning and the Art of Teaching* "once we have

arranged the particular type of consequence called a reinforcement, our techniques permit us to shape the behavior of an organism almost at will. It has become a routine exercise to demonstrate this (..) by conditioning such an organism as a pigeon”<sup>3</sup> . Learning, according to Skinner, was about behavior, about reinforcing *those* behaviors – knowledge, answers – that educators deem ‘correct’. When educators fail to shape, reinforce, and control a learner’s behavior through these techniques and technologies, they are at risk, in Skinner’s words, of ‘losing our pigeon.’

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To postmodern feminist Donna Haraway pigeons, she writes sixty years after the publication of Skinner’s *The Science of Learning and the Art of Teaching*, “are competent agents who render each other and human beings capable of situated social, ecological, behavioral, and cognitive practices”<sup>4</sup> . Haraway reminds us under the title *Staying with the Trouble* of the ambivalence of pigeons. She describes them as kin *and* despised pests, subjects of rescue *and* of invective, bearers of rights *and* components of the animal-machine, food *and* neighbor, targets of extermination *and* of biotechnological breeding and multiplication, companions *and* carriers of disease, contested subjects *and* objects of ‘modern progress’ and ‘backward tradition’. “Everywhere they have gone”, she writes, “these cosmopolitical pigeons occupy cities with gusto, where they incite human love and hatred in extravagant measure. Called ‘rats with wings,’ feral pigeons are subjects of vituperation and extermination, but they also become cherished opportunistic companions who are fed and watched avidly all over the world”<sup>5</sup> .

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The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the figure of the pigeon, the ensemble of the pigeon flock and the pigeon tower as infrastructure can help us re/con/figure and re-assemble pedagogical practice. More specifically, I suggest that a pigeon tower offers a preferred metaphor to that of the ivory tower. A metaphorical pigeon

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<sup>3</sup> Skinner, B.F. (1981) *Self-awareness in the pigeon*. Science, 212, pp. 695-696.

<sup>4</sup>Haraway, D. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*: Chapter 1. Duke University Press.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

tower gestures towards a learning environment that is conducive to delinking, that is, to inquiring into the rhetoric of modernity, analysing the logic of coloniality and to interrogating the grammar of de-coloniality<sup>6</sup>. The so called *trivium* of rhetoric, logic and grammar constituted the liberal arts as a tradition at the outset. A firm believer in the *spirit* of the liberal arts I will argue with the metaphor of a pigeon tower for a *liberal arts education from below*, that is, for a place-based, inter-epistemic and de-colonial liberal arts education.

### *Pigeon towers as infrastructural intervention*

*“The municipal pigeon tower certainly cannot undo unequal treaties, conquest, and wetlands destruction; but it is nonetheless a possible thread in a pattern for ongoing, noninnocent, interrogative (..) getting on together.” - Donna Haraway (2016)*

While the notion of ‘thinking with pigeons’ invokes the possibility of learning from and with pigeons, the pigeon tower I use *metaphorically* meaning as ‘thin’ sensorial language in an attempt to gesture towards a preferred higher education rather than using ‘thick’ language that attempts to capture reality in place<sup>7</sup>. The metaphor of the ivory tower has long dominated imaginings of higher education. It expresses disillusionment with the state of higher education for many, a sense of remoteness from the everyday for some and geographical isolation for others. Characterized by compartmentalization and standardization the modern/colonial university has begun to promote collaboration across disciplines and critical pedagogies beyond the classroom. While some of these efforts to conduct cross-disciplinary research and to engage community are commendable, the structural shortcomings of higher education remain intact. It is in the co-creation of, or infrastructural intervention through, pigeon towers that I see a possibility of moving beyond structural reform in higher education.

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<sup>6</sup> Mignolo, W. (2007) 'DELINKING'. *Cultural Studies*, 21:2, pp. 449 – 514.

<sup>7</sup> Decolonial Futures Collective (2016). *Pedagogy of attunement*. Retrieved on February 26th from <https://decolonialfutures.net/project-type/pedagogical-experiments/>

Before turning to infrastructural intervention, it is crucial to briefly recall attempts at structurally reforming higher education. There are two ways that structural reform is being promoted. A soft reform approach has focused on inclusion, mobilized through personal or institutional transformation<sup>8</sup>. This approach rests on “a critique that perceives unequal access to higher education as resulting from the failure of people or institutions to identify and integrate diverse individual needs and perspectives within a naturalized and normalized modern framework”<sup>9</sup>. This framework itself remains invisible and untouched by critique. Any effort to disrupt this modern framework is readily dismissed as violent, unproductive and uncivil. Soft structural reform insists on and mobilizes dialogue, consensus and an entrepreneurial spirit, all the while subscribing to neoliberalism.

Following Andreotti et al.’s classification, ‘soft’ structural reform can be distinguished from radical structural reform. The latter does recognize and analyze epistemological dominance as manifested in historical, discursive and affective dynamics, which affirm and reproduce hegemonic and ethnocentric practices. Attempts at radical structural reform acknowledge the unequal relations of knowledge production and how these bring about a highly skewed distribution of resources, labor and symbolic value. Advocates of radical structural reform highlight modernity’s interconnected *violences* as they materialize in the forms of capitalism, racism, colonialism, patriarchy and the nation-state, to name a few. At the same time, these advocates adopt a firm normative stance that seeks to ‘fix’ the very mechanisms that produce inequalities, through strategies of empowerment, ‘giving voice’, recognition, representation, redistribution, reconciliation, re-centering of marginalized subjects and/or transformation of the borders of the dominant system.

In their classification Andreotti et al. identify another realm of possibilities that lies beyond soft and radical structural reform. Attempts beyond reform perceive modern institutions, including institutions of higher education in their current form, as

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<sup>8</sup> Andreotti, V. et al. (2015) *Mapping interpretations of decolonization in higher education*. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 4:1, pp. 21-40.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

inherently violent, exploitative and unsustainable. Modernity's myriad oppressions are seen as interlinked. Beyond-structural-reform advocates agree with the urgent need to address issues of access, voice, recognition, representation and redistribution. However, they do not consider these responses to be sufficient. A beyond-structural-reform approach recognizes that neoliberalism is not a new phenomenon but a logical unfolding of something integral to the historical conditions of Empire that subsidized and created the possibility for the university as we know it<sup>10</sup>. Some respond to this by walking out of the university entirely and dedicating themselves to constructing alternatives; others carve out spaces of creativity and dissent within the university while inhabiting and navigating it strategically. I am here concerned with the former response, that is, the construction of alternatives, or infrastructural intervention.

The neoliberalization of higher education has resulted in the geographical isolation of universities. Increasingly universities are founded on state-sponsored land on the outskirts of metropolitan areas. Connected to residential neighborhoods through shuttle buses and guarded by security companies, the neoliberal university resembles, more than anything, a bastion. The metaphorical ivory tower is now fenced in and built from bullet-proof glass. More and more universities act as enclaves actively avoiding everyday troubles and struggles, most notably so in post-colonial cities such as Cairo, Delhi or Accra. A pigeon tower, on the other hand, is embedded in the urban fabric. As such it constitutes a possible thread in the pattern for ongoing, noninnocent and interrogative getting together, as Haraway suggests. Situated in the proximity of the 'cracks' of the city, a pigeon tower faces dilapidation and precariousness, witnesses everyday pieties and unorthodoxies, the practices of trade and trickstery, the celebration of birth, the mourning of death, children playing, passers-by wondering and pigeons coming and going.

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<sup>10</sup> Roy, A. (2006). *Praxis in the time of empire*. Planning Theory, 5:1, pp. 7-29.

In other words, the metaphor of a pigeon tower brings us closer to “opportunity, cultural bricolage, geographic fluidity and adaptable collaboration”<sup>11</sup>. AbdouMalik Simone argues in his paper *People as Infrastructure* for a way of seeing infrastructure – in its richness and variety, rather than homogeneity – as “an ingredient for expanding spaces of economic and cultural operation”, that in turn, allow for “alternative regimes of property and contract to coexist experimentally within the same economy”<sup>12</sup>. The way of seeing advocated by Simone is crucial to viewing higher education in terms of infrastructure. Such a perspective invites stories of “linked metabolisms and articulations of economies and ecologies, of histories of humans and nonhumans”<sup>13</sup> into the realm of higher education. It reckons with both contingency and embodiment in accounting for both geographical fluidity and hostility as well as infrastructural fragility. A metaphorical pigeon tower facilitates a shift in perspective towards an embedded and place-based higher education.

Another related feature of a pigeon tower concerns its materiality. Drawing inspiration from the pigeon towers one sees across North Africa and West Asia, the metaphorical pigeon tower appreciates architecture in two ways. The first way relates to the vernacular built<sup>14</sup> of a pigeon tower. Traditionally, a pigeon tower is built from earth material, i.e. mud. Its construction doesn’t depend on industrial output processed in factories and shipped across seas. As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century travelers have recorded the sight of pigeon towers along their paths. Ibn Battuta’s reference to pigeon towers in Isfahan in the 1340s is arguably one of the earliest recorded. At the time he counted as many as 3000 towers, some of which were quite elaborate. He observed that they all followed the same basic structure of round tower with pepperpot turret for the pigeons to fly in and out, no windows and only one door which was opened once a year to collect the manure. This manure was used as

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<sup>11</sup> Simone, A. (2004) *People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg*. Public Culture, 16:3, pp. 407-429.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Haraway, D. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*: Chapter 1. Duke University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Fathy, H. (1986). *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture*. University of Chicago Press.

fertilizer for the melons which Ibn Battuta mentions later on in his account, and for which the city of Isfahan is known.

Ibn Battuta's observation reminds us of the prevalence of pigeon towers across West Asia and North Africa. He writes in his travelogue in 1347, "we travelled on for the whole of this day between orchards and streams and fine villages with many pigeon towers." In his account he goes on to point to the importance pigeon towers have carried for agriculture in collecting the guano, or accumulated excrements, of pigeons. For our purpose of thinking with pigeons it is important to take note not only of the materiality of a pigeon tower but also of its structure, notably its height. A metaphorical pigeon tower floats mid-air between the height of the ivory tower and the streets, or the land. As such, it occupies the *mezzanine level* affording pigeons, or the learners of our backstory, the tranquility an elevated piece of infrastructure such as a tower provides, while remaining in tune with its surrounding. In other words, a pigeon tower allows for both the slowing down required of deep inquiry and the embodied practice that nurtures the wit and making of connections associated with street smartness or adaptability to land.

As an abode and place of gathering, a pigeon tower provides food and shelter. For our purpose of unfolding the possibility of a pigeon tower as learning environment, it is important that we tell the anecdote that goes with the metaphor to the end. A metaphorical pigeon tower provides food for thought and a learning methodology. Just as food tastes best when shared, food for thought is chewed on best together.. Often such food for thought is not easily digestible and yet once digested it makes for exceptional manure. The anecdote then goes on to tell that the pigeons, or learners, spread their wings, at times on their own, other times after forming a flock, to go around and to share their 'compostable droppings' and with it the blessings of their learnings. The following part of this paper is dedicated to three qualities of pigeons which I will then use to argue for a *liberal arts education from below*.

## *Thinking liberal arts education with pigeons*

*“It would seem that our pigeons do quite a good job of exhibiting an agape type of love toward each other. Our pigeons are actually doing the work of real love.” -*

*Tanya Berokoff*

It is said that training pigeons, whether for military service or otherwise, has a long history. Investigations into how teaching and learning works for pigeons have been a main area of focus for the field of psychology as it developed in the twentieth century. It is impossible to talk about education psychology without talking about pigeons and, in turn, to talk about education technology, or pedagogical practice, without remembering pigeons. My interest is three-fold as I develop this pigeon-inspired critical pedagogy. I first draw inspiration from pigeons’ ability to remember through their map and compass sense. Secondly, I refer to pigeons’ acute self-awareness and thirdly to the power dynamics of pigeon flocks. I present recent scientific findings for these features in pigeons and look at them in relation to a *liberal arts education from below*.

Pigeons released in unfamiliar places find their way back to their home lofts – their pigeon tower – from thousands of kilometers away even on cloudy days. They make use of their map sense and compass sense that have endeared them to pigeon fanciers who race them for sport, scientists who study them for the behavioral neurobiology of orientation and navigation, spies who wish to send messages across enemy territory, and writers of mystery novels who call on a good pigeon to carry secrets. Haraway notes that “perhaps the hottest spot for pigeon racing enthusiasts are the rooftops of Cairo”<sup>15</sup> and while pigeons are often seen as dirty and an urban nuisance, they are also the latest in a long line of animals that have been found to have superior memories. Despite having a brain no bigger than the tip of the index finger, pigeons have an impressive visual memory. In 2016 it was shown that they

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<sup>15</sup> Haraway, D. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*: Chapter 1. Duke University Press.

can be as accurate as humans at detecting breast cancer in images<sup>16</sup>.

While there are numerous studies demonstrating pigeons' ability to remember places, faces and images, it suffices for our purpose to notice pigeons' sense of map and sense of compass. What pigeons' impressive visual memory highlights is the importance of deep inquiry and appreciation for place, dis-placement, orientation and dis-orientation. In other words, pigeons' ability to remember vividly is an invitation for us to think with them about liberal arts education in a way that is sensitive to positionality. Places are, as Haraway reminds us, articulations of economies and ecologies, of histories of humans and non-humans. Places of learning are perhaps most indebted to this realization. Pigeons' loyalty to and familiarity with place preserves this fundamental truth; a *liberal arts education from below* can contribute to recuperating it. It can help heighten sensibility to detect both the carcinogenic and the compostable.

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Not very many kinds of animals have convinced human skeptics that they recognize themselves in a mirror – a talent made known to scientists by such actions as picking at paint spots or other marks on one's body that are visible only in a mirror. Pigeons share this capacity with children over two years old, chimpanzees, dolphins, and elephants. Pigeons passed their first mirror tests in the laboratories of B. F. Skinner in 1981. In 2008, *Science News* reported that Keio University researchers showed that, even with five-to seven-second time delays, pigeons did better at self-recognition tests with both mirrors and live video images of themselves than three-year-old human children. Pigeons pick out different people in photographs very well too, and in Professor Shigeru Watanabe's Laboratory of Comparative Cognitive Neuroscience at Keio University, pigeons could tell the difference between paintings by Monet or Picasso, and even generalize to discriminate unfamiliar paintings from different styles and schools by various painters.

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<sup>16</sup> Crouch, L. (2016) *The pigeon will see you now*. BBC News. Retrieved on February 26th from <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-35542678>.

I want to propose a reading of pigeons' capacity for self-recognition in relation to critical pedagogy and the project of *liberal arts education from below*. Pigeons' capacity for self-recognition can be translated in terms of self-reflexivity and its relation to de-linking<sup>17</sup> as a pre-requisite for emergent inter-epistemic communication. Pigeons' capacity for self-recognition is about differentiation, in the sense of making nuanced and generous distinctions between styles, schools and traditions. It is this distinction, or act of de-linking, that foregrounds inter-epistemic communication. In the words of Walter Mignolo "de-linking then shall be understood as a de-colonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluri-versality as a universal project"<sup>18</sup>. *A liberal arts education from below* is attuned to this shift, its dynamics, intricacies and inconsistencies.

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Arguably the most insightful finding for the purpose of gesturing towards a pigeon-inspired form of higher education relates to the formation or choreography of pigeon flocks. According to research conducted by the Navigation Group of the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford pigeon flock leaders who attempt to give their fellow pigeons incorrect information about their direction of travel can be overruled by the collective wisdom of the group.<sup>19</sup> Modelling work has predicted that the mistakes of a misinformed leader will propagate down a hierarchical decision-making system such as a pigeon flock. Using a method known as 'clock-shifting' that interferes with pigeons' sense of direction, researchers have shown that bad leadership can be overcome, setting the flock back on the correct course. GPS data on flock positions showed that misinformed leaders tended to lose their place at the top of the hierarchy, spending less time at the head of the flock and less time being followed in their movements by others.

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<sup>17</sup> Quijano, A. (1992) *Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad*. Quito: Tercer Mundo-Libri Mundi.

<sup>18</sup> Mignolo, W. (2007) 'DELINKING'. *Cultural Studies*, 21:2, pp. 449 – 514.

<sup>19</sup> University of Oxford (2016) Pigeon flock leaders can 'overrule' incompetent leaders. Retrieved on February 26th from <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2016-09-14-pigeon-flock-members-can-%E2%80%98overrule%E2%80%99-incompetent-leaders-research-shows>.

It is the collective wisdom set off by the method of ‘clock-shifting’ that I consider to be the central piece for my turning to and thinking with pigeons about pedagogical practice. Paul Goodman in his 1969 essay *Compulsory Mis-Education and the Community of Scholars* is sympathetic to the importance of what he calls a community of scholars. He advises that “rather than spend primary energy to get the university to become a community of scholars, create your own – and by so doing you may affect the institution as well as making a practical difference”<sup>20</sup>. Pigeons demonstrate flexibility in their collective decision-making. They do so in situations where the performance of the whole flock would suffer if they were inflexible. This flexibility in collective work is in my experience the most challenging part for emergent learning communities around the world. Building community demands the willingness to carry the shared weight of making as well as made decisions and to notice one’s limitation, that is, one’s strengths and weaknesses to contributing to a collaborative project. At the same time, it demands communicating one’s questions and needs in moving forward together. Pedagogical practice has a role to play in awakening it. Such practice demands staying with the trouble, as Haraway has it. She speaks of pigeons as companion species which allows her to refuse human exceptionalism without invoking posthumanism. While Haraway is interested in staying with the trouble in serious multispecies worlds, I recognize the connection to another species, that of the pigeon, metaphorically. The name of the higher educational game is thus becoming-with, not becoming; becoming-with is how partners, that is to say learners, are, in Vinciane Despret’s terms, rendered capable always remembering that “natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings”<sup>21</sup>.

### *CILAS - A pigeon tower enacted*

CILAS is a micro-college that seeks to preserve and enable access to liberal arts education. Inspired by the French tradition of *classes prépas* or simply *prépas* as

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<sup>20</sup> Goodman, P. (1964). *Compulsory Miseducation and the Community of Scholars*. Horizon Press.

<sup>21</sup> Despret, V. (2014) *Les animaux: deux ou trois choses que nous savons d’eux*. (Paris: Hermann, 2014).

well as the German *Studienkolleg*, CILAS' offer was conceived of as a 'bridge programme'. Admittedly, this bridge programme was never intended to prepare for anything in particular nor did the bridge intend to lead anywhere in particular. Rather, CILAS came into being in response to John Dewey's reminder to "cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life. And to add that only in this case does it become truly a preparation for later life is not the paradox it seems."<sup>22</sup>

Dewey goes on to say that any activity that does not have worth enough to be carried as for its own sake cannot be very effective as a preparation for something else. This also captures the spirit of the liberal arts.

In the aftermath of the January 25th Revolution of 2011 this tradition resonated with those invested in the uprising and toppling of the regime. It resonated as it proposed, among other things, to closely look at revolutionary moments in history while debating ways to connect the present moment to these moments of change. The intellectual thirst of those wondering about paths of liberation to walk along from the 'square of liberation' (Midan al-Tahrir) is what fuelled CILAS. The fact that the cohorts that have formed over the years assembled people of very different walks of life served as a reminder of the different perspectives, aspirations and memories associated with this critical juncture. CILAS proposed a different way of engaging that moment of rupture. It invited learners to come together to read, observe and listen. In employing Discussion Based Learning DBL as its main learning methodology it encouraged close reading of primary sources from different periods and geographies.

DBL proposed two things which with time became CILAS' signature alongside its course offerings. DBL paid attention to both the spatial and temporal arrangement of how discussions were led in everyday life, notably so in Cairo's street cafés. On Cairo's streets, cafés take on different forms at different hours. Providing plastic

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<sup>22</sup> Dewey, J. (1971). *The Early Works 1882-1898*. Southern Illinois University Press.

chairs, tables, drinks and waterpipes, the arrangement of the seating is left for clients to decide. Arrangements shift depending on the speakers and their urge to speak. Conversations at these street cafés are infused with humour and bound to spark reflection. To me these conversations became a source of inspiration in developing a learning methodology that would be conducive to remembrance, self-reflexivity and 'clock-shifting'. They became a base to build on, or what I began to refer to as 'pre-discussions'. If these pre-discussions were to be complemented by an invisible interlocutor, preparation and 'clock-shifting', we would have a learning methodology that fosters a liberal arts education from below, I thought. In this belief I suggested that pre-discussions serve as springboards for a post-discussion that would, in turn, welcome an interlocutor from outside, in form of text, film or audio, while doing justice to questions raised during pre-discussions. Post-discussions would be hosted and facilitated by a different member of the flock every time.

While CILAS' learning methodology was inspired by Cairo's urban forms and various spatial arrangements, CILAS itself was firmly embedded in these forms. CILAS has been nestled in the urban fabric of Islamic Cairo with its layers of history and decades of governmental neglect. As such, Islamic Cairo is both a site of cultural heritage and of precarious housing. It evokes both awe and sadness, fascination and bitterness, multiple pasts and a dire present, antiquity and urgency. Its built environment invites memories, imaginings, close observation and visioning. It serves as a source of inspiration and of despair. With this ambivalence comes potentiality, namely the potential for ways of seeing and remembering. CILAS has offered several courses that sought to preserve this intangible heritage and the local histories surrounding it. In these courses students recognised subaltern reasons for being that questioned state-centric mapping and narrating. Through these courses students learned to listen carefully to memories and aspirations, collect testimonials of eviction and displacement and began to develop a sense of place and reflect on their positionality.

At the heart of CILAS lies its core curriculum. A core curriculum is a characteristic feature of any liberal arts education. At CILAS the core introduces students to the

rhetoric of modernity alongside other rhetorics; it analyses the logic of coloniality all the while recognising its different configurations; and interrogates the grammar of decoloniality in its effort to reconnect to the tradition of the oppressed and its attempts at liberation. The *trivium* of rhetoric, logic and grammar revisited in this way invites students to train their critical judgment vis-à-vis their positionality, role in and contribution to society. The remainder of the programme is dedicated to coursework that responds to the matters of concern of the flock and to serving the larger community through teaching, mapping, translating, mediating and creating knowledge. Together the so called thematic coursework and the community service foster continued intellectual inquiry and experiential learning. Both modes of learning nourish self-reflexivity and guide self-discovery. Learners who have completed CILAS' bridge programme have gone on to pursue graduate studies, often times in a field of inquiry they weren't aware of. Others have gone on to create start-ups that offer teaching, mapping, translating, mediating and research services. Others still have decided it was best to walk out of their previous occupation and to go for a hike while others are continuing in their jobs while hopefully remembering to stretch, breathe and never cease to question.

### *Conclusion*

I proposed in this paper to think about pedagogical practice with pigeons. My aim for this paper was to introduce the metaphor of a pigeon tower as a gesture towards a preferred learning environment for higher education. The metaphor came about as a reflection on a project in Cairo, Egypt I set in motion in 2013, that of founding and directing the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences CILAS. A non-degree granting micro-liberal arts college, CILAS was inaugurated in the aftermath and in appreciation of the Revolution of 2011. It constituted an attempt at loosely structuring what was already unfolding, namely the formation of study circles, reading groups and other educational initiatives. CILAS has invited adult learners on a yearlong learning journey. It has offered food for thought and a learning methodology to accompany this journey. The rest was largely reliant on the self-direction and

determination of the learning community. What has become noticeable over the past six years and crucial to what I've come to refer to as a liberal arts education from below are three qualities that I find reflected in pigeons. I hence dedicated this paper to a pigeon-inspired critical pedagogy. Pigeons re-member, self-recognize and 'clock-shift'. In so doing they uphold positionality, self-reflexivity and structural flexibility. To me these are ingredients that promote a place-based, inter-epistemic and de-colonial liberal arts education.

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