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## "Duck Wars": Examining the Narrative Construction of a "Problem" Species

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“Duck Wars”: Examining the Narrative Construction of a “Problem” Species

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Sociology  
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## **Abstract**

The problematization of non-human animals occurs through a process of claimsmaking that constructs certain species as “problems”. My thesis examines the news narrative constructions of the Muscovy duck in Florida and Texas. I use a narrative analysis to examine the themes through which news narratives make claims in their construction of the “duck wars” in Florida and Texas. In the “duck wars”, the problematization of the Muscovy occurs through a set of claims made about the species by the reporters and residents in Florida and Texas neighborhoods. There are also sets of claims about other groups associated with the species, like the two opposing groups, the “duck lovers” and “duck haters”, in the overarching narrative of the “duck wars”. The problematized characteristics attributed to the Muscovy all focus on how the Muscovy is either perceived to belong or not belong. These findings contribute to the othering processes that occur in narrative constructions of social problems and “problem” populations.

## **Introduction**

Current literature examines the social construction of non-human animals and suggests that humans situate them in position to themselves (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Best 2018; Fine and Christoforides 1991; Potts 2009; Moloney and Unnithan 2019). One way we do this is by problematizing certain species (Best 2018; Potts 2009). For example, the focus in recent literature is on the construction of non-human animals as the source of damaging livelihoods, historical places, or as a potential threat to “native” ecosystems (2018; 2009; 2019). If a non-human animal is claimed to be dangerous or lethal, then the human reaction to that species will most likely be heightened (Best 2018). A ‘dangerous’ or ‘lethal’ species will often be controlled by way of eradication (Cohen and Richardson 2002; Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2019; Hallsworth 2011; Scarce 1997; Twining, Arluke, and Patronek 2000; Wolch 1997). One way that this problematization of non-human animal species occurs is through the construction of narratives (Moloney and Unnithan 2019; Loseke 2019; Wolch 1997).

In my thesis, I explore how the Muscovy duck is socially constructed as a “problem” species through a narrative analysis of published articles in Florida and Texas newspapers. Using narrative analysis, I examine the themes through which the news narratives focus on and contribute to the “duck wars” in Florida and Texas. In these “duck wars,” two opposing groups are at odds: the “duck lovers” and the “duck haters”. Each group constructs the other as problematic based on how they construct the Muscovy duck through their narratives in news stories. Each construction by the group is informed by their further narrative construction of the Muscovy duck as either “invasive” or “family”.

Before delving into these “duck wars”, I review the literature on the social construction of certain “problem” species through narratives. I begin with a summary of the fundamental tenets of social constructionism and the construction of social problems. Then, I discuss the significance of narratives in understanding how social problems are created and address the literature on the construction of non-human animals as social problems. Following the review of the literature, I provide an overview of my research design and the findings from my narrative analysis of the news articles. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on what these findings contribute to the overall broader literature of social problems and animals’ literature, with implications for broader understandings of othering processes present in both human constructions of each other and non-human animals.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Social Construction of Social Problems***

Social constructionism focuses on how society is created by humans through a process of meaning-making (Spector and Kitsuse 1997). Social constructionists critique the typical approach to understanding how the world exists; that the world exists unto itself, and we correctly or incorrectly perceive and live in it. Instead, social constructionists view people as making sense of the world around them by constructing meanings for things in their everyday lives according to where and when they exist (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Without doing so, the world can become overwhelming. As the world shifts around us, the process of constructing meanings also changes; we continually make and remake meanings through a process that is often taken for granted. In other words, we are seldom conscious of the process of meaning-making in our daily lives. For people in their everyday lives, reality takes on a separate form where it exists outside of their existence. Moreover, every day realities vary across time, space, and culture. Realities are dependent on when and where an individual and/or group is situated.

From within the social constructionist framework is the assumption that nothing is inherently a problem. Rather, something becomes a social problem when people or groups evaluate it and claim it to be so (Spector and Kitsuse 1997). To understand the process through which something is created as a problem, it is important to understand who is involved in the process of making meanings; not everyone has the same level of interest or power. In other words, we must understand who is making claims, and what or about whom those claims are made (Loseke 2019; Spector and Kitsuse 1997).

Who identifies or makes claims that something is a problem; who are these claimsmakers and what are their goals? The goal(s) of claimsmakers vary, but they generally seek to make claims about the world through different forms of interactions (Spector and Kitsuse 1997) that occur in different social contexts (Spector and Kitsuse 1997; Best 2018). Claimsmakers consists of activists, media, government, and experts. The goal of claimsmakers is to construct and reinforce social problems through claimsmaking activities. These activities occur in a social context (Best 2018). For example, a social context could be a farm, a neighborhood, a small town, or a city. A city, for example, could be situated in a historic time of growth, or economic decline due to a pandemic. The situatedness requires scholars to understand claimsmakers as varying along lines of inequality; some have more power than others; some may have vested interests in claiming something is a problem. As a result, some claimsmakers have greater access to resources that can provide for more potent claims. If the Florida Wildlife Commission (FWC), for example, claims a species is a nuisance animal, their authority as a government-sanctioned entity would hold greater weight in the claimsmaking process; at least for those who want to “deal with” a so-called nuisance animal. It is also important to note that not all claimsmakers are successful in influencing other people with their claims; only a minority of those who make claims are successful in convincing relevant audiences that a problem exists, and something should be done about said problem.

Claimsmakers also make claims about humans and non-human animals according to time and place. An example of this is found in the literature that examines the problematization of species according to when and where they exist in a place (Irvine 2003; Potts 2009; Sanders 1999). The efforts of possum eradication in New Zealand demonstrate how the different discourses negatively situate the possum as recognizably cute, but a “nuisance” despite not



always being considered as such (Potts 2009). When first introduced to New Zealand by colonists, they were economic assets in the fur industry. However, the possum has become a scapegoat for the negative impact their presence has had on the native environment and wildlife. Possums are perceived as a threat in “foreign threat narratives” (Potts 2009:3) where they spread, “infect”, “invade”, “attack”, and “kill” native flora and fauna. Interestingly, the negative constructions of the possum are spread by writers, news stories, and artists. According to Potts (2009), the threat narrative is the main reason the possum is problematized, despite being introduced by humans.

Another example of how animals become “problems” is seen in Irvine’s (2003) work. Irvine unravels how pets become “unwanted pets” according to a person’s situatedness. In one example a woman surrendered her cat when she moved through the narrative revealed that the pet became unwanted for more complex reasons. The woman claimed not to be surrendering her cat because she was moving, but because the cat “bugged” her in the mornings and shed all around the house (2003:557). The cat was first an exciting pet, but with moving came other identified “problems;” the cat became a “problem” for this guardian. As seen in other cases of guardians who surrendered their animals, the animal did something to prompt the surrender. The animal is perceived to be out of control, so the guardian surrenders control of that animal. Sanders (1999) refers to this as “unlinking”, and it shifts the “problem” as being the non-human animals instead of the human’s (Irvine 2003).

As demonstrated through discussing claimsmaking processes and who the claimsmakers are, the social construction of social problems is a rhetorical process (Schneider 1985; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Gusfield 1976) through which “moral entrepreneurs” create rhetorical tropes (Gusfield 1976; Becker 1963). These “moral entrepreneurs” influence the public’s understanding

of social problems. This is how the study of social problems shifts the focus from understanding a problem as something inherent or natural to something that is created; the focus shifts to one of uncovering and understanding who identifies and constructs something as a problem. Once the problem is constructed, a “solution” can be fashioned (Best 2018; Spector and Kitsuse 1977).

### ***Categorically Constructing “Problem” Animals***

How, specifically, do claimsmakers construct some things to be problems? As noted above, language plays a key role in this process (Zerubaval 1995). Specifically, we use language to “lump” together things into categories. We “lump” together things or experiences based on their looking similar and separate or “split” things we consider different. In other words, we socially construct or determine what is similar and what is not according to when and where these constructions take place. Zerubaval (1995) calls this “sculpting...islands of meanings.”

With the continuing industrialization of the world, questions of territory and belonging seem to permeate academic literature. In the late 1800s “sportsmen’s clubs” become a prominent organization with the shared goal of fostering “game protection” due to social codes that required hunters not to overhunt particular species. These organizations then inspired and influenced state and local levels, specifically in the development of hunting laws and regulations. However, into the 1900s it became apparent that game protection as a category was limited in scope (Brulle and Benford 2012). “Wildlife management” was more appropriate because it applies concepts of animal ecology to the management of “wild” areas. This construction of problem animals became apparent in the 1920s when the industrializing Western world began constructing “invasive” species as social problems (Brulle and Benford 2012; Smout 2003). The reorganization of wild animals happened because there was a perceived need to manage them by organizational and institutional organizations, like the Audubon Society and the FWC. However,

the classifications that came from this reorganization of “wild” areas by ecologists led to confusing results; species of animals that were once considered natives were considered non-native (Smout 2003). For example, in the case of the Quaker parakeet, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service initiated a program to eradicate the wild birds based on their previous reputation as an agricultural pest despite being first introduced as an “exotic pet” (Seymour 2013).

We similarly sculpt non-human animals by categorizing them as “wild” or “tame” (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Best 2018). Animals are not constructed to exist in problematic categories when they are in their habitat without human intervention and interests (Best 2018). Non-human animals are placed into categories partly based on how problematic they are to humans and their territory. In the case of “invasive” species, they are claimed to not belong and should not exist in certain environments due to perceived threats they pose to those native ecosystems.

Depending on the dominant claimsmakers, the questions often revolve around who is infringing on who’s territory; humans invading non-human’s territory, or vice versa (Best 2018). This is demonstrated in the work by Harker and Bates (2007) where they examined how wolves and bears became “pests” when they disrupted human interests in shared spaces. Ranchers became outraged when wolves were discovered to be killing their cattle. Outraged at the damage to their property and financial livelihood, ranchers demanded the removal of the wolves (2007). Then, there was a similar call to arms to remove bears when they tampered with garbage cans in suburban environments; they were perceived as posing a threat and not belonging in those landscapes (2007).

More recently there was the case of the Burmese Ball Python. The Python was an introduced species in the United States. They are native to the jungles and wetlands of Southeast

Asia but are not considered “native” in North America. Early sightings of the pythons in Florida during the 1970s did not result in significant public attention (Moloney and Unnithan 2019). However, when sightings increased in the early 2000s, scientific research began on the species’ ecological impacts. The research showed that they posed a significant ecological threat to Southern Florida. Perceived as not appropriate in a south Florida landscape, by its “foreign” and “invading” status, they were regarded and constructed to be social problems. The presence of the python in South Florida and the deaths of “native” non-human animal species in that area inspired a moral panic against the species and their humane removal and euthanization (2019). In the process of claimsmaking, humans situate non-human animals as either fitting into our landscape, or not (Archibald 2015; Cahanin 2017; Jerolmack 2013; Potts 2009; Crowley 2019; Valdez et al. 2019). This process is embedded in the “us” versus “them” language used in stories told about “problem” species. The specific language used exaggerates key differences between human and non-human groups (Potts 2009; Moloney and Unnithan 2019). Latour addresses how western society creates different “ontological zones” between humans and non-humans (1993:10). Nature, in this sense, exists as a pure entity that is socially constructed as something that exists outside of human construction. This is how, according to Latour, “nature” exists in a category that is subject to planning and conscious design. Human societies construct and manage “nature” because it is perceived as “wild” and unable to manage itself (2004).

More specifically, people create landscapes by conferring meaning to nature and the environment (Greider and Garkovich 1994). They do this by creating different landscapes with unique, significant, and enduring meanings. Landscapes serve to reflect ideas about what nature is and should be. This is done by conferring ideas about culture, its values, and different belief systems. If an animal is considered dangerous or lethal, then the more likely the reaction to that

species will be heightened; the response to that species will then skew towards eradication and control (Cohen and Richardson 2002; Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2019; Hallsworth 2011; Moloney and Unnithan 2019; Scarce 1997; Twining, Arluke, and Patronek 2000; Wolch 1997). Othering “nuisance” species is the justification for their systematic removal from landscapes. Removal techniques vary but fall under a category of lethal control (Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2019). For example, the efforts of possum eradication in New Zealand demonstrate how the different discourses negatively situate the possum as recognizably cute, but a “nuisance”, and as an unwanted foreign invader (Potts 2009). Despite the role of humans in the transportation and introduction of these “invasive” species into native ecosystems, as in the case of the possum’ (and other animals’) case, the non-human animal is labeled as a threat to a “native” environment. This “native” environment can then “other” the “invasive” that threaten it. Lethal control techniques are justified because the “invasive” species is constructed as a persistent “weed,” or threat, and social problem, in a native “garden” (Bauman 1989; Potts 2009; Best 2018). These removal techniques, which are often cruel, are then justified by a rational governing organization (Weber 1968) like the FWC who releases guidelines for the control of different species.

News stories provide a great space to inspect the construction of social problems. While generally assumed to be a reliable report of information, they still play a role in the construction of nature and non-human species as problems. News stories and categories produce, or give voice to, narratives that construct some species as good and others as bad. When stories “identify” and claim some species to be invasive, the narrative serves interested parties and may shape how those species are interpreted and understood. The narratives in news articles are particularly important to consider because of the work they do in a world characterized by social

relations among strangers when deciding who is a friend and who is a foe (Loseke 2019). While the pit bull, for example, is not being categorized as an “invasive” species like the Quaker parakeet and Muscovy duck, they are categorized as deviants. These groupings are distinct but similar. By problematizing the pit bull in media narratives, it inspired their status as a social problem that led to a war on pit bulls (Twining, Arluke, and Patronek 2000). This resembles the war on “invasive” species and problem animals. Much like “invasive” species, the pit bull disturbed the proper boundary between culture and nature because of stories that constructed them as an “aggressive” and “savage” species. News stories help facilitate moral panics about species, whether pit bulls in neighborhoods or Pythons in the Everglades, by constructing and offering narratives through stories. Readers then interpret and reproduce these narratives by continuing the war against species, including the eradication of some like the Pythons in the Everglades.

There are different kinds of reasons associated with constructing a species as a social problem (Best 2018; Cohen and Richardson 2002; Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2019; Hallsworth 2011; Moloney and Unnithan 2019; Potts 2009; Scarce 1997; Twining, Arluke, and Patronek 2000; Wolch 1997). People tend to balance conflicting values attributed to animals in ways that are comforting to people and their lifestyles (Best 2018; Irvine 2003). Due to these daily constructions of animals by and for humans, the meanings of animals as social constructions are fixed and enduring. The non-human animals we label as “tools” serve human interests, while those categorized as companions help or make humans feel happy or safe. For example, we label as food those animals meant for human consumption (and not companion animals) so they can be treated differently. We construct and define “invasive” species as “nuisance” animals and place them even lower on this scale where their lives are valued less and

threatened more because they are perceived to be of no use to us; they are not perceived as serving humans in ways mentioned previously. Once the species is deemed problematic, or a social problem, then their removal is justified as a solution to this problem. Removal techniques vary but fall under a category of lethal control (Crowley, Hinchliffe, and McDonald 2019). This positions the findings of recent literature as a conflict between humans and non-human animals that fall in that problematized category.

To add the question of how the Muscovy duck problematized in news media narratives, I distinguish my research from previous literature in that I focus not only on how the Muscovy is problematized in similar ways to current literature but also on how the outcomes of their problematization differ. While previous research focuses on the constructions of non-human animals as “problems”, I show how this process also problematizes people involved in the construction of the narratives. This contributes to othering processes across the human-animal boundary and also applies to how humans other each other through the process of claimsmaking. While othering processes are studied at length in social problems literature, my research adds a connection between non-human animal literature and social problems literature.

## **Methods**

In my thesis, I examine the narrative construction of the Muscovy duck as problematic species. The broad question I ask is how, and under which conditions, is a species constructed as a problem? I will do a narrative analysis of stories presented news media articles printed in Florida and Texas newspapers that frame the Muscovy duck as a local “problem” species. I chose to study narratives because they are stories constructed at all levels of social life. The different levels at which narratives are constructed are the levels of person, organization, institution, and culture (Loseke 2016). Narratives from one level then influence narratives produced on the other levels. The narrative productions of moral and emotional meanings are a central characteristic of the social processes of power and politics in our globalized, heterogeneous, morally fragmented, rapidly changing, and mass-mediated world (Loseke 2017). As Jennifer Wolch (1997:102) argues, “The media both represents and affects public opinion through their discourse in an iterative cycle”.

I used textual analysis of news stories because it will allow me to use stories from a variety of sources across different places to more fully understand how the Muscovy duck is being constructed as a problematic character in the “duck wars.” A benefit of textual analysis is that it is a form of nonreactive research. This means that my presence examining narratives in news articles did not have an impact on the narratives produced. I examined news articles and without impacting the production of the stories. I used stories from all published news sources in Florida and Texas. This allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of how the Muscovy duck was



constructed across time, location, and culture. I drew from news sources in Florida and Texas because these states identified the Muscovy as highly problematic (Downs et al. 2017).

The data for this study were 25 unique news articles. The news articles were collected between May of 2020 and February of 2021. The articles were published between the dates of February 2006 to January of 2021. This research received approval from the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board before my collection process and is considered to not include human subjects. To collect the data, I went to the news article websites in Texas and Florida: the Houston Chronicle, Herald Tribune, Miami Herald, Orlando Sentinel, Florida Weekly, Palm Beach Post, ABC News, Fox News, Sun-Sentinel, and the Tampa Bay Times. I chose these news sites over others because they discussed the Muscovy duck in Florida and Texas. I only used news sources that discussed the Muscovy duck, so the collection of websites used are varied to cover the stories that covered instances of the Muscovy being problematized or discussed in different counties across Texas and Florida. Because I was focused on finding content about the narrative construction of the Muscovy, I searched using the keywords "duck wars", "Muscovy duck", "duck", and "Muscovy." All of the news articles are officially printed articles, both online and in print with a range in length between 1 page to 6 pages. The articles included interviews with residents, representatives from the Fish and Wildlife Commission, School Boards, and Homeowner Associations.

I organized my findings according to the emotional codes present in the articles discussed. The different emotional codes were positive towards Muscovy (PTM), negative towards Muscovy (NMT), and mixed (M). To categorize, I first read each article to identify a clear sentient theme about the Muscovy duck. Clear themes emerged. Either people loved the duck, disliked the duck, and were neutral. Articles that focused on the problematic Muscovy

tended to be more negative overall and were coded as negative. Articles that talked about the Muscovy as unproblematic tended to be more positive towards Muscovy and coded as such. Regardless of the code, most articles focused on constructing the duck as a character in the “duck wars.”

To analyze my data, I used Loseke’s (2015) method outlined in her work, “The Empirical Analysis of Formula Stories.” First, I established a social context and asked four questions that help situate “invasive” species stories. Specifically, I started with who authored the story, why the author claimed to write the story, who the intended audience was, and what type of story was being claimed. The meanings of story characters, plots, and morals depended on understanding what a reader, in this case, me, brings with them when they read an article. While I am not analyzing how readers interacted with these stories, generally speaking, I am reading and analyzing the narratives present in these different stories. In these stories, there were varying, yet equally justifiable, interpretations of key story ingredients. Next, I read to get an overall sense of the story by asking questions about the plot, the major characters, and morality. Then, I looked for categories in the explicit descriptions of “invasive” species in the narratives. The stories told in the news articles develop “invasive” species as characters through the different descriptions used. Through this analysis, I can unpack the process through which the Muscovy is problematized through news narratives.

## **Findings**

### ***Setting the Stage***

A common theme in the news articles is that the Muscovy duck is a character in the “duck wars” in Florida and Texas. The reporter of a *Houston Press* article writes, “In pockets of Pearland, a long-simmering war has built over the white and dark-emerald Muscovy ducks that make homes in residents’ flower beds” (Foxhall and Hennes 2019). According to a reporter in the *Miami Herald* in Miami Springs, the residents “have a love/hate relationship with the city’s countless Muscovy ducks” (Clark and Writer 2012). The “duck wars” consist of conflicts between residents over whether or not the duck should be allowed in neighborhoods. The idea that the Muscovies belong or do not belong seems to be the source of the conflict and a defining characteristic of each group. The “duck lovers” want to see the ducks in their neighborhoods, while the “duck haters” want them removed. The claims about whether or not the ducks are allowed to belong serve as a source of contention between the two groups and the “duck wars”. Due to this, both sides tell a different story and construct the duck differently. They also have different claims about how to solve the “duck wars” so conflicts do not continue to emerge.

According to these news narratives, conflicts between residents began when the duck made their way into the states from South America. In an article published by the *Tampa Bay Times* titled, “Muscovy Duck Wars Rage on,” the reporter writes, “Skirmishes between lovers and haters of the wattled invaders have existed since the ducks made their way here from South and Central America” (2015). This article, among others, summarizes how conflicts between neighbors began when the Muscovy duck “moved into” the Southern United States. Conflicts

over these “wattled invaders” (*Tampa Bay Times* 2015) turned problematic in neighborhoods as neighbors grew aggressive towards one another. In the *Tampa Bay Times*, the reporter revealed that two men engaged in a physical dispute over the feeding of Muscovy ducks. While a 55-year-old man “...in Davie .... was feeding Muscovies from his front yard...” he “allegedly tackled, punched and kicked a 65-year-old neighbor who criticized him” (2015). The reporter continued, “...in recent months, clashes have aggravated the enduring enmity between Muscovy fans, who like to feed them, and foes, who'd like to exterminate them” (2015). Here, the two groups are claimed as opposing. Those who enjoy the duck, the “duck lovers” and those who are against the ducks, the “duck haters”.

While conflicts erupt between people, organizations like Homeowner’s Associations can become involved when these conflicts heighten in neighborhoods. According to the *Houston Press*, the HOA’s step in to remove the duck led to further disputes between residents. Their solution to this conflict was the removal of the ducks from neighborhoods since they are categorized as an “invasive” species in some Floridian and Texan neighborhoods according to the FWC. While removal of the ducks was often proposed, not all residents agreed that they wanted the ducks removed from their neighborhoods. According to the *Houston Press*, while some residents in a northwest Houston neighborhood wanted to see the Muscovy population removed from their neighborhood, others did not,

“Ducks in a northwest Houston neighborhood have become so annoying over the past decade that the local homeowner’s association has decided it’s time to kill them-which has neighbors feeling either totally relieved or very uncomfortable” (Flynn 2016).

Those who wanted to see the ducks removed were constructed as being “totally relieved” at their removal, while those who did not want the ducks removed were depicted as “very

uncomfortable”. Despite the feelings of either party, the HOA was responsible for handling complaints and concerns of residents over the Muscovy population in their neighborhoods. This is important to include because it demonstrates how the conflict between groups has increased and caught the attention of HOA’s who call in trappers to remove the Muscovy population.

Since there are two opposing groups over the topic of removing the duck population from neighborhoods, each group then made a set of claims about the other that fueled reports of conflict in the articles. According to the reporter in a *Tampa Bay Times* article, “Duck disputes can even set human against human” (2015). The “duck lovers” claim the other group as being “duck haters” (Ballou 2015; Tampa Bay Times 2015). They claim the “duck haters” are “violent” (Morse 2019) when removing the Muscovy from neighborhoods. In a Houston neighborhood in Texas, the reporter for an article in the *Herald Chronicle* wrote about how the “duck wars” took a violent turn for the ducks.

“What began as a fun neighborhood quirk is, somehow, a great big 2019 issue — reminiscent of battles over feral cats, or, as one resident went as far as to say, immigration. Some people want to care for the ducks here; others, clearly, want to keep them out. Many can’t figure out why it’s such a problem” (Foxhall and Hennes 2019). In this neighborhood, they liken the violence towards the ducks to similar issues with feral cats and immigration. According to this resident, ducks are invading neighborhoods and land that they do not belong on. The reporter in the same article continues to claim that the “duck haters” are forcefully removing the ducks from neighborhoods, “Dead ducks are a frequent sight in the neighborhood, one resident said. Residents say drivers intentionally mow down ducklings. Someone else, yet to be caught, has allegedly been exterminating ducks under cover of the dark with what might be a bow and arrows, the same crime the occurred two years ago” (2019). The

killings of the ducks are also confirmed in one article: “recently, dead ducks were mysteriously left there [in the street to be] witnessed by elementary students on their way to school” (2019). Then, there are the “duck lovers” (Ballou 2015; Bryan 2010; Carter 2019; Tampa Bay Times 2015). This group is claimed to “anthropomorphize” the ducks (Ballou 2015) and blamed for “... feed[ing] them” (Tampa Bay times 2015) which ultimately contributes to their growing population size. According to the reporter in a *Florida Weekly*,

“Along with everyone reached for this story — those who advocate strict population control and those who seek to protect the ducks and those who believe in both — [a resident] implored people not to feed them. That can result in exploding populations, causing more environmental problems and conflicts with people, and ultimately leading to more euthanized ducks” (Whittle 2020).

The “duck haters” claim that the “duck lovers”, or “those that feed them” (Whittle 2020) are the source for the “exploding populations” (2020), thereby blaming the “duck lovers” for the conflicts.

### ***The “Problematic” Muscovy: The “Duck Haters”***

In this section, I clarify how “duck haters” construct the Muscovy as a “problem” species. Overall, the claims made by the “duck haters” in their interviews with reporters construct the duck as “problematic” because of deviant characteristics attributed to the species. These characteristics include their feces production in neighborhoods and population size. Both serve as justifications for their problematization and removal from those in the “duck hater” category. Population size and feces production are claimed to be how the Muscovy came to be a “problem”. The “duck haters” claim the Muscovy’s population size and feces production are problematic because they view the ducks as out of place and not belonging in their

neighborhoods. According to these residents, the Muscovy population belongs elsewhere. “Duck haters” ultimately describe the Muscovy as “trash” and “bad birds” that do not belong in their neighborhoods (Whittle 2020; Ogle 2018). Finally, I conclude this section with a discussion on how those in the category “duck haters” propose to end the “duck wars” and the Muscovy “problem”. They claim this problem can be solved by removing the Muscovy population from their neighborhoods.

Their population size is claimed to be problematic by the “duck haters”. According to the reporter of a *Herald Tribune* article, “the problematic version of the Muscovy is a domesticated species when they reproduce, they produce more offspring than their non-domesticated cousins” (Whittle 2020). The reporter goes on to write, “This has led to a dramatic increase in their population in the Southern United States” (2020). In a *Sun-Sentinel* article their breeding patterns are noted by the reporter, “Listen, these are very prolific animals when it comes to breeding” (Ballou 2015). Then, another article by *ABC News* in Hillsborough County offers a similar story:

“There’s hundreds, every time you move one out another comes in” (Leigh 2019).

Another reporter in an article in the *Florida Weekly* claimed there is a sharp increase in the Muscovy population. They wrote, “[m]embers of the Audubon Society found almost 50 percent more Muscovies in Sarasota, Charlotte and Manatee counties in 2005 than three years ago, and some bird counters believe their figure was very low” (Whittle 2020).

Then, according to a *Sun-Sentinel* reporter, the FFWC “estimates there are tens of thousands in the state, with a high concentration in urban areas such as South Florida” (2015). Several years later, the *Florida Weekly* talked about the population size of the Muscovy as they tried to summarize the debates over the Muscovy:

“These birds have escaped captivity or were released illegally for ornamental purposes. Their status as an ‘invasive’ or ‘introduced’ species and their propensity for breeding has resulted in official policies that promote population control over protection. That means they are usually euthanized unless a private landowner or rare shelter will take them.”

(Williams 2020)

In doing so, the reporter stated where the ducks came from and, most importantly, why their population is considered so problematic. The Muscovy ducks are an introduced species that breed in large numbers, which is one possible explanation for their dramatic population increase over the past few years in Florida and Texas (Audubon 2020). The proliferation of the species in neighborhoods in these states is one reason the Muscovy duck is constructed as a problem by the “duck haters”.

With claims of increasing population size came claims about an increase in feces on residents’ yards. “No matter how cute the ducklings, not everyone appreciates the big ducks because they tend to poop anywhere and everywhere” (Clark and Writer 2012). This hate is because of the feces left behind from the adult ducks. The love, in this case, is for the ducklings. In Miami Springs, the same article addressed how the School Board for Miami Springs Elementary School called a company, Bug Busters Inc. of Miami, to remove the ducks from the school property. The company was called in to remove the ducks because, “there was a lot of poop on the courts and outside hallways, a parent said a duck pooped on his car” (Clark and Writer 2012). In a *Herald Tribune* article, the author interviewed residents in a Punta Gorda neighborhood. One resident claimed, “I don’t like them sitting around like they’re sipping bourbon in my yard.” The resident continued and said, “They come over and get in my yard and crap all over the place” (Whittle 2020). This anthropomorphic explanation of the Muscovy’s



behavior in his yard explains the behaviors of the duck when they are searching for food from the yards. Instead of claiming the duck as searching for bugs and other native food for this species, this resident claims the Muscovy “sip[s] bourbon” and “crap[s] all over the place” (2020).

Here, Muscovy ducks are claimed to be “trash” that do not belong in their neighborhoods in interviews with reporters in the news articles. A reporter in a *Herald Tribune* article interviewed residents and one neighbor in Southwest Florida who said, “I’m happy to say we don’t have that duck trash here” when asked about what they think of the Muscovy ducks in their neighborhood (Whittle 2020). Another resident kept their view of the Muscovies brief, but no less meaningful, “They are bad birds, believe me” (2020). The use of words like “trash” and “bad birds” constructs the ducks as not belonging to those areas through the use of language that justifies the ducks as having characteristics that make them “bad” and “trash”. The use of this language is also found in another article published by the *Miami Herald*. A journalist for the *Miami Herald* shared their opinion on how residents in Miami feel about the Muscovy. They wrote, “We want these trash peacocks out of our face” (Ogle 2019). Residents do not want this species of fowl in their neighborhoods. The reporter compared the Muscovy to a “trash peacock”, or the less desirable version of another fowl in Florida. Another reporter in *The Palm Beach Post* interviewed the president of the HOA in a Jupiter neighborhood in Florida and claimed, “These ducks are messy; They are a nuisance” (Morse 2019). The claims about the Muscovy as being “messy” and “trash” are linked to their feces production in neighborhoods. Residents that are in the “duck hater” category do not want to continue having them in their neighborhoods.

With claims about increasing feces production and population size, the Muscovies are claimed as problematic because the ducks are constructed as not belonging in Floridian and Texan neighborhoods. When discussing where the ducks “belong,” a resident claimed, “[t]hey’re a total nuisance, we would love to have been able to gather them and transfer [them] to a farm out in Conroe” (Flynn 2016). But where did the ducks go? According to this reporter in the same story, “the ducks are transported to Tampa and released on a farm” (Clark and Writer 2012). These two examples show where the duck is supposed to belong. The ducks are not supposed to be in their yards sipping bourbon, but instead, they are supposed to be on a “farm” or somewhere, anywhere, else that is not in their controlled neighborhood environment. This continued in another article in the *Miami Herald*: residents said they were “sick of putting up with Miami ducks” (Ogle 2019). The Miami ducks in this article are the Muscovies. The reporter continued, “you hear about pythons every day, but do you ever see them? NO; you have only seen pythons on your Twitter feed; what you see IRL [in real life] are these ducks standing in front of your car or pooping on your lawn” (Ogle 2019). When discussing why the Muscovy is problematic, there is a direct connection between being able to see the ducks and their feces over other species like the Burmese Ball Python. Both species are considered “invasive,” but according to this article, there is only one that residents see. A Bonita Springs resident in Florida supported the control of the population of Muscovy when he stated in a *Florida Weekly* article, “As a lifelong member of the National Audubon (Society) and birding enthusiast I feel strongly that we must do our best to control invasive species that harm native species by crowding them out of habitat, introducing disease and fouling ponds that are a food source for many species, including the osprey and bald eagle” (Williams 2019).

Here, population size is linked to a perceived threat; the Muscovy is constructed as a potential threat to “native” species. By not being categorized as “native,” their status as “invasive” means that their population size is considered a threat to “native” ecosystems and neighborhood ponds. The “duck haters” offer a resolution to the “duck wars;” control the population. There a few methods of population control discussed in the news articles by reporters and residents, all verified by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, and The Audubon Society. Population control is the most popular method of removal for the “duck haters.” According to the author in a Palm Beach Post who quoted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “anyone can remove or destroy Muscovy ducks...or their nests, or eggs at any time when found” (Morse 2019). The most popular method proposed is to not feed the ducks. According to a reporter who summarizes what the Audubon society said about the Muscovy population in neighborhoods in an article posted in the *Herald Tribune*, “the law doesn’t allow people to go duck hunting in back yards, so the only way to control Muscovies is to stop feeding them” (Whittle 2006). The author of a *Palm Beach Post* article wrote about one resident who intends to help the effort of controlling the population. In an interview with this resident, they said, “the easiest thing any resident or visitor can do is to not feed the birds, [the resident] said he would work to notify [other] residents and put-up signs around the complex” (Morse 2019). According to another interview in an *ABC News* article, a resident said, “Don’t give them a reason to be there, do not feed them and bring in your bird feeder at night so rodents don’t push the seed to the ground and create a food source for them” (Leigh 2019). Then, in another *ABC News* article, the reporter wrote that the city of Pearland in Texas was also trying to control the Muscovy population. According to this reporter and the City of Pearland, “the City of Pearland is telling residents they are not allowed to feed the ducks” (Childers 2018). Then, in the

*Houston Chronicle*, the reporter wrote on how Texas neighborhoods in the City of Pearland address the duck by encouraging residents to not feed the ducks. The reporter wrote, “[r]esidents are also not allowed to feed any species of ducks, including Muscovies, per city ordinance and city officials warned anyone who fails to abide by the legal parameters to address the Muscovy duck population could face criminal charges or civil penalties” (Hennes 2019). The reduction in population size can legally contain any removal practices that fall under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services humane removal techniques but not feeding the ducks is the most popular method for residents in both Florida and Texas.

As presented in these news narratives, the Muscovy is constructed as a problem because of their feces production and overpopulated presence in suburban places. The reason that feces production is problematic is that it is another way that the species is seen. The species being claimed as seen in these areas contributes to their problematization because some residents find their presence as a nuisance and causing property damage. This constructed deficiency attributed to the species then serves as justification to reduce their population sizes and thus remove them from their property in neighborhoods. The practice of not feeding the ducks, as required by Florida and Texas city officials, is the most popular method of reducing the Muscovy’s population size. However, feeding the Muscovies is also practiced by “duck lovers” and is one thing claimed by the “duck haters” that the “duck lovers” do that is claimed to be problematic due to it encouraging the Muscovy population to continue to increase.

### ***The “Protected” Muscovy: The “Duck Lovers”***

In this section, I discuss the “duck lovers” and how they construct the Muscovy as not problematic. This is important because it tells the other side to the “duck wars” and how the problematization of the species is not only because of the claims being made about the species

“problematic” characteristics but the counterclaims by those who claim to not want the Muscovy to leave their neighborhoods. The “duck lovers” claim they enjoy the ducks because the species is constructed as part of the neighborhood environments and they belong. The ducks are also constructed as outdoor pets and family members, and they do not deserve the “abuse” from the “duck haters”. Then, I conclude with how the “duck lovers” claim that they do not want to see the species removed from their neighborhoods because of how “duck haters” construct the ducks as problematic, instead they claim that they want to protect the Muscovy ducks. In the “duck wars”, the “duck lovers” claim the Muscovies are being wrongly constructed as problematic by “duck haters” and instead claim they should be protected.

“Duck lovers” claim that the Muscovies are part of the neighborhood environment. This construction of the Muscovy as belonging is shared by one resident, known as the “duck lady” in a Houston neighborhood in Texas: “to her, they are just a part of living in an area with trees and ponds and are part of the wildlife” (Flynn 2016). This resident goes on to say, “[t]hat’s kind of the beauty of this neighborhood-it’s part of the woodlands, it’s got that atmosphere, it’s like being out in the country” (2016). The ducks represent a more woodland atmosphere that is not as closely maintained and controlled but rather shared. The ducks are considered to belong in the neighborhoods and ponds because that is part of living in the area. Another couple in Pecan Grove Texas claims the ducks are part of their daily afternoon ritual. According to them, they “wake up, feed the ducks on the way to school, the afternoon ritual rings essentially the same in reverse; Pecan Grove husband and wife and their son take joy in this daily and weekly routine” (Kuhlmann 2016). For these residents, the ducks are part of the atmosphere in their neighborhoods and are considered to not be “invasive,” but rather part of the environment that

they enjoy. The removal of the ducks would take something away from these communities for them.

Others view the ducks as family. Residents who fall into the category of “duck lovers” think of the Muscovies as part of the family. A reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* interviewed a family that was concerned about the disappearing Muscovies in their neighborhood. The reporter writes, “[t]he family initially thought nothing of it-that their animal friends had found a new feeding area,” (Kuhlmann 2016). The reporter continues, “[t]hough all are heartbreaking, one death hit the son particularly hard, as it was a baby the husband and son had worked to rescue and raise as a chick” (2016). The taking in and caring of a baby duck strengthened the bond between the family and these ducks. When removed, it was not only removing part of the routine but a part of the family that they had invested interests in seeing success in their neighborhood pond. The ducks are constructed to be part of the neighborhoods and everyday routines for “duck lovers” because of how some residents construct them to be extended family members or pets that frequent the ponds and flower gardens.

For “duck lovers,” the Muscovies are part of the neighborhoods and should not be relocated.

“Duck lovers” claim that the Muscovy do not need to be relocated and instead, claim to want to protect the duck because of how they are constructed as problematic by “duck haters.”

According to a *Florida Weekly* article, a resident started a sanctuary for the Muscovy ducks after witnessing a violent attack on ducklings. The resident said she

“started Duck Haven after watching a man drowning baby ducks and beating their mother in a lake near her home. Back in Long Island, she and her late husband had raised foster children, she recalled, and when they came to Florida, the ducks felt to her a little bit like that” (Williams 2020).

The resident then goes on to say,

“I guess when I moved down here, I took a liking to these ducks and I could see how when I would go out to rescue one, people said, ‘They’re garbage ducks, they’re nuisance ducks,’ which made it even more of a challenge for me to protect these ducks that so many people disliked” (2020).

After witnessing a violent scene from someone perceived to be in the “duck hater” category, someone who drowned baby ducklings, this resident took it upon herself to start caring for the ducks. Here, this resident talks about how the other group, the “duck haters” make a challenge for her to protect the Muscovy population. Likening the ducks to her foster children depicts how deeply she cares for the ducks; she looks after the ducks as she would her children. The emotion behind linking the ducks to her late husband and the foster children she used to raise brings imagery of saving and protecting the ducks on a level that keeps her continuing this practice. Meanwhile, in Miami Springs, the Muscovies are claimed as protected and displayed openly on their website, according to the author in a *Miami Herald* article. The author writes, “Families of Muscovy ducks are a frequent familiar sight throughout Miami Springs, waddling along main roads and byways and paddling in canals and fortunately, the ducks enjoy protected status and are not a staple of our dinner tables” (Rabin 2019). In a *Sun Sentinel* article, the reporter interviewed a resident in Pembroke Pines South Florida, who is claimed to be a wildlife advocate. In the interview, the resident says, “Muscovies should not be killed, by whatever method and they are beautiful animals that deserve to live as much as any human does” (Ballou 2015). The construction of the duck as beautiful, family, and in need of protection is why the “duck lovers” claim that the species should not be problematized, but instead protected.

## **Discussion**

The “duck wars” consist of two opposing sides: the “duck haters” and the “duck lovers.” As my findings suggest, both groups make a set of claims about the duck in their construction of the problem species. The “duck haters” claim the duck is problematic because of their population size, feces production, an unwelcome presence in their neighborhoods. For this group, the Muscovy duck is constructed as a “problem” species that is the source of contention between “duck haters” and “duck lovers”. The “duck lovers” construct the Muscovy as part of the family and welcome additions to neighborhoods. Both groups make counterclaims about the species and construct the duck differently in the overarching narrative of the “duck wars”.

Each group also makes claims about each other. Fundamentally, “duck haters” were categorized because they wanted the species removed from neighborhoods. “Duck lovers” categorized them as “haters” because they wanted to “abuse” or otherwise “harass” the ducks in public parks or private yards. The “duck lovers” are also constructed by the “duck haters”. The “duck lovers” feed the ducks and are claimed to anthropomorphize the ducks. The “duck lovers” work in the sanctuaries and tend to ducks constructed to be wounded by the “duck haters”. Because the “duck lovers” care for the Muscovy population and feed them, which they are advised not to do, they are constructed by “duck haters” to be the cause of the Muscovy “problem” and encouraging an “invasive” species to persist in their neighborhoods. Yet, by removing the duck’s population, the “duck haters” are constructed as violent and unnecessarily aggressive towards passive ducks that the “duck lovers” believe belong in those areas.

The “duck lovers” claim the “duck haters” are abusing the Muscovy population and seek out ways to protect the ducks. The “duck haters” claim the “duck lovers” are encouraging an “invasive” species to continue proliferating in their neighborhoods. The conflict ensued between neighbors who differ in their constructions and claims about the Muscovy. To resolve conflict,



the “duck haters” claim that population control is the best method of action. The “duck lovers” claim the opposite and claim that the Muscovy population should be protected.

My findings demonstrate how the Muscovy is a prototypical character because of the policies being formed about and for them by city ordinances and how that impacts their population across the United States. As my findings suggest, the Muscovy duck is not inherently a social problem or an “invasive” species. Instead, this species became a “problem” species through narrative constructions by “duck haters” and “duck lovers” in an overarching narrative of the “duck wars”. All news articles focused their stories on the Muscovy duck in light of how residents perceive them through interviews. These policies are shaped by claimsmakers who attribute characteristics to the Muscovy population. The two opposing groups, the “duck lovers” and “duck haters”, attribute characteristics to the Muscovy and then generalize to the wider population. By this I mean, because one Muscovy was given a certain characteristic, all Muscovies thus have that characteristic by nature of being a Muscovy duck. These characteristics are evaluated as deficiencies. Deficiencies are ways that the producers of the stories, the claims makers, problematize the species. The deficiencies of the Muscovy are constructed as their population size and how that relates to their feces production. Then, the news articles and companies are the coaxers that circulate the stories from producers to the consumers. The producers of the stories and the consumers become the producers through the interviews. In these interviews with news companies, the producers then influence others like fellow residents, trappers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, the Audubon Society, and HOA’s. However, because these stories are intended to inform the public, the overall theme in the following articles is to remove the Muscovy population from residential areas. To remove the Muscovies, the problematization of their character comes out in the following ways: they have a population size

that is too large, their feces and waste production tarnishes property, and they pose a threat to the ecosystem. Then, there are the stories and narratives that organize around how the people perceiving the Muscovy as a problem are an actual problem. The deficiencies linked to the species are instead linked to those who remove and call for the removal of the species, the “duck haters”. Those who are placed in that category then problematize those in an opposing category, the “duck lovers”. They frame those that enjoy the duck as “duck lovers” and claim they are the source of the problem because they feed and encourage the Muscovy populations in their neighborhoods and parks. These two groups are the claimsmakers in this story of the duck and consist of residents in these different neighborhoods covered by local news stories. The “duck haters” call for the ducks to be removed because they are perceived to be a social problem linked to the “duck lovers”. The “duck lovers”, then, refer to the “duck haters” as the problem that needs to be stopped because they are inhumanely harming the “innocent” Muscovies.

These findings suggest that the ways we construct the other are based on claims and perceptions of belonging. This contributes to understandings of the othering process apparent in claims made about not only non-human animals’ populations but also human populations. These findings contribute to the body of literature on animals and social problems literature by contributing unique findings that reveal narrative constructions and claims in the othering process of non-human species. As previously discussed, the Muscovy duck is constructed as a “problem” species in the narratives that consist of claims about the species and humans in the “duck wars”. The problematized characteristics attributed to the Muscovy all focus on how the Muscovy is either perceived to belong or not belong in Floridian and Texan neighborhoods. Human populations that are othered also have problematized characteristics attached to them through the process of claimsmaking and this connection should be explored further in future

research. Populations that are constructed as the other through claimsmaking revolve around notions of belonging. Overall, these findings contribute to the othering processes that occur in narrative constructions of “problem” species and social problems.

As stated previously, future research needs to explore these processes through which claimsmaking constructs and problematizes the other through claimsmaking and how that resembles the processes through which we other and problematize non-human species. Specifically, in relation to social problems literature. While literature exploring these topics does exist in social problems literature, little research contributes to how animals in society and other topics of sociological interest intersect and relate to social problems and narrative literature. More specifically, questions pertaining to how humans construct the other can benefit from this discussion on narrative constructions of the other, non-human animal or humans alike.

## **Limitations**

There are two limitations to this study. There has been a lack of research into the study on Muscovy ducks, but not on “invasive” or “problem” species. This literature focuses on how “problem” species come to be social problems and the social construction of social problems. While I do study narratives about the Muscovy duck in news articles, more work would need to be done to further flush out how individuals feel, perceive, and respond to “invasive” species. The inclusion of interviews would benefit this body of literature to address that limitation.

The second limitation is that I might not have included every published article about the Muscovy, either online or in print. While my news sources are considerably varied across multiple news platforms, and my sample size adequate for this type of analysis, there are stories that I did not have access to or knowledge of. Further work would need to address these other articles and see if they either fit or differ from the narratives of the included sample.

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