How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural-Spatial Logic of Problem Animals

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How do animals become problems? Drawing on interactionist theories of social problems and cultural geography, I argue that the construction of animals as problems relies upon cultural understandings of nature/culture relationships, which in turn entail "imaginative geographies." Specifically, modernity posits a firm boundary between nature and culture. Animals have their place, but are experienced as "out of place"—and often problematic—when they are perceived to transgress spaces designated for human habitation. Relying on New York Times *articles from 1851 to 2006, and articles from 51 other newspapers from 1980 to 2006, this article focuses on the process by which pigeons as a species were problematized. I contend that pigeons have come to represent the antithesis of the ideal metropolis, which is orderly and sanitized, with nature subdued and compartmentalized. While typified as a health issue, the pigeon's primary "offense" is that it "pollutes" habitats dedicated for human use. The catch phrase "rats with wings" neatly summarizes society's evaluations of, and anxieties about, this bird. This metaphor reflects a framing of pigeons by claims-makers that renders them out of place in the cityscape. This study expands social problems theorizing to more thoroughly account for animals and the role of space. Keywords: animals, nature, culture, space, environment.*

Feral pigeons are a problem in cities around the world. In the West, businesses flourish by contracting with local governments to control this *nonnative* "pest." Many cities and towns have criminalized pigeon feeding to control their numbers and the problems linked to them, from potentially fatal diseases to the property damage that can result from their feces. Over the last century, pigeons have been shot, gassed, electrocuted, poisoned, trapped, and fed contraceptives, among other such efforts to repel them including spikes and sticky gel on ledges. Pigeons, more than other so-called "nuisance birds"[1] such as starlings, are a despised species.

A phrase commonly used to represent the popular disdain for pigeons is "rats with wings." Yet, while pigeons have been a part of city life for thousands of years (Levi [1941] 1963), this problematic framing is a recent phenomenon, even within the era of modern cities. While sparrows were once framed as the United States' greatest problem bird (Fine and Christoforides 1991), today it is in reference to pigeons that news articles declare: "Rat of the sky is now public enemy No. 1" (Bildstien 2004). As the human population expands, uneasy cohabitations of humans and animals continue to proliferate. Cougars threaten rural and suburban inhabitants (Baron 2004); deer destroy backyard gardens; and reintroduced wolves in Yellowstone Park bring the ire of farmers (Scarce 2005). As such, the management of animal populations has been a site of bitter social conflict and claims-making (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005).

1. They are labeled such by institutions such as the Audubon Society, and are not protected by the Migratory Bird Act.

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Such problematizations of animals call out for a sociological examination of the cultural contexts that produce them.

Sociological human-animal studies are becoming more commonplace (i.e., Alger and Alger 2003; Goode 2006; Irvine 2004; Sanders 2003; Serpell 1986), yet many of them are microinteractional and focused on companion animals (Jerolmack 2005). The more macro-oriented work in sociology has tended to favor rural studies and the role of nature/animals in constituting rural identities (cf. Bell 1994; Enticott 2003; Tovey 2003). Indeed, it has become commonsense in the field that interpretations of animals—and nature—are guided and constrained by culture (Evernden 1992; Greider and Garkovich 1994; Irvine 2004; Jerolmack 2007a, 2007b; Wolch and Emel 1998). Thus, how humans construct animals reflects our conception not only of nature but also of society (Sabloff 2001). Despite this fact, the processes of problematizing animals, and their very real consequences that determine animal lives and shape the contours of society, have been virtually ignored by sociologists (but, see Fine and Christoforides 1991; Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005). In fact, the only mainstream sociological article that examines animals as social problems is Leslie Irvine's (2003) institutional study of unwanted pets. Through this exclusion, sociologists allow research, discourse, and policy regarding "nuisance animals" to be dictated by knowledge produced from the natural sciences, the media, and politics (cf. Fine 1997). Tracing the problematization of animals signifies how the nature/culture boundary is conceived, negotiated, and protected. Also, examining how species of animals are defined as problems can mirror and inform processes of how human groups are constructed as problematic (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Fine and Christoforides 1991).[2]

This article applies "an interpretist view of the environment, socially and historically grounded" (Fine 1997:83) to understand how animals become social problems. After examining the work of Bruno Latour (1993) and cultural geographers on relationships between nature and culture, and sociological studies of problematizing animals, I document—largely through 155 years of *New York Times* articles—the historical rise of the pigeon as a public problem and the invention of the rats with wings frame. I show how this problematization relied on the work of claims-makers. Yet, on a deeper level, I show how rhetorically framing pigeons as rats with wings reveals a cultural anxiety about disorder and a deeply felt need for a sanitized city that goes beyond a concern for diseases pigeons may harbor (cf. Douglas 1966; Philo 1995). The metaphor works to further reduce the moral and physical place we allow for pigeons. Thus, in redefining the animal, claims-makers relied upon collective definitions of space. Pigeons are experienced as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966; Philo and Wilbert 2000), and the discourse produced about them reflects a sort of "moral panic" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994) about "wild" animals that defy the boundary between "proper" spaces for humans and animals (Wolch and Emel 1998).

My central assertion is that the way the West problematizes pigeons exposes culturally derived modernist conceptions of proper, morally appropriate, spatial relations between animals and society. This spatial logic is often strikingly revealed in the *metaphors* we use to problematize animals. By investigating this process, I aim to (1) bring the study of animals further into social problems theorizing, and (2) marry the interactionist perspective with the emerging cultural geography literature. *The benefit of the latter for sociology is to integrate a more thorough analysis of physical and metaphorical space into our analyses of social problems.*

2. Of the features shared by most constructivist approaches to social problems (Becker 1963; Best 1995; Blumer 1971; Fine 2001, 1997; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Gusfield 1981; Loseke 1999; Schneider 1985; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985), two are most notable: (1) the insight that "the relationship between 'objective conditions' and the development of social problems is *variable and problematic*" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:143; emphasis in original); and (2) the position that agents and institutions, acting as interested claims-makers, define and frame actions, people, or circumstances as problematic. As I will demonstrate later, the defining of problem animals shares these features. Yet such definitions *are* patterned, refracted through *cultural* frames with *spatial* dimensions.

Nature/Culture Relationships and Problem Animals

Latour (1993) argues that the essence of the "modern constitution" lies in the process of "purification," whereby Westerners create the fiction of "two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other" (p. 10–11). Annabelle Sabloff (2001) calls this dualism "the most notorious feature of the Western nature-habitus" (p. 27). The point is not that nature is "socially constructed;" rather, Latour (2004) argues that we can see the world as it "really" is by studying the inextricable *associations* between humans and nonhumans that exist everywhere but are unthinkable under our modern dualisms. Thus, we should not talk of dinosaurs without reference to how they are known through paleontologists, nor speak of ozone holes without "their meteorologists and their chemists" (Latour 2004:35). Latour (1993) beckons social scientists to examine the "missing matter" of society, *nonhumans*, and to study society as it is lived—a collective of humans, animals, objects, and technologies (cf. Haraway 1991).[3]

Cultural geographers have recently begun to use Latour's approach as a way to situate human-animal relations. They "endeavor to discern the many ways in which animals are 'placed' by human societies in their local material spaces (settlements, fields, farms, factories, and so on), as well as in a host of imaginary, literary, psychological and even virtual spaces" (Philo and Wilbert 2000:5). These scholars look at the boundary-work involved as modern societies seek to make sure that companion animals stay on the leash or in the home (lest they escape and become problematic feral animals; see Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley 2000), that megafauna and predators stay in the zoo or in pristine wilds far removed from civilization, and that livestock stay on the farm and their translation into food takes place out of view. All societies have their "imaginative geography of animals" (Philo and Wilbert 2000:11), and while we modernists allow certain animals into society (such as companion animals), we do so in ways that civilize and subdue "nature" (i.e., spaying/neutering, grooming, and declawing "pets").

Westerners have increasingly less tolerance for urban "wildlife," and while some wild animals are celebrated because they are beautiful, rare, or useful (such as the red tail hawk "Pale Male" of New York), many become interpreted as pests (Sabloff 2001; Wolch, West, and Gaines 1995). Additionally, animals that disgust us, such as rats, are often associated with the most undesirable urban interstices such as sewers. These "pests" create "discomfort or even nausea" when they "transgress the boundary between civilization and nature" by entering sidewalks and homes (Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley 2000:60). Here, they are "matter out of place," threatening a "set of ordered relations" (Douglas 1966:48). Though they are unaware, there are "complex spatial expectations being imposed upon animals" (Philo and Wilbert 2000:22).

There are a few notable sociological studies of the problematization of "wild" animals, one of which is a piece by Gary Alan Fine and Lazaros Christoforides (1991) that takes up the "problem" of the English sparrow during the late nineteenth century in the United States. The article documents how nonnative sparrows were framed by anti-"invasive species" ornithologists as a "menace to the American ecosystem," dirty and useless "immigrants" that competed unfairly with native birds and should be eliminated (p. 375). The authors argue that this metaphor resonated because of the perceived threat of new immigrants to the economy and social fabric of America at that time. Through connection to a problem of "a longer

3. Haraway (1991) presents a feminist critique of the nature-culture separation, arguing that the guise of scientific objectivity inscribes and masks social domination. In this context, she introduces the concept of the "cyborg," which resonates with Latour's "hybrid," to emphasize the fiction of the boundary between nature and society: In "our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology" (p. 150; see also 177–78).

lineage or greater gravitas," metaphors can help a new problem gain status and "survive the competition of public discourse" (Fine and Christoforides 1991:376; cf. Best 1990; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). The anti-sparrow rhetoric disappeared from public discourse in a matter of decades, and Fine and Christoforides (1991) claim that this is because the framing of them as immigrants no longer resonated. Many of the "problem" immigrants back then were integrated into American society. The authors claim that the very existence of a problem may be based on the metaphorical connection, the implication of "A is like B" being that "A should be treated as B" (Fine and Christoforides 1991:377). Today, "there is no widespread call for the destruction of the sparrow" (p. 380). "Its harm beyond that of being a nuisance has never been demonstrated" (p. 378).

An edited volume, *Mad about Wildlife* (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005), echoes Fine and Christoforides (1991) in its use of interactionist theories of social problems to understand conflicts over animals. The contributors emphasize how the framing of animals by institutions and claims-makers with particular interests guides local definitions of animals and policy. For example, the reintroduction of otters into Missouri pitted their supporters—environmentalists who framed them as "playful, ecological angels" (Goedeke 2005:35)—against anglers who resented otters' predation of fish, and who framed them as "hungry little devils" (p. 31). While drawing on perceived traits of otters, each side relied on the projection of moral and human qualities onto these creatures. A similar conflict has occurred surrounding the legality and morality of pigeon and dove hunting, which often pits cosmopolitan environmentalists against espousers of "rural values." Germane to this investigation, the pigeon or dove is portrayed as a gentle, loving symbol of peace by animal rights activists trying to prevent hunting while their opponents construct it as a useless, vermin-infested rat with wings (Bronner 2005; Herda-Rapp and Marotz 2005; cf. Munro 1997 on duck hunting and Woods 2000 on foxes).

A common theme that emerges out of sociological investigations of problem animals is that, more often than not, the worth of animals is judged largely on their usefulness for humans. Animals are often seen as pests when they are thought to be useless, especially if they are viewed as scavengers (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005), are not deemed to be charismatic or particularly attractive (Michael 2004), and are perceived to wreak havoc on human settlements or property, such as foxes, rats, raccoons, seagulls, deer, geese, and rabbits (Capek 2005; Wolch and Emel 1998; Woods 2000). Animals may also become stigmatized, and move beyond being a mere pest, if they are perceived to prey upon human beings, such as pit bulls (Twining, Arluke, and Patronek 2000) and suburban cougars (Wolch 1997), or to spread disease, such as pigeons (Bronner 2005) and—likely the most legendary "vermin"—rats (Birke 2003; Lynch 1988).

Such studies on the problematization of animals demonstrate how sociological insights gained by looking at human deviance (Becker 1963) and social problems (Best 1995) can be extended to animals. There are issues of interests, authority, and power that go a long way in determining which animals become elevated to the status of a public problem (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). However, the spatial logic of nature/culture imaginative geographies (Philo and Wilbert 2000) usually takes a backseat to narrower definitional concerns in these works (see Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005:2; but, see Capek 2005). While the modernist understanding of the nature/culture relationship is certainly contested by scholars and activists (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005), it is still a powerful organizing principle that is not merely a matter of utility but is also a moral and ontological matter (Sabloff 2001). Thus, marrying cultural geography's concern for the physical and conceptual placing of animals to the interactionist social problems perspective provides sociology with a larger analytic tool with which to organize a variety of problematizations of animals as instances of enacting the spatial logic of the "modernist constitution" (Latour 1993).

Method and Data

Because, Jennifer Wolch (1997) argues, the media both represent and affect public opinion through their discourse in an "iterative cycle," she recommends employing content analysis of the media to understand how society conceptualizes its relationship to animals. Fine and Christoforides (1991) employ this method to analyze the sparrow discourse of last century, partially relying on the *New York Times*. As it is the most widely read American paper that has articles from all years readily available through a subscription database, and because it is the newspaper where I have found what I believe to be the first reference to pigeons as rats with wings, I focus my analysis on articles from the *Times*, from 1851 (the paper's inception) to the end of 2006. I also touch on newspaper articles on sparrows to compare rhetoric.

Pigeons have not dominated the headlines nor do they stand out as one of the major social problems of our day. However, the articles that have been written about pigeons—and sparrows—are often rich in rhetorical content that reveal how a historical era problematizes animals.[4] A major benefit of this data set is the number of years covered. Time-series data (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988:73) allow me to document the changes in representation that have occurred throughout the twentieth century. Yet counting articles written about nuisance animals is *not* the best way to uncover when and how they were defined as problems, because simply referring to a pigeon as, for example, an unwanted visitor to a bird feeder is qualitatively distinct from referring to a pigeon as a "filthy rat with wings." *The historical shift in rhetoric is far more telling than the number of articles written*. I also rely on articles written between 1980 and 2006 from 51 predominantly American and Anglo newspapers that are available through Lexis-Nexis. The rationale for this addition is that the phrase rats with wings picks up momentum in the *Times* after 1990. By examining other papers beginning from a decade before this spike, I am able to check if this frame has expanded similarly in the wider arena of Western media.[5]

Like Fine and Christoforides (1991), I am more concerned with the rhetoric of how people talk about animals as problems than with coding and quantifying (cf. Malone, Boyd, and Bero 2000; Wolch 1997). Out of the 498 *New York Times* articles written about pigeons as either nuisances or pests between 1851 and 2006,[6] in this analysis I rely on a subsample of 85 articles from the *New York Times* and 12 op/eds and letters to analyze the rhetoric and key events. The subsample was selected by narrowing the search to articles that featured pigeons in the title; yet the content of all articles was examined. From Lexis-Nexis I examined a set of 162 titled articles about nuisance pigeons between 1980 and 2006, pulled from 458 articles. My method for analyzing the articles is much like an ethnographer's technique for analyzing his or her field notes. There was a process of loose coding, in which I looked for and marked emergent themes: the meta-theme was moral connotations versus value neutral presentations; I also noted anthropomorphic language and how pigeons were categorized (vermin, nuisance/pest, part of nature). I then selected quotes that I thought best reflected these themes but were still true to the tone of the whole piece. Not every article that I relied on to build my argument appears in this paper. Since I am examining rhetoric, I select quotes that

4. Sparrows did not dominate headlines either. Due to space, I only briefly touch upon the anti-sparrow rhetoric reported in the *Times*. However, I did analyze 41 *Times* articles (1861–2006)—including those reported in the Fine and Christoforides study (1991)—and 27 articles from other new sources acquired through Lexis-Nexis (1980–2006) that featured sparrows in the title. My findings match the rhetoric described in Fine and Christoforides (1991), and the claim that such rhetoric disappeared after the 1920s.

5. These are all of the papers available if one selects "major papers" from the Lexis-Nexis search engine; 30 are American papers, largely urban but with wide suburban and regional distribution and coverage; the other Anglo papers are based out of Canada (2), England (5), Ireland (1), New Zealand (5), and Scotland (2); there is one paper each from Brazil, China, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore.

6. Typing "pigeon" as a keyword nets thousands of articles, many only mentioning them in passing; thus I performed a keyword search of the body of articles using "pigeon AND nuisance OR pest OR problem."

reflect the larger body of data, just as an ethnographer must choose which events and quotes to present.

As will become apparent later in the article, the media are a major arena for circulating the rats with wings frame. While I do not release the media of responsibility for shaping the reputation of pigeons through their selection of language and informants, a media critique is not the goal of this study (see Gans 1979; Molotch and Lester 1974). It is important to note that newspapers only tell part of the story about how we imagine animals. News is just one window into public discourse. While I occasionally rely on popular culture references and other sources to more fully capture this discourse, the case presented is incomplete. My method enables partial access to a "latent [cultural] repertory" (Campion-Vincent 1992:172), and it allows me to determine the fluctuation in the salience of a given representation; but it is far more limited in its capacity to detect the degree to which cultural internalization of this discourse occurs in everyday life.

The Rise of the Pigeon Problem

While the sparrow was framed as the most hated urban bird of the late nineteenth century,[7] at the start of the twenty-first century it is pigeons that are deemed filthy and even immoral, and that are the subject of systematic extermination efforts. This section examines the historical rise of this frame.

From Innocent Bird to Mundane Nuisance

From the first article that appeared in the *Times* in which pigeons were in the title, 1874, until 1909, there are only eight items. Perhaps surprisingly, four of the articles and a letter condemn the sport of shooting pigeons. The activity was called "needless mutilating" in an 1874 article, and the author noted that it was "fast falling into disrepute" in England. Other articles expressed moral outrage, calling the sport "brutal murder" on "harmless pigeons" (Foger 1881). The sparrow was the villainous bird of the time, reflected in a *Times* writer's lament (*New York Time*s 1878):

> Only a few years ago pigeons fed in the streets . . . without danger of attack. Their *right to feed* . . . has been disputed by the sparrows so persistently that the pigeons have yielded their old feeding grounds to the new-comers, and now keep to their koops; but even there they are not safe from the incursions of their chattering enemies, who pursue them without fear . . . robbing them of their food, and worrying them until pigeon life . . . must be a good deal of a burden" (p. 2; emphasis added).

The author even suggested replacing the "innocent" pigeons with sparrows in shooting contests. This actually happened. Pigeon shoots became illegal in New York even as the government paid a bounty for sparrow corpses, and sport shooters placated public ire before the ban by replacing pigeons with sparrows (*New York Times* 1895). However, while pigeons as a

7. Within years after the sparrow was introduced into the United States to control a type of worm that was infesting trees in New York (*New York Times* 1869), the *Times* quoted ornithologists and city officials who argued that sparrows "starve out native songbirds" and ought to be "converted into pet-pies" (1870). It was claimed that sparrows "plunder," were "lazy" and "audacious" (*New York Times* 1878), and were an "unmitigated nuisance" that did not possess "one single redeeming quality" (*New York Times* 1871). The sparrow revealed itself to be, in the eyes of the American Union of Ornithologists, "an imposter, a thief, and a murderer," "filled with hatred of all honest birds" (*New York Times* 1884). Claims-makers sought the "systematic destruction" (Cous 1883) of "the most ill conditioned, disagreeable-looking, and unpleasant mannered of all the birds" (*New York Times* 1898). The government did in fact encourage and financially reward the shooting of sparrows.

species may have been viewed as innocent, some members of the city experienced local problems with members of that species.

The first focus on pigeons as a nuisance in the *Times* came in a short piece from 1906, in which a man was arrested for "maintaining a nuisance" for breeding pigeons on his roof. Another article did not appear until 1921, where it was reported that a hawk was accidentally shot by someone aiming for pigeons on Fifth Avenue. Yet in 1924, the *Times* reported that 100 pigeons that nested in a church would be killed (and then eaten) because their cooing interfered with religious services, and a 1926 article reported that the London County Council was considering ways to reduce pigeon numbers. However, "pigeons found their champions" among some London legislators who failed to see the necessity of the "destruction of a few pigeons" and suggested focusing on bigger nuisances, like feral cats. This was a time of growing ambivalence toward pigeons. In 1927, the director of the New York public library pleaded with the public to stop feeding the birds to prevent them from nesting in the building and making a mess on the facade, yet he recognized the "beauty of the birds," the "pleasure people get in feeding them," and that "the birds have many friends among the public" (*New York Times* 1927). In 1930, the keeping of homing pigeons on tenement roofs was banned for its role in creating unsanitary conditions (*New York Times* 1930). In all, however, the articles about pigeons—even if portraying them as a nuisance—appear to be reported in a morally neutral manner. Even as pigeons were exterminated in some places, the bird as a species was not morally denigrated or deemed an illegitimate urban inhabitant.

The Emerging Pest Species

A letter to the *New York Times* from 1935 stated: "pigeons in a city, except in such open spaces as are provided by parks and squares, are *entirely out of place*" (Knox 1935; emphasis added). This marked one of the first times that the pigeon was problematized apart from a specific incident, and came after several other articles that complained that feeding pigeons in some locales was creating a nuisance. A sinister letter followed, in which the author recommended "wringing their pretty little necks" because "these impudent, obscene, noisy birds constitute a nuisance, supported by neighborhood sentimentalists who litter the sidewalks with food for them" (J. L. L. 1935).

Complaints of feeding and large numbers of pigeons became more frequent. On November 18, 1937, the *Times* (1937b) reported that an unknown person killed 110 pigeons with strychnine. Those feeding the birds reacted with horror at their convulsions (*New York Times* 1937a); and ten days later, a retired police officer killed, upon request, 176 pigeons in an upscale neighborhood in New Jersey (*New York Times* 1937b). London began grumbling about the growing nuisance of pigeons, with one health officer comparing their breeding capabilities and nuisance factor to rats (*New York Times* 1938).

In 1945, the first *Times* article appeared that mentioned a specific disease associated with pigeons. Officials in Philadelphia said that hundreds of pigeons were infected with ornithosis, "a disease contagious to humans;" they were destroyed. In 1952, scientists confirmed that pigeons—along with many birds—could carry psittacosis,[8] originally thought to be carried only by parrots (Gelb 1952). Through the rest of the 1950s officials repeated these claims, yet articles on the nuisances brought about by pigeon feeding or their excrement outpaced such reports. The last article of the decade, however, while recognizing that "feeding the pigeons is universal" and that pigeons offer "city folk a chance to participate in outdoor life," called pigeons "free-loaders at heart" and panhandlers (Dempsey 1959). Through humor, the article stereotyped pigeons as a species, and it pointed out that pigeon feeding bans were catching on in some locales.

8. Ornithosis and psittacosis are the same disease.

It is perhaps surprising that the same newspaper that contained such vitriolic attacks against sparrows (see footnote 7) barely contained any moralizing language about pigeons as a species, even as their nuisance factor increased through the 1940s and 1950s. However, pigeons had been linked with disease, so the threat was no longer one of just messy buildings and sidewalks. While there had been no confirmed cases of pigeons passing a disease to humans, the possibility seemed real and the fear was growing. Pigeons had become medicalized, and would increasingly be typified using an epidemiological frame (Best 1990; Birke 2003). Playing on the growing animosity toward pigeon feeding and a perception of these birds as a nuisance, the decade ended with a tongue in cheek but macabre American song written by the satirist Tom Lehrer, celebrating "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park" (1959):

All the world seems in tune
On a spring afternoon,
When we're poisoning pigeons in the park.
Every Sunday you'll see
My sweetheart and me,
As we poison pigeons in the park.

We'll murder them all amid laughter and merriment,
Except for the few we take home to experiment . . .

The Public Health Menace

Though this song is satirical, it reflected a growing discursive antipathy toward pigeons. Mike Michael (2004) points out that we often use humor to make light of the death of "resolutely uncharismatic . . . clueless and stupid" everyday nuisance animals, such as the "roadkill humor" frequently visited upon animals like opossums and squirrels that are run over by cars (p. 285). It is the low status of animals like the pigeon that enables the thought of killing them to be funny.[9] Such a status was abetted as pigeons became linked to disease. This link solidified in the 1960s. A 1960 *Times* article cited a health official who said of pigeons: "These birds are recognized carriers of diseases—viruses and fungus infections." While such recognition came in the recent past, by 1961 pigeons were dubbed a "health menace" and were linked to a form of meningitis that can kill humans (*New York Times* 1961). While the article pointed out that the actual threat to humans was low, the link between pigeons and disease was strengthened, despite the fact that the ability of pigeons to pass the diseases they may carry to humans had seldom if ever been demonstrated. However, pigeons had not penetrated the collective consciousness in such a way as to be framed as a public problem. While a nuisance to many and a potential disease carrier, no potent "frame of vision" (Fine and Christoforides 1991:377) existed that would place the various "problems" associated with pigeons into a simple, coherent interpretive system (Goffman 1974; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). It could hardly be said that pigeons were a pressing public issue.

Pigeons became much more of a pressing public issue on October 1, 1963, when a New York City health official "ascribed two recent deaths to diseases carried by pigeons and called for a campaign to rid the city of its 5,000,000 pigeons" (Devlin 1963). These were the first deaths directly blamed on pigeons, and also the first time an estimate on the number of pigeons was published, in the *Times*. The large (very speculative) number, coupled with the news of the deaths that pigeons were responsible for, made New Yorkers look upon the pigeons they lived amongst in a new, threatening light. The deaths resulted from cryptococcal meningitis. Interestingly, the paper only reported that one of the victims had been in contact

9. Michael (2004) states: "What can, very likely, never be [considered] roadkill are the charismatic megafauna who are iconic to . . . environmentalist sensibilities" (p. 284). When animals like a chimpanzee, tiger, or human are run over, "this is a victim, and this victim's death on the road is a tragedy" (p. 284).

with pigeons, and the sole corroborating evidence was that the men died of a disease that pigeons were known to sometimes carry in their feces. The city official, Dr. Littman, however, went on to recommend outlawing feeding and exterminating *all* of New York's pigeons. Dr. Littman instilled fear in the public, saying that the fungus was "in the air in all five boroughs" and that "everyone is inhaling it." The doctor concluded, "There is no question but that some people in our city are dying because some people want the pleasure of feeding birds" (Devlin 1963).

The threat was clear, and the doctor defined *villains* and *victims* (Irvine 2003; Loseke 1999). With these components, pigeons *as a species* emerged as a public problem. The doctor stated that those who would feed the pigeons were not only selfish but were indirectly murderers; and the disease-ridden pigeons were the deliverers of death. As vermin, the species' entire presence in the city should be annihilated. The next day, the City Board of Health opened an inquiry into the feasibility of carrying out the mass extermination of pigeons. The City Health Commissioner conceded that more scientific facts ought to be gathered before such a decision was made (*New York Times* 1963a); and an October 3 piece suggested, "let's get rid of the rats first," and that one could not imagine Piazza San Marco in Venice, Trafalgar Square in London, or Central Park in New York without pigeons (*New York Times* 1963e). Yet it was apparent that pigeons were increasingly being deemed unworthy of a place in the urban landscape, both conceptually and materially (see *New York Times* 1963b). The pigeon became merely a container of diseases. An October 8, 1963 article (1963d) noted that in Queens, new park signs read, "Do Not Feed Pigeons. Pigeons Are the Greatest Disease Carriers," and the Long Island Railroad declared "war" on the pigeons. The weapons were nets, wires, spikes, poison, and so forth. It was also disclosed on October 12 that "poachers" had been catching pigeons to sell to restaurants and poultry markets (*New York Times* 1963c). Though private trapping and killing were (and are) illegal—one must hire licensed pest controllers—few seemed interested in protecting pigeons.

In a July 14, 1964 *Times* article, an Italian medical expert declared the connection between the two New York deaths and pigeons to be "illogical and without foundation," and he contended: "pigeons are no more dangerous to health than any other house-hold pet or virtually any other animal." While this article may have exonerated pigeons, it does not appear to have influenced a growing number of cities' response to this problem animal. "Do Not Feed the Pigeons" signs continued to go up, and cities like New York expanded tactics to combat pigeons, including an unsuccessful attempt at feeding pigeons wheat soaked in a birth control chemical (Long 1965). To be sure, some student protestors shouted: "We love pigeons" during the public experiment, and in 1964, Mary Poppins sang a tune in support of a "pigeon lady," entitled "Feed the Birds." Pigeons were still an accepted part of the cityscape for many, but advocates' voices would be slowly drowned out by a new metaphorical hook that condensed the threat of the urban pigeon into a "slick, little package" (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988:62); accordingly, pigeon feeders became ostracized and found less legally and morally acceptable locations to feed the birds.[10]

Framing a Problem Species

On June 22, 1966, an article in the *Times* announced: "Hoving Calls a Meeting to Plan for Restoration of Bryant Park." Thomas P. Hoving, the parks commissioner, excoriated litterers and vandals, while the supervisor of Bryant Park lamented: "the homosexuals . . . make faces at people [and] once the winos are dried out at Bellevue, they make a beeline for Bryant Park (*New York Times* 1966)." The article portrayed a park in crisis, overrun by perceived social ills such as vandalism, litter, the homeless, and homosexuals. After this section, a heading read, "And There's the Pigeons." The park supervisor called the pigeons "our most persistent vandal,"

10. On how animal stigma can extend to those who care for them, see Arluke and Sanders 1996:70; Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley 2000; Twining, Arluke, and Patronek 2000.

"because the pigeon eats our ivy, our grass, our flowers, and presents a health menace." While he said the 500 or so pigeons may carry the disease ornithosis, the supervisor conceded: "everyone seems to want to feed them . . . it's impossible to stop the pigeon feeders." Tagged on to the end of this paragraph is the first reported utterance[11] of a metaphor that would follow the pigeon for the next 40 years: *"Commissioner Hoving calls the pigeon 'a rat with wings'"* (1966; emphasis added). With that, the article closed with hope that a cleanup would "bring in a better element of people (1966:49)."

Rat with wings. A simple label uttered by a parks commissioner trying to tackle a host of issues befalling a landmark public space. While the pigeon nuisance was just a part of a much larger problem that had supposedly befallen the park, Commissioner Hoving and the Bryant Park supervisor, in no uncertain terms, morally implicated the pigeons as "vandals," and slinging the term rat with wings at them is consistent with the tone of the piece in which derogatory language was used to indict the homeless and homosexuals. Pigeons became a nuisance through the 1930s and 1940s, nesting and defecating in and on landmarks, statues, and sidewalks. In the 1950s, we learned that pigeons carry diseases. In 1963, they were framed by several officials as menacing vermin to be exterminated (Devlin 1963). In this 1966 article, all of these threads were neatly brought together in a convenient package, rat with wings. This metaphor efficiently summarized the apparent health and nuisance threat of pigeons, linking them to the existing menace of rats in an article that also tied them to recognized social problems of the time such as "winos" and homosexuals.[12] According to the article, the pigeon was consciously motivated to wreak havoc on the social order as a "vandal," who by definition, "deliberately destroys or damages public or private property" (Oxford American Dictionary 2005). The metaphor did not *create* the pigeon problem (cf. Fine and Christoforides' [1991] claim for sparrows); rather, it shows that the "problem" reached a certain cultural salience that warranted a frame.

It took some time for the phrase to catch on, but it is a process that one can witness emerging in the discourse. In 1967, Barbara Paine told *Times* readers how to attract desirable birds to a feeder while keeping away nuisance birds: "To discourage pigeons, recently defined as rats with wings, I scatter millet and cracked corn for juncos and other sparrows in the heart of the brush pile. There is no other reason given for why one may want to discourage pigeons, though the author explains the benefits and detriments of possible nuisances like starlings. The metaphor was the justification. The next decade was relatively quiet in terms of alarmist articles about pigeons, although dozens of standard stories on nuisance and disease were reported.

In 1977, however, a long article appeared in the *Times* entitled "Going to War With Pigeons—and Losing" (Brown 1977). The author began by saying "pigeons are the bums of the suburbs . . . like bums, they pick a neighborhood and stay there, and it takes a lot of harassment to get them to leave." She called pigeons "a nuisance and an enemy to clean living [who] are also aliens." Despite the author's statement that "no one has proven them a health hazard," she framed pigeons as not just undesirable but immoral, called "stupid" and tied to the most undesirable human beings, "bums" (as did Hoving).[13] The same year, a December 23 *Times* article on a small town in Illinois examined the mayor's efforts to eradicate pigeons. He called them "dumb clucks," a local resident dubbed them "cockroaches of the sky," and the author accused them of being "squatters" in a historic building whose "droppings are known to carry 25 diseases, some potentially fatal" (*New York Times* 1977).

11. After searching a variety of news media, the Internet, and other popular culture outlets, this is the oldest reference I have found for pigeons as rats with wings.

12. It is worth noting that the acceptability of derogatory terms used here to describe homosexuals and the homeless speaks to the historically and culturally contingent aspect of social problems.

13. See footnote 12. It is unclear if bums refers to the homeless, or anyone deemed lazy or parasitic. Of note is that the alleged threat of pigeons and the homeless often overlap (Fine and Christoforides 1991:391).

While another resident said the pigeons were beautiful, city officials decided to kill the pigeons using strychnine-laced corn to end the "war" on pigeons.

It seemed that more urbanites wanted a war against pigeons. In 1979, the *Times* reported on an exchange between New York mayor Ed Koch and a city resident that occurred on a call-in radio show. The caller suggested shooting pigeons that infest city buildings. While the mayor replied, "We can't just shoot them," he "quoted approvingly a former parks commissioner, Thomas Hoving, who characterized the birds as 'rats with wings.'" A health official mentioned in the article considered pigeons "harmless" unless they gather in large numbers in confined spaces, but in the end the justification for not poisoning pigeons was because cats and dogs may be killed. Even as the overall tone of the piece and radio show did not paint pigeons as a threat, the rats with wings metaphor was resurrected, this time catapulted through the airwaves as well as the press. An article the following year reported on "the great pigeon menace" (Cavanaugh 1980), and a *Times* article by Haberman (1980) kept the metaphor alive: "They are . . . detested by people like the former New York City official who called them 'rats with wings' . . . Americans often regard them at best as pests and at worst carriers of disease" (p. 132).

The metaphor was beginning to spread its wings in the public discourse, although it had not yet become assimilated enough to float around rootless. The metaphor was tantalizing to some journalists because of all the connotations that it embodied, yet it was still usually reported as having once been uttered by a city official. Enter Woody Allen and his film "Stardust Memories" (1980), often erroneously considered to be the origin of the phrase rats with wings. It came in a conversation between Allen—playing the character "Sandy"—and a love interest—Dorrie—when a pigeon entered the apartment.

> Dorrie: "Hey, that's so pretty. A pigeon!"
> Sandy: "Geez, no. It's not pretty at all. They're, they're, they're rats with wings."
> Dorrie: "They're wonderful. No! It's probably a good omen. It'll bring us good luck."
> Sandy: "No, no. Get it out of here. It's probably one of those killer pigeons."

The metaphor went Broadway, officially entering pop culture lexicon in a way that could not be accomplished in the *Times*. Allen urged Dorrie—and the audience—not to interpret pigeons as pretty but to see them as rats. A year before, the novel *Mole's Pity* (Jaffe 1979) contained this passage: "Above, on the poorest tars: pigeons. Rats with wings. The male ruffling his wings, aimlessly strutting about the female" (p. 10). The movie and the novel demonstrate the comic and the poetic appeal of the metaphor; and both enactments of the label did the work of divorcing it from Commissioner Hoving. The 1980s featured many articles on pigeon control, including shooting the pigeons in downtown Buffalo (*New York Times* 1984) and Beaver Dam, Wisconsin (Wilkerson 1986), and placing metal spikes on ledges (Brewer 1986) and plastic owls on New York buildings in the "battle against 7 million pigeons" (DeChillo 1986).

Cementing a Bad Reputation

By the 1990s, the rats with wings label worked itself into the discursive vocabulary. A 1988 article from Oregon began: "The proper name is pigeon. But some people call them 'rats with wings'" (Koberstein 1988). It was not indicated who "some people" are, implying the phrase was part of the general rhetoric surrounding pigeons. A January 12, 1990 *Washington Post* article asked: "Pigeons: Beautiful Birds or Rats With Wings?" The same newspaper affirmed that they were indeed rats with wings three months later (Welzenbach 1990). A 1991 *Times* article pointed out that while "some [people] take bags of grain or bread to their favorite parks to feed pigeons . . . others insist, against all taxonomic evidence, that pigeons are winged members of the order Rodentia," and it claimed that "anti-pigeon complaints are rising" (Angier 1991). The following year, a letter to the editor carried the byline "There's a

Law Against Feeding Those Filthy, Greedy Pigeons" (Goldstein 1992). A 1993 article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* on homing pigeons demonstrated how understanding street pigeons as rats with wings was becoming rhetorical common sense in the public arena and a departure point for discussing them. It pointed out that "pedigreed homing pigeons" are not "the rats-with-wings type" (Breckenridge 1993). Making this distinction has become the classic rhetorical device for articles written about racing pigeons (Ove 1998; Van Sant 2002).

Almost every article printed on pigeons from 1990 onwards—in the *Times* and 51 papers from around the United States and elsewhere—engaged with the frame, even in the few instances where pigeons were cast in a positive light. Yet increasingly, the language of "some people consider pigeons rats with wings" was being replaced in the media with language that claimed consensus: "Largely regarded as grain-eating, guano-making rats with wings" (Hollingsworth 1997); or "commonly derided as 'rats with wings'" (Ove 1998); or "many New Yorkers think of [pigeons] as rats with wings" (Noonan 1999); or "widely perceived as being disease-ridden rats with wings" (Helen 2001). Some declaratively stated, like the *London Independent* (Wilkie 1995), "Pigeons in the streets are rats with wings and feathers." The articles began to have a common sense tone. In stating "Anti-pigeon sentiment is nothing new" (Helen 2001), this loathing is represented as a timeless reflection of the collective psyche; and when an article (Romano 1995) states "Pigeons. Scientific name: *Columba livia*. Urban nickname: rats with wings," it helps educate urbanites on how they ought to think about the pigeons in their midst.

Besides mayors, health and park officials, and the media itself, the budding pest removal industry played a key role. These experts inform us how to recognize a pest.[14] In one *Times* article an exterminator responded to those concerned about his use of poison on pigeons: "The people who are complaining are misguided souls. Pigeons . . . are just rats with wings" (Ramirez 1997). However, there are indications that the frame *had* sunk into the public arena even beyond city officials, so that papers could be said to reflect a popular cultural representation, even as they helped cultivate it (on structuration, see Giddens 1984). In 1997, a pigeon "serial killer" stalked Manhattan. While an ASPCA official did track the killer, most coverage saw the issue as comic relief. The official's "fondness for pigeons" was called "a relatively rare trait for humans" (Finn 2000), and musings on the motive for killing included: "maybe it's the way [pigeons] slop on pedestrians, swarm on the sidewalks, and buzz through plazas like a squadron of crop-dusters. Or maybe it's just the look of them, the beady eyes, the dirty gray feathers, the arrogantly plump rumps" (Herszenhorn 1997). The topic of pigeons as rats with wings even came up in an interview with a football player, who bragged of killing them with tennis rackets and said, "I have no idea why they are on the face of the earth" (Mills 2003).

Perhaps the pinnacle of the rats with wings frame came in a recent satirical book that provides the reader with "101 Tried and True Pigeon Killin' Methods" (Jones 2005). The book threatens those with a "pathological connection to feathered rats" not to read on (Jones 2005:vi), and the publisher's book description states:

> No one is certain when pigeon-loathing began, but the anti-pigeon phenomenon has by now insinuated itself into every medium of popular culture. Whether in film, television, music, or advertising, pigeon eradication has become an accepted way to tug at a person's funny bone. With *Canceled Flight: 101 Tried and True Pigeon Killin' Methods,* A. V. Jones has created an *Anarchist Cookbook* of comic relief for the worldwide pigeon-hating population.[15]

While this book is written in jest, its production—complete with detailed photographs of dead pigeons impaled with various objects—and sale in the humor section of Barnes and

14. On the argument that the pest industry largely invented the pigeon problem, see Mooallem (2006).
15. See www.canceledflight.com.

Noble relies on the robust presence of the cultural frame of the pigeon as a rat with wings. Its publication is a sort of bookend to Lehrer's 1959 song "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," the culmination of a decades long process of pigeons transforming, in the public arena at least, from everyday minor nuisances to a symbol of what we find vile and morally repugnant in the urban cityscape.

Essentializing a Problem Animal

Newspapers were able to point out concrete ways that pigeons did indeed annoy humans: feces, noise, potential disease, and so forth. That is to say, their image as a nuisance is partially grounded in their "natural" characteristics. However, the fact that sparrows were once rhetorically framed as the most hated bird, and that pigeons are today, does not find a satisfactory explanation merely through "objective conditions." There is a contingent relationship between conditions and their definitions as problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). In this and the subsequent section, I examine the underlying cultural context. Claims-makers emphasized filth and disease, yet this typification goes well beyond epidemiology. The issue at stake is the place of animals in our imaginative geographies and the definition of space.

Pigeons, Disease, and the Law

Up until the deaths of two New Yorkers in 1963, pigeons were not a standout public problem. Though they could be seen as a growing threat after being linked with diseases, it was never shown that they carried more diseases than other nuisance birds such as sparrows and starlings, nor were they ever linked to human casualties. The deaths of two New Yorkers from meningitis did not *in itself* change that. "A social problem must acquire social endorsement if it is to be taken seriously and move forward in its career" (Blumer 1971:303). It took the work of an entrepreneur (Becker 1963)—Dr. Littman, a city medical official—to link the deaths to pigeons, when what was definite was only that pigeons could carry the disease. The doctor went even further than this. He spread paranoia, warning that the threat existed in all five boroughs of New York City and that those who fed pigeons were contributing to the deaths of New Yorkers. And he recommended the extermination of all of the pigeons in the streets. Dr. Littman and city officials after him, along with institutions like the parks department, marked pigeons as vectors of disease, and their positions of authority and expertise ensured that pigeons were *essentialized* as vermin in the "arena of public action" (Blumer 1971:303). Those who supported pigeons could not refute the claims with the same authority, and besides, why take chances? Irvine (2003) notes a similar thought process in the nineteenth century, when stray dogs were rounded up and killed in a paranoid response to the ill-understood rabies virus, urged on by scientists and health officials.

Of note is that there are repeated instances of officials reporting in the above articles that pigeons are virtually *harmless*. Natural scientists have found that pigeons can carry dozens of diseases, but more important is whether those diseases are *zoonotic*, or passable to humans. Diseases such as psittacosis, while carried by pigeons, are also carried by other urban and domesticated birds. In fact, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) claims that pet birds (such as parrots and parakeets) and poultry (such as chickens and turkeys) "are most frequently involved in transmission [of psittacosis] to humans" (CDC 2005). At any rate, the CDC reports that there are less than 50 known new cases a year (very few are fatal) and that one must inhale a concentration of dried infected feces in order to catch psittacosis. The same holds for the rare cryptococcal meningitis that can grow out of the feces of pigeons, and again, many other birds as well.

As with sparrows, the pigeon's "harm beyond that of being a nuisance has never been demonstrated" (Fine and Christoforides 1991:378). While city officials acknowledge that

pigeon feces can be a hazard by clogging air conditioners or if it accumulates in very large quantities, the CDC in Atlanta and the New York Department of Health officially state that there are no substantiated transmissions of disease from pigeons to people (Fagerlund 2003). Further, it does not appear that pigeons carry diseases that are not also carried by other urban birds (Angier 1991; Helen 2001; Kelley 2000), yet they garner attention as a particularly filthy and dangerous animal.

The disease discourse had a profound spatial and legal impact on the pigeon. Feeding pigeons became outlawed outright or could result in a citation if deemed a health nuisance by officials, not just in New York but also in a growing number of cities across the Western world. When institutions such as the Parks Department and the Department of Environmental Protection officially designated pigeons as nuisances or pests based on epidemiological claims, this classification enabled their removal, poisoning, and extermination. Pigeons quickly became a major moneymaker for the pest control industry after they became a recognized pest (Blechman 2006; Mooallem 2006). Such designations, as labels affixed to these birds (Becker 1963), reinforce that the appearance of pigeons in human space should be experienced with disgust or anxiety. Yet the disdain felt for pigeons goes beyond any specific references to diseases; their "diagnosis" as rats with wings hints at a deeper anxiety about the metaphorical threat of these birds to the orderly, sanitary modern city. We live in an era that celebrates "medical triumph and the conquest of disease" and nature (Birke 2003:211) as a cornerstone of modernity; dirt and other "pollutants" threaten this vision (Douglas 1966).

Of Pigeons and Rats

Metaphors allow us to "make sense of the ultimately unnamable experiences of life . . . [and] far from being a mere decorative trope, metaphor has long been recognized as a basic and pervasive mode of human cognition" (Sabloff 2001:23). Nietzsche saw metaphors as "a way of experiencing facts and, by making them objects of experience, giving 'life' or 'reality' to them" (Brown 1976:171; cf. Fernandez 1986; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Richard H. Brown (1976) points out that "the metaphor has at least two systems of reference," and that "by transferring the ideas and association of one system or level of discourse to another, metaphor allows each system to be perceived anew from the viewpoint of the other" (p. 172). Importantly, "the logical, empirical, or psychological absurdity of a metaphor has a specifically cognitive function . . . It offers us a new awareness" (Brown 1976:173). Metaphors open us to the experience of acting *as if* they were true. Effective metaphors "cannot be translated literally without substantial loss of meaning . . . The 'meaning' of the metaphor is thus an emergent [quality]" (Brown 1976:181).

Because a "good" metaphor can change one's assessment of the facts, "the striking metaphor becomes widely adopted . . . it is transformed into a literal description of 'the way things really are'" (Brown 1976:185; cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Sabloff 2001). The resultant insinuation is that object A should be treated as object B (Fine and Christoforides 1991). Annabelle Sabloff (2001) encourages us to examine how metaphors are used to "reorder the natural world" in urban settings (p. 13); the label rats with wings appears to be such a metaphor.

In what ways are pigeons rats? Rats carry "an enormous weight of metaphor and meaning;" many cultures have a "deep antipathy to rats, believed to carry filth and disease, associated with the gutter" (Birke 2003:207–08). It is likely that no animal—save the cockroach, if considered an animal—is so reviled as the rat (Barnett 2001; Hendrickson 1983; Sullivan 2004). "Routinely elicit[ing] reactions of disgust and horror" (Birke 2003:210), rats are "vicious animals to be seriously feared" (May 2004:169; cf. Lynch 1988). Even Reuben A. Buford May (2004), a strict constructionist, states: "Their history as disease-carrying scavengers is well documented and thus their reputation is well deserved" (p. 169). The "wild rat of

the sewers" (Birke 2003:210) is an incomparable animal villain, an "evil, disease-full vermin" (p. 214) that is "the terror of so many myths and legends" (p. 210). The rat certainly did aid the spread of plagues (carried by fleas) that have killed untold numbers of people. While, for much of the Western world, rats no longer pose the same public health threat, they have become culturally enshrined as one of the most loathed animals on the planet. Their very presence at a distance is enough to invoke anxiety and nausea. Thankfully, rats are nocturnal and usually display fear of human beings.

Pigeons, however, are diurnal (active in the day), and they often appear quite willing to mingle with humans. This docile habit has long enabled pigeon feeding by humans who enjoy their company. However, pigeons tend to travel in large flocks. As ground feeders that adapted to cities over millennia and descended from cliff dwellers, unlike most other animals, pigeons live, nest, eat, and defecate on sidewalks, streets, and ledges—not in trees or grass. As cities became more built up and animals were gradually removed from city streets, pigeons have come to stand out as one of the most visible urban animals. As they came to be seen as an epidemiological threat, the presence of the birds in large numbers and of their fecal matter on sidewalks and benches produced anxiety that the menace cannot be controlled.

While few if any instances of disease transmission were traced to pigeons, the "potential pest arguments" framed a clear and present danger that needed to be neutralized (Goedeke 2005:39).[16] The metaphor rats with wings captured the felt potential of this bird to wreak havoc on civilization, and not only by unleashing disease. As "scavengers," one commonly sees pigeons eating the refuse of society just as rats do. Pigeons are also deemed to be just as filthy as we imagine rats to be, abetted by the deposits of feces they leave behind. Cities have long made a more literal connection as well, claiming that putting out food for pigeons attracts rats; in 2007, there were Parks Department posters in New York that read: "Feed a pigeon, breed a rat."

Framing pigeons as rats—as with framing sparrows as immigrants or foxes as thieves (Woods 2000)—simultaneously orders nature and redraws moral boundaries. Everyone "knew" that rats are filthy, have brought some of the worst plagues around the world, and live in the urban interstices that most of us studiously avoid, such as sewers and empty lots. So ingrained is this "truth" that the character and threat of rats is not discussed in a single one of the newspaper articles that links pigeons to them. As such, rats are beyond the sympathy of most people, labeled as vermin and exterminated, invoking fear or revulsion among the populace.[17]

Not everyone "knew" that pigeons were so filthy and disease ridden. While still occurring today, feeding pigeons has historically been a prime pastime of park visitors. Pigeons have been permitted to live amongst us, claiming a place in the urban fabric. But if pigeons are rats with wings, a menace to our health and a filthy scavenger, then why should they be allowed on our sidewalks, ledges, statues, and fountains? If pigeons are conceptually rats, then they should be physically removed from all the places where we do not want rats. Through labeling pigeons are pushed further outside, and stand opposed to, our moral boundaries (Becker 1963; Fine 1995). Thus, the frame serves as a *distancing mechanism*, so that one who encounters a representative member of a species so labeled will be more inclined to dismiss, abhor, or even kill it in accordance with the proffered interpretation—a stereotype for animals.

People rank order animals in terms of greater and lesser value (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Kellert 1996; Wolch 1997), based on such features as perceived attractiveness, intelligence, rarity, and so forth. In this ranking, rats have long been at or near the bottom (Birke 2003). The rats with wings frame collapses the distinction between the two species, essentially

16. The West Nile Virus and Avian Flu have both sparked recrimination against pigeons and those who feed them, even though pigeons show a strong resistance if not immunity to these viruses.

17. Yet, rats are often used in labs, where they are translated and purified (Birke 2003; Lynch 1988).

binding the moral and aesthetic baggage of the rat to the pigeon in order to lower the status of the pigeon and enable—even demand—it to be treated in the same way we treat rats (cf. Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982). Over time, the pigeon has been successfully constructed as a wolf in sheep's clothing—it may appear friendly, harmless, and even cute, but it is in fact a menace.

Frame Resistance and Competition

The salience of the rats with wings frame in the public arena sheds light on a cultural logic at work in discourse, especially among officials acting as claims-makers. Many articles quote "everyday people" also deriding these birds, suggesting that the frame is a rhetorical resource in daily life as well. And, while I cannot elaborate here, ethnographic research I have performed in public spaces in New York, Chicago, Venice, and London show that the rats with wings phrase and frame are common currency when people talk about the pigeons they encounter on the street. Yet, there is evidence on a micro and macro level that the rats with wings frame is not entirely hegemonic. One can see people feeding pigeons in public on a regular basis, even if such people are sometimes derided as "crazy" (Mooallem 2006). But there are also those who *publicly* seek to rescue the reputation of pigeons from the proverbial gutter. For example, London's mayor met surprising popular resistance in 2005–2006 to his ban on pigeon feeding in Trafalgar Square.

Pigeon supporters' main weapon in reputation rehabbing is to link laudable human traits to these birds (anthropomorphization is also used by their opponents). For example, it is stressed that pigeons are monogamous and mate for life (Kelley 2000) and that both parents share equally in raising the young (Helen 2001), valued behaviors in Western society. Pigeons as "heroes" is a also common narrative, referring to pigeons that relayed messages in war time: "They were war heroes and won medals for dodging Nazi bullets as they ferried vital messages to troops" (Hudson 2004). Another technique is to demonstrate how pigeons' "biologically identical relatives, doves, are regarded as a symbol of love, peace, and the holy spirit" (Helen 2001).

The rats with wings metaphor, however, is so pervasive that it forms the necessary departure point even for advocates, constraining the shape of the discourse on pigeons. They can say that pigeons, too, are symbols of love and peace because there is no real difference between doves and pigeons, but the public gets bogged down in taxonomic confusion. When they say pigeons have been heroes, the media remind them that *feral* pigeons have *not* been heroes. Alas, few advocates possess the authority and access to the public arena needed to make their claims count (Best 1995). Pigeons, of course, are not really rats; and people rarely experience the same level of anxiety around pigeons. Yet while vocal opponents of this frame, and pigeon feeders, show that the rats with wings frame has not drowned out alternative perceptions, the unflagging rise in use of the metaphor indicates a solidifying public cultural repertory.

Ordering Nature

The problematization of the pigeon is a symptom of a larger cultural logic. While there are numerous ways that animals can be ranked and valued (cf. Arluke and Sanders 1996), one of the most crucial is the spatial dimension that is so central to Mary Douglas (1966) and the cultural geographers (Philo and Wilbert 2000; Wolch and Emel 1998). I am not so much interested in whether the rats with wings label created the problem (cf. Becker 1963) as I am in why this frame grew out of and resonates with contemporary Western culture (Best 1995). Pigeons represent the symbolic core of a larger perceived threat (Goode and Ben-Yehuda

1994), that of disorder and impurity (Douglas 1966).[18] While the epidemiological danger may be low, the unchecked presence of these "dirty birds" signals a cityscape that is not subdued. The logic here is analogous to that of "broken windows theory" (Wilson and Kelling 1982), which argues that the presence of minor disorder such as broken windows or litter signals a lack of social control that, if left alone, will bring greater disorder. While controversial, former New York Mayor Giuliani used this framework in his "quality of life" campaign of the late 1990s that saw people fined and jailed for minor infractions. Vulnerable populations, such as the homeless, were easy targets in efforts to "clean up" the city (Duneier 1999). Hoving (*New York Times* 1966) explicitly linked pigeons to the homeless and to disorder ("vandals"), as did other articles that called pigeons "bums" and "squatters."

In "cleaning up" cities, certain objects and human and animal groups are bound to be perceived as "out of place," and their removal signals the restoration of order. Douglas (1966) asserts: "Dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt. It exists in the eye of the beholder;" and "in chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (p. 12). Separating and removing impurity is one of the hallmarks of modernity. Literal and metaphorical dirt is never simply perceived in and of itself: "Where there is dirt there is a system;" "dirt as a matter out of place . . . implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order" (Douglas 1966:48). In this matrix, *space* is crucial in determining "pollution." Shoes may not be dirty in themselves but become so if placed on the kitchen counter. It is at this point that shoes become "matter out of place." These mundane infractions reveal our culturally dependent classificatory schemes, and elicit almost reflexive reactions to resolve the conflict as a *moral matter* that restores order (Durkheim [1933] 1997; Garfinkel 1967).

Chris Philo (1995) shows how the presence of livestock and slaughterhouses in nineteenth century London was seen as a threat to urban progress. It was deemed improper for people, especially women and children, to smell and see the unbridled animality of livestock, i.e., defecation and fornication. Philo (1995) notes a "definite and growing will to expel certain categories of animal" (p. 677). The loss of everyday encounters with wild animals has produced a loss of tolerance for them.

Redefining Material Space

"Urban living has resulted in the incorporation of animals into the private sphere (as pets), or urban culture has removed them to a real or imaginary 'wild' or to some rural past" (Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley 2000:59). Despite this compartmentalization, there is always the threat that "wild nature just might reassert itself and disturb the urban order" (p. 69). Animals can defy our conceptual categories and attempts to situate them in specific spaces. In doing so, they can become problems. There is "a common aversion to untamed nature if it appears as such in a domestic setting" (p. 57). Such animals seem doomed to be considered morally transgressive as they transgress the spaces that we have defined as "for humans only."

No matter how much money and resources we spend to repel or kill pigeons, they demonstrate themselves to be one of the most adaptive urban creatures. Pigeons stand out as one of the most despised urban transgressors because they—in all their animality—are so public. They do not even retreat to sewers, trees, or parks to defecate, mate, and live, as do so many

18. Folklorists have also observed panics caused by out of place animals, whereby occasional or unconfirmed local reports of "big cats" violating the borders of human settlements become regional legends (Campion-Vincent 1992; Goss 1992). These tresspassings can spark a "collective anxiety attack" (Bartholomew and Victor 2004) by being framed as part of a larger social problem through these legends. "Collective anxiety is induced by a shared belief in threat rumor. Once a belief in an imminent threat spreads widely enough to create a consensual definition of the situation, the belief intensifies fears and distorts individual perception" (Bartholomew and Victor 2004:229).

other animals. While certain species become emblematic in rural environs and are a celebrated component of place (Bell 1994; Yarwood and Evans 2000), these same species can become problematic if able to move about on their own volition in urban spaces. Even as pigeon shoots become less morally acceptable in the countryside (Bronner 2005), pigeons are labeled out of place as a species in the city, translating them into unwitting deviants (Becker 1963).

Claims-makers have not only redefined pigeons, *they have redefined space*. Pigeons are now a "homeless" species; the past century has redefined an ever-increasing number of spaces as off limits to them (and other animals), until there seems nowhere humans live that is considered legitimate for pigeons. The early laws banned homers from the rooftops of tenements. A letter from 1935 to the *New York Times* complained of the presence of pigeons in some places, but recognized their "right" to exist in "open spaces" such as parks and squares (Knox 1935). At this time, while New York asked people not to feed pigeons at the library, they were still fed in parks that even had dedicated pigeon-feeding areas. Yet in a matter of decades, "Do Not feed the Pigeons" signs were hung at parks in New York and around the United States, and nuisance laws were put on the books, that inscribed a new definition of *all* pubic places as off limits to these birds. It makes sense in this light that pigeons are labeled as "bums" (Brown 1977) and "squatters" (*New York Times* 1977). New definitions of space, combined with the linkage of the pigeon to the rat, leave pigeons with no place to call home. Sparrows were villains for displacing native birds; pigeons, however, invade *human* space.

Animals possess agency (Philo and Wilbert 2000; Wolch and Emel 1998). Wild or feral animals move about with their own trajectories—what Michael (2004) calls "animobilities"—that often bring them into zones of human settlement, where they encounter humans that move along their own trajectories. Some animals, like pigeons, live almost exclusively within "human habitats." These animals pollute our streets. When animal and human trajectories collide in the built environment, to the extent that animals cannot be tamed or controlled, there is an underlying existential human experience of social disorder (Douglas 1966). The capacity of flight makes the pigeon a particularly effective transgressor. While we have legislated spaces for these birds out of existence, we cannot put up fences or easily set traps to limit their "animobilities." They can freely move across state and national borders, having no regard for territory and the definitions that humans give it. As far as they are defined as rats and as contagions, they are rats with the frightening ability to come by land *and* air.

Conclusion

I have argued that pigeons have been problematized based on the underlying imaginative geography of the modernist constitution (Latour 1993). This logic places firm spatial boundaries between nature and culture and views transgressions of these boundaries by animals as pollution (Douglas 1966) and deviance (Becker 1963). As such, pigeons represent a large category of nuisance animals that create social disorder. Pigeons stand out in this regard due to some of their particular habits, which put their animobilities (Michael 2004) most visibly at odds with human trajectories. If this logic is correct, we would expect that the animals most likely to be deemed problem species are those that most flout our imaginative geographies. There appears to be evidence of this, such as the wolves (Scarce 2005), foxes (Woods 2000), bears, and cougars (Wolch 1997) that become open season the moment they cross property lines in rural or suburban areas. In the city, most any public place is out of bounds for animals unless they are controlled or civilized. Invasive species takes on new meaning.

I have also argued that the metaphor rats with wings emphasizes the filth of pigeons beyond any threat of disease. It is notable that this phrase is being extended to encompass a variety of birds in the suburbs and country. Geese, considered a nuisance especially to business parks and golf courses, have been called rats with wings (Harber 1995), as have seagulls that encroach inland to scavenge (McCracken 2005), crows that travel in packs (Spears

2000), and starlings that leave a mess and create a racket (Kotok 2005). As to be expected from this article's analysis, the label also acts as a resource in justifications for controlling the labeled animal. For example, it was recently reported that farmers in Canada planned to gas "at least 50,000" starlings a year (*Ottawa Citizen* 2006). One farmer declared: "We like to call them rats with wings . . . They're vermin, they spread disease and cause damage, and they're prolific like rats. They're nasty pests" (2006). A *Times* article about a town's slaughter of 350 geese pondered why "anyone would defend wild geese that cover school playgrounds with their droppings," and it claimed that the geese who now refuse to migrate "breed diseases that can kill other, scarcer birds, including those migratory geese who live hard, play by the rules, and wind up getting duck plague or botulism for their trouble" (Collins 1996). The rhetoric indicates a congealing pattern in how these animals are being problematized along cultural-spatial lines.

There is a correspondence between how human groups treat animal groups and how they treat each other (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Irvine 2004; Philo 1995). Regarding space-based conflicts and social control, I have indicated that it is not only animals that are problematized for being out of place (cf. Duneier 1999). The notion of imaginative geographies gives sociology a vocabulary to make broader theoretical linkages among a variety of social problems. And, as nature-culture boundary-work is one of the primary organizing principles of modernity, sociologists would be remiss to leave the study of animals and nature to the natural sciences.

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