

# 21A.303J / STS.060J

## Anthropology of Biology

### Spring 2022

Professor Stefan Helmreich

---

#### **Course Description**

If the twentieth century was the century of physics, the twenty-first has become the century of biology. This subject examines the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of biology in the age of genomics, biotechnological enterprise, biodiversity conservation, pharmaceutical bioprospecting, synthetic biology, global pandemic, and more. Although we examine such social concerns as genetic modification and reproductive rights, this is not a class in bioethics, but rather an anthropological inquiry into how the substances and explanations of biology — increasingly cellular, molecular, genetic, viral, and informatic — are changing, and with them broader ideas about the relationship between “nature” and “culture.” Looking at such scientific forms as cell lines, CRISPR, and epidemiological models, and drawing upon primary sources in biology, social studies of the life sciences, and literary and cinematic materials, we rephrase Erwin Schrödinger’s famous 1944 question, “What Is Life?” to ask, in the 2000s, “What Is Life Becoming?”

## Race, Breed, and Myths of Origin: Chillingham Cattle as Ancient Britons

BEGINNING IN THE SECOND HALF of the eighteenth century, British public attention was intermittently captivated by a small but distinguished group of cattle. These striking animals were white (a color not usually favored by British stockbreeders); they were powerfully built; and they roamed the parks of their wealthy proprietors untroubled by the restraints that conditioned the existence of ordinary domestic beasts. At the time when widespread celebration of the breeding methods associated with Robert Bakewell emphasized the vulnerability of livestock animals to human manipulation, these cattle gloried in their wildness.<sup>1</sup> The most famous of them lived at Chillingham, the remote Northumberland seat of the earls of Tankerville, and other herds, the number of which fluctuated constantly, were scattered across northern England and southern Scotland. Many of these herds were founded during the nineteenth century by landowners who admired the animals. So compelling was their appeal that proprietors who could not afford such a substantial investment in fancy livestock nevertheless occasionally commissioned portraits of their estates adorned by white cattle that, as far as can be determined from any corroborating historical records, never lived there.<sup>2</sup>

Ritvo, Harriet. "Race, Breed, and Myths of Origin: Chillingham Cattle as Ancient Britons." *Representations* 39 (1992): 1–22. © University of California Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

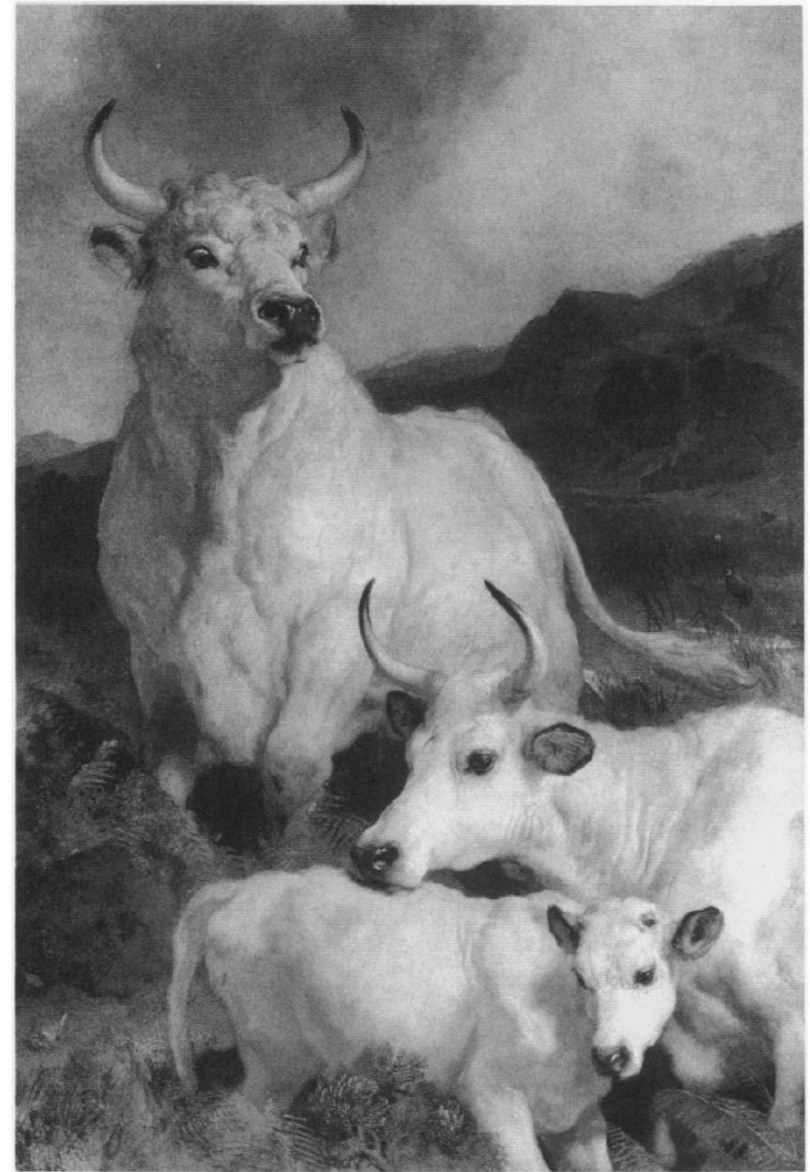


FIGURE 1. Edwin Landseer, *The Wild Cattle of Chillingham*, 1967. Photo: Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England.

Ritvo, Harriet. Figure 1 from "Race, Breed, and Myths of Origin: Chillingham Cattle as Ancient Britons." *Representations* 39 (1992): 1–22. © University of California Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

### 3

## TEDDY BEAR PATRIARCHY TAXIDERMY IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN, NEW YORK CITY, 1908–1936



Image by [slgckgc](#) on Flickr. License CC BY.



Image by [Daniel Mennerich](#) on Flickr. License CC BY-NC-SA.

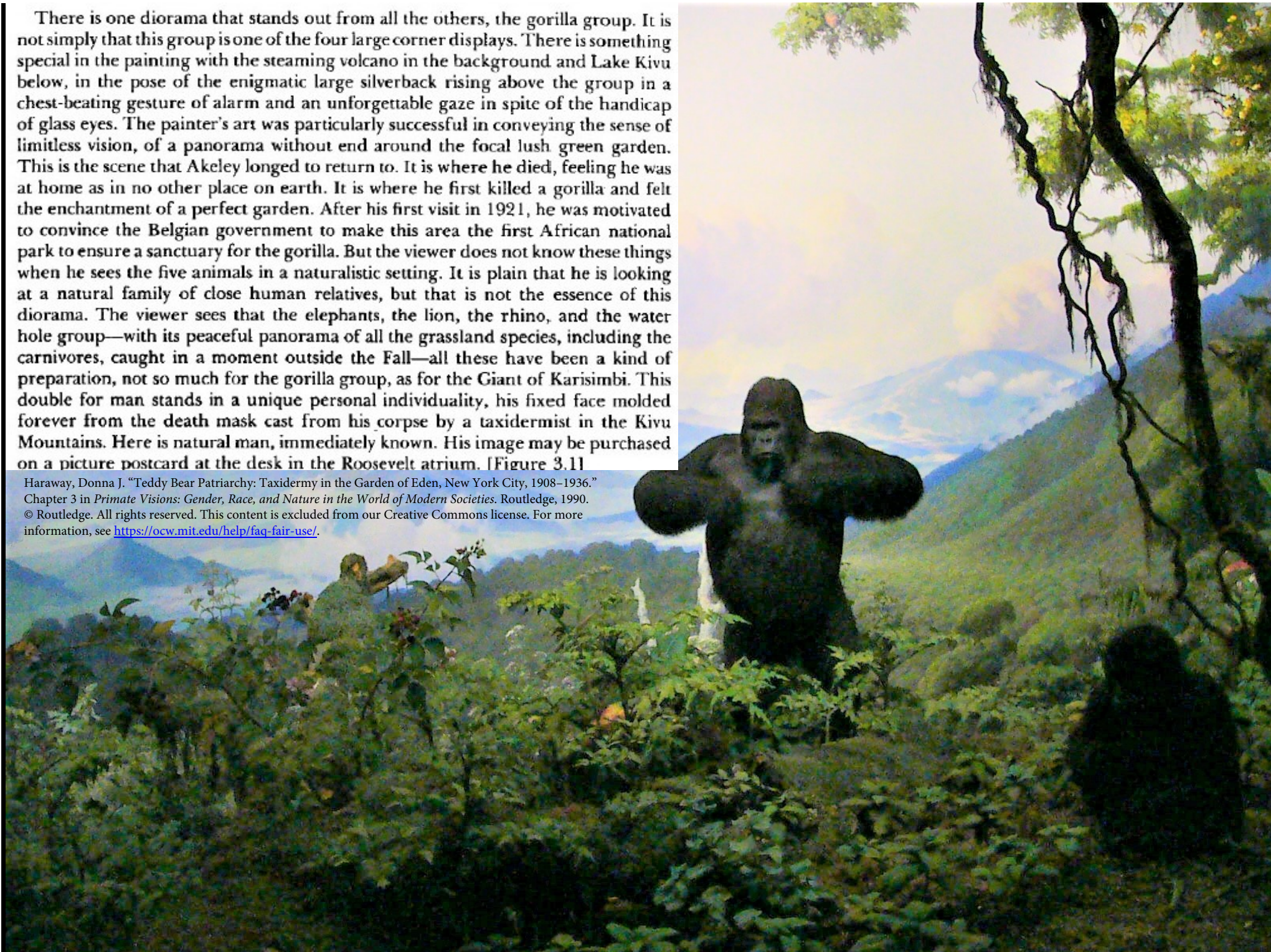
### Hall of African Mammals, American Museum of Natural History

To enter the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, the visitor must pass by a James Earle Fraser equestrian statue of Teddy majestically mounted as a father and protector between two “primitive” men, an American Indian and an African, both standing, dressed as “savages.” The facade of the memorial, funded by the State of New York and awarded to the American Museum of Natural History on the basis of its competitive application in 1923, is classical, with four Ionic columns 54 feet high topped by statues of the great explorers Boone, Audubon, Lewis, and Clark. The coin-like, bas-relief seals of the United States and of the Liberty Bell are stamped on the front panels. Inscribed across the top are the words TRUTH, KNOWLEDGE, VISION and the dedication to Roosevelt as “a great leader of the youth of America, in energy and fortitude in the faith of our fathers, in defense of the rights of the people, in the love and conservation of nature and of the best in life and in man.” Youth, paternal solicitude, virile defense of democracy, and intense emotional connection to nature are the unmistakable themes.<sup>6</sup>

Haraway, Donna J. “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936.” Chapter 3 in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Societies*. Routledge, 1990. © Routledge. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

There is one diorama that stands out from all the others, the gorilla group. It is not simply that this group is one of the four large corner displays. There is something special in the painting with the steaming volcano in the background and Lake Kivu below, in the pose of the enigmatic large silverback rising above the group in a chest-beating gesture of alarm and an unforgettable gaze in spite of the handicap of glass eyes. The painter's art was particularly successful in conveying the sense of limitless vision, of a panorama without end around the focal lush green garden. This is the scene that Akeley longed to return to. It is where he died, feeling he was at home as in no other place on earth. It is where he first killed a gorilla and felt the enchantment of a perfect garden. After his first visit in 1921, he was motivated to convince the Belgian government to make this area the first African national park to ensure a sanctuary for the gorilla. But the viewer does not know these things when he sees the five animals in a naturalistic setting. It is plain that he is looking at a natural family of close human relatives, but that is not the essence of this diorama. The viewer sees that the elephants, the lion, the rhino, and the water hole group—with its peaceful panorama of all the grassland species, including the carnivores, caught in a moment outside the Fall—all these have been a kind of preparation, not so much for the gorilla group, as for the Giant of Karisimbi. This double for man stands in a unique personal individuality, his fixed face molded forever from the death mask cast from his corpse by a taxidermist in the Kivu Mountains. Here is natural man, immediately known. His image may be purchased on a picture postcard at the desk in the Roosevelt atrium. [Figure 3.1]

Haraway, Donna J. "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936." Chapter 3 in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Societies*. Routledge, 1990. © Routledge. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.





### THE SCENE OF THE GORILLA GROUP

When Mr. Akeley and his party came up to the "lone male of Karisimbi" which Mr. Bradley (with Mrs. Bradley above the gorilla) had shot, all agreed that the spot itself and the view from it would make an ideal setting to be reproduced as a background for the group of five gorillas to be placed in the Museum of Natural History in New York. The picture above is a com-

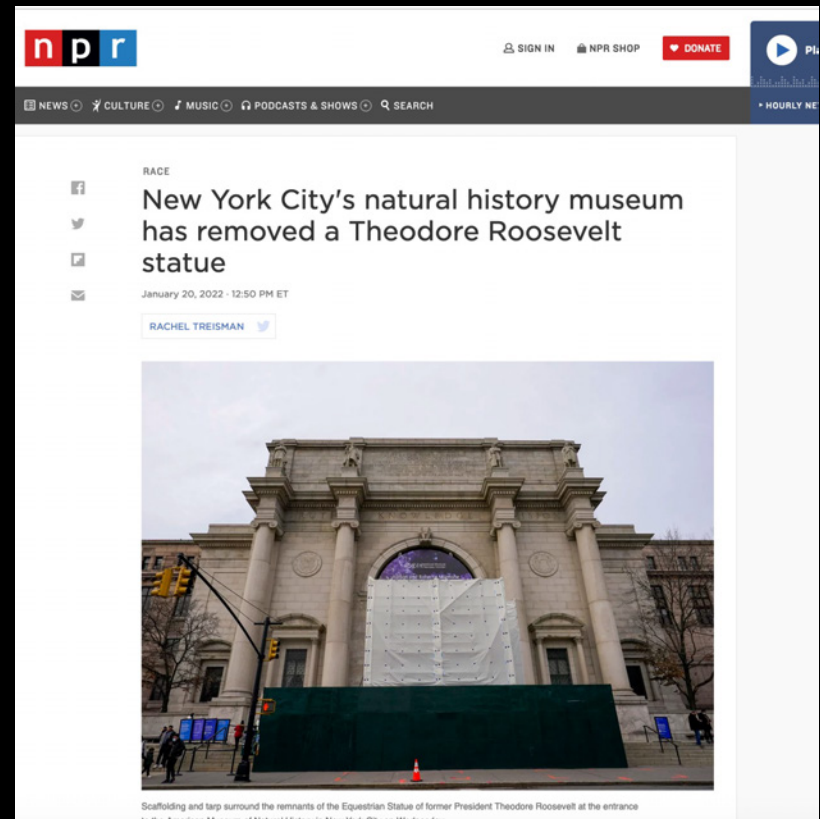


### MR. AKELEY AND A DEAD LIONESS

This lioness was one of a group of eight that Mr. Akeley and his party came across



© Monument Removal Brigade. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



Treisman, Rachel. "New York City's Natural History Museum Has Removed a Theodore Roosevelt Statue." January 20, 2022. NPR. © NPR. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



© Source unknown. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



© Localwaters. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



## Department of Anthropology



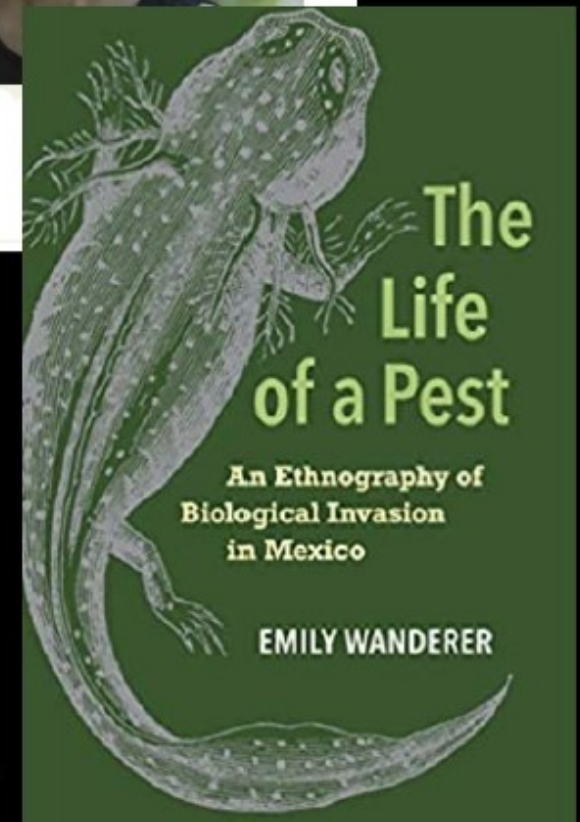
ABOUT | UNDERGRADUATE | GRADUATE | PEOPLE | RESEARCH | NEWS | EVENTS | ALUMNI | ACTION | PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

### Emily Wanderer

Assistant Professor

Emily Wanderer earned her PhD from MIT's program in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology and Society. She is an anthropologist of science whose research focuses on the intersection of medical and environmental anthropology and addresses how ideas of identity and place in the world are implicated in the practice of life scientists, as well as the ways human and non-human lives intersect and are transformed in scientific practice.

Her research and teaching interests include the anthropology of science and technology, medical anthropology, environmental anthropology, multispecies ethnography, Latin America, and Pittsburgh.



© University of Pittsburgh. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Wanderer, Emily. *The Life of a Pest: An Ethnography of Biological Invasion in Mexico*. University of California Press, 2020. © University of California Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.303J / STS.060J The Anthropology of Biology  
Spring 2022

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.