

Jared D. Margulies. 2023. *The Cactus Hunters: Desire and extinction in the illicit succulent trade*. New Jersey: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 9781517913991. \$24.95.

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What does it mean to collect rare and living plants in an era of anthropogenic environmental degradation? What do the plants themselves tell us about our ethical drives to preserve them and our desires to connect with them? In *The Cactus Hunters*, Jared D. Margulies draws from a Lacanian psychoanalytic register to better understand how desire facilitates a vibrant and illicit global succulent trade that has brought numerous species of succulents to the brink of extinction. Through his international and multi-sited ethnographic investigation, Margulies asks how succulent enthusiasts can take the seemingly paradoxical position of driving plant species toward extinction out of love, and in the name of conservation. In doing so, he reveals the complex networks of more-than-human entanglements that provide depth and texture to ethical understandings of legal and illicit. As his analysis convincingly demonstrates, desires, ethics, gender roles, racial characterizations, and colonial extractivisms are not bounded human affairs. Instead, they are mutable processes of becoming—which are mediated through human and plant actor relationships. Additionally, by positioning desire as the crucial theoretical framework upon which his analysis rests, the book brilliantly articulates how capital works through desire to generate new markets and perpetuate the valorization of value through the commodity form. Here, succulent subjects are rendered as valuable objects which are desperately sought after, trafficked, and sold for both their rarity and aesthetics. However, as the book indicates, these commodified plants are far more than mere passive objects. The book utilizes two crucial theoretical framings for conceptualizing not just succulent collecting in the age of the Capitalocene, but also the global wildlife trade at large: *objet petit a* and lively commodification.

*Objet petit a* (otherwise known as *objet a*) as theorized by Lacan, is the ever-unobtainable object of desire, driving the subject toward fulfillment yet remaining perpetually out of reach. *Objet a* is not an actual thing *per se*, but a paradoxical abstraction which emerges when images are lost to the desiring subject and must be found—the Thing. As such, *objet a* can never actually be found since satisfaction is produced through the process of searching, not through the goal. In terms of succulent collecting, Margulies (2023) documents how collectors will compulsively obtain dozens, sometimes hundreds, of plants and yet continue to feel unsatisfied with their collections—driving them to collect more succulents over time. Extinction plays a major role in this process as a looming anxiety that threatens to foreclose any possibility of encountering *objet a*. Collectors therefore feel a kind of pressure to pursue rarer and rarer plants and through this, ironically they push plants further toward extinction in their native ecosystems. Collections become extensions of the self, which extend beyond the lifespan of the individual collector. In this way, collections become a mode through which immortality can be attained as plants passed on between persons carry imbue social power from previous owners. A cactus passed down is never 'just a cactus' but rather a conduit of human sociality which connects the living to the passed through the liveliness of the plant itself.

Once in the possession of private collectors, Margulies makes clear that cacti, *Echeveria*, and other succulents are demanding commodities with their own agentic capacities that must be accounted for and addressed if they are to continue living and, in turn, hold value: lively commodities. Keeping lively commodities is a process of attentive care that transcends the individual subject as an atomized actor and expands existing notions of agency beyond the intentionality of rational (human) persons. The book documents how the actions and intentions of collectors are just as much shaped by the plants, as the plants are by them. Succulents themselves produce desirable aesthetics that entice the human gaze and necessitate specific kinds of affective human labor to remain alive. Margulies then uses these multispecies entanglements as a means of problematizing lively commodity collecting. In rendering succulents as lively commodities, plants must be severed from existing connectivities to land and to other forms of life as they are compartmentalized in containers, and forced into new modes of relationship with human curators as alienated subjects. The book uses these alienated entanglements to call attention toward the complicated ethics of (oftentimes illicit) conservatory work by collectors.

In recent years we have seen an abundance of important more-than-human studies come out of anthropology, geography, and other social science disciplines to challenge existing hegemonic notions of anthropocentric superiority. *The Cactus Hunters* situates itself in this growing collection as a critical ethnographic examination of life beyond-the-human in the Capitalocene. Through an attentive analysis, the

book carefully and successfully articulates how existing social relations and inequalities are reproduced through the illicit succulent trade. For example, cacti are predominantly collected and cared for by men. Margulies uses this observation to theorize how these plants are used to reaffirm male-coded traits of tough exteriority while also allowing space for gendered fluidity and feminine-coded tenderness as cacti flower tending becomes important for aesthetic maintenance. Additionally, class distinctions under neocolonial relations are maintained through extractivist adventures in which (most often petite bourgeois) Euro-American succulent enthusiasts travel the world searching for increasingly rare species of plants and seeds to plunder from nations and landscapes in the 'Global South' and facilitate value regimes of commodified life. Finally, the book points toward how racial hierarchies are maintained through succulent extraction and circulation. While white collectors are oftentimes portrayed as 'concerned conservationists' altruistically saving species from extinction by trafficking them out of the 'Global South,' Southeast Asian collectors are portrayed as economically driven, irresponsible poachers who loot from 'Globally North' nations like the US to make massive profits in Asian markets. Here, plants are utilized as tools in race-making projects of 'virtuous whites' against 'reckless and greedy Asians.'

This line of analysis is particularly welcome considering that race has long been a justifiably critiqued blind spot in multispecies studies. At the same time, however, I believe that the book's theorization of race comes up short. I was left wondering how the plants themselves become racialized subjects as they are used to reproduce existing human racial hierarchies. The motif of nonwhite foreigners abducting and selling innocent and powerless whites has long been used to justify distrust and punitive policing of nonwhite populations under colonialism. In framing succulents as subjects in need of protection against Asian abduction, could the plants be theorized as white coded? If so, how does the racialization of plants influence multispecies networks of desire along unjust power hierarchies?

Through his extensive and well-articulated analytic framing, Margulies has produced a unique and important piece of literature that masterfully brings Lacanian psychoanalysis and political ecology into dialogue to provide a much-needed framework for understanding an overlooked aspect of anthropocentric environmental degradation: the illicit trafficking and commodification of living beings. The book challenges the reader to think beyond the purview of the human, while never dithering or feeling jargonistic. Complex theory is digestibly presented alongside vivid vignettes of an international journey following the unfolding lives of cacti and 'cacti people.' This is all done without ever succumbing to ecological despair regarding planetary futures. Margulies invites the reader to recognize material dilemmas while also envisioning better futures.

## Reference

Margulies, J. D. (2023). *The cactus hunters: Desire and extinction in the illicit succulent trade*. University of Minnesota Press.

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