

**Jared D. Margulies.**  
***The Cactus Hunters: Desire and  
Extinction in the Illicit Succulent Trade***

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Plants move. Botanical science has taught us that plants expand their biogeographical range through different dispersion methods. Usually in the form of seeds, plants' motion is facilitated by animals or the currents of wind. One of plants' most important dispersion mechanisms is anthropochory, when humans act as vectors of long-distance dispersal processes. In this book, Jared Margulis shows us how plants travel worldwide due to their unique interactions with the deep unconscious human world. Focusing on plant collectors' desire, *The Cactus Hunter* offers a fresh perspective to understand the mechanism that, ingrained in the minds of Anglo-European and Asian collectors, has pushed some species of cacti and succulents to local extinction – despite regulations that try to impede this illicit mobility of plants.

To reveal the connections between the human psyche and the extinction of plants, Margulies takes the reader on a long trip encompassing Brazil, Mexico, the United States, England, Czechia and South Korea. Studying the illegal movement of plants, the book focuses on the idea of mobilities, which resembles the mobility of the Matsutake

mushroom explored by Ana Tsing.<sup>1</sup> In *The Cactus Hunter*, we travel with the author to meet diverse succulent enthusiasts who act at the edge of what is considered ‘illicit’ or ‘illegal’. By ‘following the thing’ as a research methodology, combined with human-plant ethnographies, we are immersed in the human side of succulent looting and how this illicit activity becomes difficult to control under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Thus, through a vivid narrative, Margulies introduces us to a series of characters such as collectors, taxonomists, semianarchistic and enthusiastic retirees; all of them linked to the collection, looting, study or protection of succulent plants. Soon, the reader discovers how the interactions between these human-cacti characters usually occurs at the blurred edges of legislation and, more importantly, is highly complex.

To understand these complexities, Margulies primarily draws on a Lacanian perspective. From this framework he supports his argument revolving around how the ‘lootability of succulents’ have turned them into objects of desire (p. 4). Then, the author introduces us to the motivations that make people become plant collectors. To do so, he stresses how collecting plants is not the same as collecting inanimate objects. Living elements such as cacti demand more ‘hands-on’ practices of care (p. 29). The relationship between collectors and their plants then is mediated by care, which, in turn, reveals emotional ties with plants, often emerging in distant feelings rooted in the collector’s past. The act of caring is reflected in how collectors organise their collections. Organisation and classification are two important recurrent topics in this book, mainly because the discovery and naming of a new species by taxonomists creates missing ‘object’ in the cabinet of the collectors, igniting desires and extinctions (p. 102).

After introducing the reader into the world of cacti collectors and classifications, the author focuses on the experience of what he calls the ‘cactioexploration’ (p. 69). These are largely explorations to remote and biodiverse areas in the Global South performed by men from the Global North, who are in search of rare species of cacti to feed their private collections. These explorations, rightly recognised by Margulies as situated in long-lasting colonial dynamics, embody the encounters between

1 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

collectors and their illicit desires. Here, the reader faces another element common in the book: the central role of the author's experience as part of the narrative. In this case, Margulies' encounter with *Uebelmannia buiningii*, a cactus he portrays as close to disappearing, works as an argumentative line to interrogate how the particularities of the cacti seed trade is inserted in blurry legislation under CITES (p. 83). This is especially important because the act of extracting seeds devoted to greenhouses on the other side of the world is seen by many collectors not as an illegal action, but as a part of a conservation strategy.

The illicit trade in cacti takes the reader to Czechia. There, we witness the rise and establishment of this country's devotion to cacti and the reasons which made Czech enthusiasts highly skilled cacti propagators. We learn that this is a consequence of the limitations imposed during the Soviet era. Communism made it difficult to access certain plants, propelling desire because, as Lacan explains, 'Lack conjures desire' (p. 131). Conversely, on the other end of the political and economic spectrum, 'capitalism hijacks desire' (p. 159). In the realm of plant collectors, overflowing desire might lead to overcollection and, thus, to possible extinctions. At this stage, the reader is confronted by a singularity of the psychoanalytic perspective of this book: if desire is capable of producing extinction, desire is also capable of producing anxiety about such extinction. To explain this, in chapter four, the author puts his experience at the centre and invites us to reflect on extinction in the capitalistic world (the Capitalocene). Using the anecdote of his encounter with *Arrojadoa marylandae*, an endemic Brazilian cactus growing in a mining area devoted to exploitation, the author self-examines his extinction-related anxiety, which he labels as a psychic cost of extinction (p. 159). Analysed through Lacanian eyes, we learn that anxiety arises when desire becomes impossible: in this case, the desire for organisms not to disappear. Importantly, the self-reference of the author's expertise is accompanied by a recognition of his 'Loci of enunciation', which Mignolo and other Postcolonial scholars have been insisting should be present in any interpretation of the world (p. 182).<sup>2</sup>

2 Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (7–8) (2009): 159–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>

After chapter four, the travel through the illicit world of cactus collection undergoes a turn. Margulis abandons the cactus and now focuses on two succulent plants, *Dudleya farinose* and *D. pachyphytum*, and their extraction from the wild by South Koreans. In contrast to the previous sections, which had a certain degree of narrative independence, the last sections are concatenated. They follow a sequence of events that guide us through the author's encounters with an armed game warden from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, elusive fishermen in the Isla of Cedros in Mexico, and nursery owners in South Korea. In a kind of detective-like plot, the author 'follows the thing' to Korea, seeking to elucidate the rationale that ignited the desire for these plants among Asian collectors. There, we learn how mass media in USA have distorted the narrative linked to the looting of this species whereby Asian housewives and millennials are framed as the culprits. However, this interpretation proved to be based on stereotypes in what Margulies names an 'Asian super consumer myth' (p. 281). Instead, the author shows that desire for these plants is triggered by their cuteness and how, through cuteness, *Dudleya* species turn into living capital at work (p. 291). In the final chapter, the author returns to the extinction reflection, stressing a common point of the book: the encounter between collectors' desires and legal frames takes place in grey areas full of ambiguities, misinterpretation or lack of interest. These vaporous interactions have shaped collectors' behaviours while pushing different species towards the cliff of extinction.

In *The Cactus Hunters*, Margulies puts the multitemporal and diverse nature of plants at the centre of his analysis. In doing so, he brings emerging ideas in the field of more than human geography, critical plant studies, human-plant ethnographies and plant humanities to the field of conservation. Aligned with the perspective of a plant-centred narrative presented by authors such as Hall,<sup>3</sup> this book provides detailed evidence that shows how the illegal trade of plants deserves the same attention as animal poaching practices such as the rhino horn trade. However, like the skills needed by anyone aiming to transplant a thorny cactus, this book might present some difficulties for readers who are not familiar with psychoanalytic ideas. The author uses psychoanalytic ideas

3 Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, SUNY Series on Religion and the Environment (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

from Lacan (and eventually from Freud) as a thread to join the theory with the empirical evidence; nevertheless, this is unevenly stitched in places. Rather than a flaw, this intermittence of psychoanalytic references strengthens the narration, making key sections of the book easier to navigate for non-experts in psychoanalysis. Finally, colourful illustrations of the represented cacti and succulents would have added more detail and engagement to the discussion. Colours, as the author mentions several times in the text, work actively in the creation of desire. In spite of this, this book is well-organised, with a fluent concatenation of facts; the author shows a remarkable narrative capacity and great erudition. With this book, we understand how, as some plants symbolically take root in our desires, at the same time, they slowly unroot forever from their native soil.

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