

*The Succulent Subject: a political ecology of plants, desire, and illicit trade*

Jared Margulies

My project is about people and the plants they desire explored through the undocumented world of illicit succulent plant trade. I examine what motivates collectors to possess plants beyond the law, and the consequences of doing so. I describe and analyze how collector desires have material consequences for species futures, and how the commodification of plant life both mediates, responds to, and also produces forms of vegetal desire. Taken together, I argue for thinking about these entwined relationships through the concept of the production of desire, and how desire shapes species pathways towards forms of flourishing and diminution. While also a story about who engages in illicit plant economies why they do so, my project is a meditation on the apparent contradictions between the forms of care avid collectors extend to plants, and the illicit activities collectors knowingly and unknowingly are entangled in through chains of illicit acquisition. Through research into the activities and perspectives of collectors, smugglers, conservationists, law-enforcement agents, and the plants themselves, I offer insights into the relationships forged between people and the plants they seek to possess, with material consequences for species threatened with extinction as a result of illegal trade. It begins with a basic question: why do certain people steal certain plants?

This is a multispecies ethnography of a broadly undescribed illegal wildlife trade. The illegal trade in plants exceeds illegal animal trade in volume and economic worth, yet receives little attention from policy makers and the scientific community. Unlike many animal-derived trades, many of these species are not prized for their economic exchange value, but are sought out by passionate collectors as *living beings*. Arguing that illegal wildlife trade and conservation are rooted in shared rather than antithetical histories, I explore practices of commodification and conservation understood through trajectories of species flourishing and diminution. I developed my arguments over the course of three years of multispecies ethnographic inquiry spanning seven countries across four continents. Narrated through the social cultures of illicit trade in rare and endangered plants, I advocate for thinking about human-plant relations through non-capitalist orientations. I consider what thinking with desire beyond the commodity-form of plant life offers as a corrective to capitalist approaches to species conservation and efforts to save species from extinction.

My research demonstrates that economic justifications are insufficient for understanding the roots of illicit succulent trade, requiring a turn to matters of desire. A key contribution of the book is through engagement with psychoanalytic thought to understand how desire to possess rare and endangered plants drives illegal plant trade. This involves a turn towards what motivates individuals' efforts to satisfy desires with close attention to their objects of desire, while at the same time taking the opportunity to complicate simple object/subject binaries in which nonhuman *life* is afforded the same analytical positionality as lifeless *things*. Most illegal wildlife trade literature begins from the position

that a key driver is economic opportunity, but thinking with desire enables an analysis focused on what incites desire in the collector, what they subconsciously seek to fulfill through the possession of particular plants, and how tuning into more-than-human desire can help make sense of why certain people steal certain plants. Answering these questions becomes essential to understanding the foundations of illegal trades and envisioning trajectories of future species flourishing rather than extinction.