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## Emergent Ecologies by Eben Kirksey

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***Emergent Ecologies*** by EBEN KIRKSEY  
Duke University Press, 2015 \$94.95

Reviewed by CHERYL LOUSLEY

Eben Kirksey tells a good story. He'll start in a conventional place, like an amphibian conservation centre in Panama, working to stave off frog species extinction, and then before we know it, our hands are covered in frog poop from cleaning out their tanks; we're in New York as Kirksey experiments at home with designing a Utopia for the Golden Frog out of a bar fridge; we're sterilizing tubes for "unloved microbes" in a chytrid laboratory that might help identify the fungus killing frogs; we're offering frog-based pregnancy tests from the early days of Planned Parenthood; we've jumped deep into the mail-order lab frog trade, and we're driving around Florida talking to the people who love and care for a range of escaped exotic species, from frogs to birds to rhesus macaques descended those imported for the filming of *Tarzan*. And along the way, as Kirksey quite literally follows the trails of this loose, transnational multispecies assemblage, we find our expectations confounded, and definitive answers hard to settle on.

As the Panamanian golden frog appears to have gone extinct in the wild, it is thriving to such an excess in a captive breeding program in the United States that zoos must kill them by the hundreds. And while the paperwork is at times blamed as making it too cumbersome to transfer any of this biopolitical surplus to Panama — or even a utopian fridge — it may also be that releasing the progeny of these

captive frogs could bring a new amphibian disease to Central America. One theory on the global spread of the pathogenic chytrid fungus links its travel to laboratory science itself, as it is carried by the African clawed frog, a standard organism in biology laboratories ever since its early success as a humane replacement for rabbits in human pregnancy tests. But then that story, too, seems to dovetail too smoothly with popular myths about invasive aliens and global pandemics coming out of Africa. Even as frog extermination plans got underway, the evidence, Kirksey points out, seems quite inconclusive, with prevalence of the disease not geographically clumped as one might expect from the theory.

Professionals and amateurs, captives and free-roamers, urban and rural, the loved and feared, tabloids and *Nature*, speculative pet markets and research labs all figure in Kirksey's stories as he crafts a multispecies ethnography that does not assume in advance what categories will matter — or materialize — at any given time and place. He calls this "emergent ecology" because the assemblages he describes are shown to be dynamic and are insistently historicized.

Ecology research does not take place in a vacuum, although, as Kirksey recounts his various visits to the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute on Barro Colorado Island, formed during the construction of the Panama Canal, many of the scientists there live like it does. Kirksey describes the privileged isolation that his United States citizenship grants him, such as "entry to the old Officer's Club on Clayton Army Base," and the economic inequalities

that keep ordinary Panamanians from accessing even the nature tours the Smithsonian offers to the public. Armed forest rangers patrol the grounds to discourage hunting in the biodiversity research zone, and signs and practices linked to the racial and class segregation of the institute's early days remain.

Kirksey's occasional return visits allow him to explore some of the cultural and ecological changes that accompanied the transfer of the Canal Zone from the United States to Panama in 1999, finding middle-class aspirations among Panamanians and efforts by conservation groups to block the clean-up of abandoned military zones because of the rare species they harbour.

At the heart of Kirksey's stories — which are indeed about love, whether the love that strives to make endangered species live or the love involved in putting to death — is a recurring question, first posed by Donna Haraway: "who benefits, when species meet?" Kirksey aims to sort through the details, often in playful experiments of do-it-yourself biology that double as performance art, with his emphasis always on discovering how the story keeps going rather than delivering a clear-cut ending.

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