

Transcription

University of Minnesota Press

Episode 10: Waste More, Want More: The case for taking objects seriously.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/waste-more-want-more>

**Soundbite:** “What if rather than sort of asking people to abstain, what if we kind of doubled down on that? Humans seem to want to surround themselves with objects they love.”

**Host intro:** [Christine Harold](#) is a professor of communication at the University of Washington. Her new book, [Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World](#), investigates the attachments we form to the objects we buy, keep, and discard, and explores how these attachments might be marshaled to create less wasteful practices and balance our consumerist and ecological impulses. [Nicole Seymour](#) is a professor of English based in Southern California whose book, [Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age](#), seeks out a new way to talk about environmentalism that is less performance and self-righteousness and embraces irony and humor. As the novel coronavirus pandemic continues to rage in the United States, consumption is on pause for a lot of people. And these two scholars are here to talk about what that means. This conversation was recorded in October 2020.

**Nicole Seymour:** OK. Hi, this is Nicole Seymour.

**Christine Harold:** Hi, this is Christine Harold.

**NS:** So, I was one of the reviewers for Christine’s book in manuscript form, and I’m really excited that it’s out in the world right now, and that I get to talk to you about it. I have to say, I wasn’t sure if you would hate me for using a swear word for the blurb on the back of your book.

**CH:** I loved it, actually.

**NS:** OK, good. I just figured that now is the time to tell me if you do hate me. I think it was something like: “Westerners buy too much shit but you should definitely buy this book.” Paraphrasing a little bit there. So, your book seems to be motivated, in large part, by concern over the environmental impact of Western consumerism, specifically, the waste it produces. And I really love this point you make about how part of the solution is learning to care about objects, so, not just caring about the Earth, which is being polluted, or workers who are being exploited. In other words, we need to become stewards of objects, not just stewards of place or people. And one of the ways we can do that is by, as you say, opening up the object. So, I wanted to start by asking you to explain more about

what you mean by this idea of opening up of the object.

**CH:** Yeah. Thank you, that's really helpful. You're right. One of the kind of operating premises of the book is that so much environmental rhetoric, for all its good intentions, at least at it relates to consumer culture, which is my primary object of study, environmentalist rhetoric tends to ask us to, if you care about the Earth, if you care about pollution or human rights and so on, then, the answer to that is to stop shopping. We have lots of movements that are "buy nothing day" and "stop shopping" campaigns and so on. And I think those things have a certain utility for sure as consciousness-raising efforts. But I think at the end of the day, they haven't proved as effective as they might. So, one of the things that I really try to grapple with in the book is, what if, rather than sort of asking people to abstain, to reject that part of themselves that loves things, what if we kind of doubled down on that and capitalized on it and took advantage of the fact that humans seem to want to surround themselves with objects they love. To make objects they love. That is to say, part of my argument is, what if we take things more seriously rather than less. I'm a scholar of rhetoric, so, I really look at the ways that we use certainly, language, images, signs, but also objects to kind of influence the ways that people think, behave and believe. This project was trying to look at what are some of the roadblocks to us really having a more intimate relationship with objects. What are some practices that people are engaging in that are an attempt to problematize that. The book really unfolds through what I talk about as an intensifying or escalating deconstruction of objects, at least as the case studies unfold. I start with [Target](#), and the ways in which Target as a marketer, as a corporation, really foreground design as their central brand identity: "We make design for all." Like [Ikea](#) and others, they really celebrate what they call a democratization of design. As I argue in the book, at the end of the day, Target really sells a version of design where it is a dressing up of objects. Their structure and the conditions of their manufacture are no different than something you might buy at say, [Walmart](#). But that they're kind of dressed up in a skin of design. Nevertheless, they do kind of promote an awareness or an interest in designers, in a kind of design vocabulary. And so on. I can talk about that more. At the end of the day, the model still treats objects as this discrete other to ourselves. It's this thing on the shelf, in a store, that I covet in some way. I take it home; it's there to do my bidding. It's there for my use or for my pleasure. And I have no obligation to it once it loses its shine. I can just toss it onto the landfill. But then, I look at other case studies, like Ikea, for example. Ikea, for most of its products are ones that you have to bring home and assemble yourself. And engage in at least in their assembly, not in their manufacture, necessarily. But at least the object is opening up. So, you see lots of people taking advantage of that by things like [Ikea hacking](#). There is something almost [Lego](#)-esque about Ikea components that for some people, sparks their creativity. There's also a dynamic in which just the labor of sitting down and spending an afternoon putting

together a [Billy bookcase](#) that is an investment — of your energy, of your patience, of your time, in a way that kind of opens the object up as something that's malleable, that you imprint on in a particular way. I recognize that these are kind of cookie-cutter components that make completely homogeneous objects potentially. Nevertheless, there's kind of an opening up that invites our investment. And then, I move on to look at other approaches to making and design and modes of design that invite us to imprint our stories on objects. I kind of trace this escalating opening up of objects in ways that, my hope is, anyway, that we can see new moments in the life of an object, from the harvesting of its materials to its manufacture, to its marketing, to its consumption, to what do we do with it once it's in our homes, what do we do with it once we're done with it? That there's this kind of way in which there's a rhetorical opening up that offers opportunities for us to intervene in different ways. Rather than just the traditional model where it's there for me on the store shelf, I chuck it when I'm done with it. I'm interested in looking for new points of intervention.

**NS:** The other reason I really like this idea of opening up the object is, it's both literal and figurative. This idea, you can watch a video, as I did when I moved to Germany, I watched a video on how I could take out my SIM card and replace it with a different SIM card using a paperclip. I was like, oh, my God, I'm a genius. You're literally potentially opening objects but also opening them up in figurative ways, affectively, making new connections to them and so forth. So, I was also really struck by one of the claims in your introduction that designers are the most underacknowledged and understudied communicators in our Western, and perhaps, the world at large. I was wondering if you could speak more about this idea and why it's important. Why should we see designers as communicators or what potentially changes if we see them as such?

**CH:** This book is really building off of my first book, also with University of Minnesota Press, [OurSpace](#), which was looking at the challenges, or activists who wanted to challenge corporate branding rhetoric. So, things like culture jamming or copyright pirating; really, people who wanted to challenge corporations by way of their brands. One of the things I argue in that book is that, that becomes possible as a terrain of contestation because people, there's a whole generation, my generation, Generation X and beyond, millennials and younger, who have been reared in a world of branding. That we're literate in the grammar and the vocabulary and the syntax of branding. Therefore, it becomes one of the arrows in our quiver as activists or people who want to make change. Being literate in branding was really important. One of the things that I'm arguing in this book, or at least a context in which I imagined this book is that branding hasn't gone away, for sure. Branding still saturates our culture. But design is really the next generation of branding. It's not just about does my device have an apple on it or does it have a clever campaign on TV that makes me want it. The actual form,

function, the way it feels in my hand, the interface, those sorts of things — we're becoming increasingly literate in that language as well. One of the things about design, and [Bruce Mau](#), who is a famous designer, makes this comment, that the goal of good design is to be invisible, to be in that old cliché of water to a fish. Where, we're influenced by design all the time but good design doesn't announce itself. As a rhetoric scholar, as a communication scholar, I'm really interested in that, that it's a design of interfaces. It's a style of communication or a mode of communication, but one that purposefully wants to be invisible in ways. I think, we could look at what I was suggesting about Target, is one way, and Ikea; those are one kind of way in which we've become conversant in the language of design, certainly, in our high-tech gadgets. We're becoming increasingly conversant in what's the footprint, what's its interface, those sorts of things. So, I think it's kind of the next terrain in which people can say, OK, well, there's a version of design that you might find at Target, which as I was suggesting before, making mass-produced things, plastic widgets from China look pretty, or look like they're midcentury modern, or whatever, that it's kind of a skinning operation. That's kind of design as decoration. But then, there's a whole host of other designers, people again of generations who were reared in the vocabulary of design, who are saying, either A, let's design things with more sustainable materials, with more sustainable production practices, or those that I look at in the book more closely, designers who say, are there ways that we can actually embed in the form of an object some components that open it up to us imprinting on it emotionally or invite us to imbue it with story, and so on. Let alone all of the people who are engaged in crafting and making things and so on. And so, we're seeing this return to everyday people being manufacturers of sorts and exploring. And as we know, from the great work on media literacy, the best way to teach people to be media literate, for example, is to just get them making a video or teach them to make a podcast. Get them literate in the doing.

**NS:** Are we podcast literate now? This is my first. OK, so shifting gears a little bit now, of course, I felt like I had to ask you a pandemic question because everyone's talking about it. I noticed probably a month into our lockdown or semi-lockdown that I hadn't been shopping, not just in a, I hadn't been going out and shopping; I also wasn't shopping online, which you still could. Part of the reason is I think, is that I wasn't seeing other people. You see a friend, they talk about this new outfit I just bought or I bought tickets to this thing, or whatever, and so, the social aspect of consumerism wasn't there for me anymore. Also, thinking back on this period and rereading your book, I'm just thinking about how much time I was spending in my apartment, reconnecting with all of my objects, spending more time with them than I usually do. I'm just curious if you — you personally had a similar experience — and maybe if more broadly you think that the arguments of your book have taken on different resonance in the past few months.

**CH:** Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting. Exactly, what you say, that there's this performative quality, at least with certain versions of consumption, so as you've probably read, I don't have data on this, but just from reading various culture pieces, that the fashion industry has taken a huge hit recently. Things like athleisure are doing quite well, comfort clothes. But clothes that are specifically fashion is really hurting because there's not that performative quality or there's not the context for it right now. There's a few ways in which it seems like our consumption practices are being interrupted right now that are really pertinent to some of the themes of the book. First, is that, we see this huge — one of the chapters in the book looks at the seemingly disparate practices of [Marie Kondo's KonMari method](#) of decluttering, and hoarding. Looking at our relationship to clutter, for example. You've probably heard this term or at least it will resonate with you even if you haven't — "corona cleaning" — so, there's been all these articles about people engaging in corona cleaning, cleaning out their homes since they're spending so much time in their homes. So, for example, the big Goodwill in Los Angeles had to take out advertisements just saying, please stop bringing things to us because they couldn't accommodate the onslaught of stuff that was being donated to them. So, I think there's that dynamic, when we're really reevaluating our spaces and nesting in new ways. And of course, you're also hearing a lot about people taking up old hobbies, or doing DIY projects, crafting, making bread, doing those self-sufficient, pleasurable, old-school activities that at least for now, do interrupt the consumerist impulse, which is, I'll just go buy the thing. So, in addition to that, as you mentioned, lots of people are shopping less, or at least, they're shopping differently. So, I think there is a really, let alone the fact that people can't just go into stores like they used to. But as we know, lots of people are furloughed, laid off, out of work, have other expenses. So, consumption is on pause for a lot of people. Obviously, it's hard to know how repatterned things are going to be once things get back. I know we're not going back to normal but getting back to being in person again. I suspect a lot of our old habits will just come back but I also think that there is a significant repatterning that's happening that does have some potential.

**NS:** I should say, of course, that from my perspective as a person who could teach online, not everyone had the luxury of connecting again with their objects because they were sleeping less and being essential workers, but based on social media, there was this sense of nesting as you say. I was also reading today that sales of houseplants have exploded over the past couple months which is in keeping with this larger trend of apparently millennials and Gen Z are now this huge houseplant-buying sector. It may be a wacky question, but I'll just throw it out there. I'm thinking about something like a plant and how that is and maybe isn't an object in the way that you're writing about in the book but at least the narrative around the houseplant explosion is that Gen Z and millennials can't afford houses, so, they need to make their tiny apartments look cute, they have to

have something to care for. You don't write about plants but you do mention a couple examples of objects that are created by designers; they are objects that need us, quote-unquote, almost like in a *homodachi* kind of way, so, you write about this trashcan that turns itself toward the wall when it needs to be taken out, that sort of thing. Maybe you can talk a little more about this idea of objects that train us to care of them and what is and isn't an object; does a plant count as a consumer object or not because it's a living thing.

**CH:** Yes, and you forgot the vacuum cleaner that poops out its own dustbag. That's a work of a [designer named Hyerim Shin](#), who did this, admittedly, kind of experimental or kind of conceptual series of appliances that she designed. They're very cute, they're in pastel colors, really rounded edges; it's a toaster, a trashcan and a vacuum cleaner. And they all are designed in such a way that they call attention to themselves as needing you. So, if the crumb tray gets full on the toaster, it makes a sneezing motion and so on. Her premise is that one of the reasons we're wired to love babies is because they're so helpless that we need to tend to their needs. She was interested in, what if I made objects that also demanded attention in the way that a baby does. She did this with an eye toward attachment, fostering attachment in the way that we attach to babies. I love the example of houseplants. I don't know that they would count as an object, but they certainly count as a commodity. They're something that we acquire, they are a unit of exchange, and I do see the trend toward the "plant lady" T-shirts, all of the macrame-hanging devices and the rise of houseplants. And I think you're right that that probably has something to do with when people might not be able to buy a home but they can really nest in the home that they have. I think there's something about houseplants, like the objects that Shin made, they demand our attention, they invite our investment. I do think they contribute to a kind of an opening up or a literacy. So, if you have a home, where you're surrounded by houseplants, and you're starting to learn, how much light does this one need, how much water does that one need, maybe I should position this one in the north window. You're starting to develop a literacy, a capacity to tend to the needs of something outside yourself. I would say at a formal level, that in and of itself kind of repatterns the consumer model, the way of being that we're invited to inhabit by consumer culture. Where it's like, everything's there for me, does it delight me, does it give me joy, if it doesn't, chuck it. I think plants are an interesting example, of objects, they're probably not objects necessarily, but commodities that force us out of that pattern, because we have to say, what does it need? It's starting to look kind of wilted or it's starting to look kind of brown. It's a tuning in to something outside yourself that I think is fundamentally powerful. And then, maybe, it cultivates a hunger to get out into the natural world, maybe you're tuning in there a little bit more, too, because you've honed it a bit at home.

**NS:** I was thinking, you just mentioned your hoarding chapter, and I think you

even mentioned, maybe it was an [Animal Planet](#) show, animal hoarders. I was like, is there a such thing as plant hoarders? Because it almost seems like on Instagram, the more the better; you could have hundreds of plants, and people are actually jealous of you rather than sort of horrified by it. But this question of it's a form of consumption that reflects positively on you, whereas, other forms reflect negatively.

**CH:** You're right that it does seem like the more the better. I have that attitude in my home. I regularly grab a plant just when I'm at the grocery store — I see a plant I like, I'll grab it and find a place for it. Never do I go out and say, I'm looking for a particular kind of plant. I just pick them up. I don't think we have quite the same sort of shame about plants; plants aren't really clutter for most people.

**NS:** This does remind me, though, of the chapter where you talk about Marie Kondo. I promised to tell you about —

**CH:** Yes, please —

**NS:** — Marie Kondo at the Oscars. I can't say I actually met her, I just saw her from afar. I have a friend who works for the library of the [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#). So, he's a librarian for the Oscars, basically, and so, he got me a ticket as a seat filler, I was literally seat filler.

**CH:** That's so cool.

**NS:** It was amazing. I was in the lobby, and I saw this person. I'm usually good at recognizing celebrities. I recognized her face but she was out of place; I knew who she is but she's not — I was so confused. I was like, oh my God, it's Marie Kondo. And then, I [saw] her at a cocktail party later that night and then, a third time at the valet. And I just felt like — this was two years ago, or a year and a half ago — she's very of the moment, and I just thought, she's made it, she's definitely made it, that she got that invite to the Oscars. I don't know that she got the invite the next year, though.

**CH:** She definitely had a huge moment. She's still very popular. When the show launched in January of 2019, people just couldn't get enough of her. So many people who knew that I was writing, had a chapter that engages her, I can't tell you how many emails and texts that I get from friends and colleagues around the country just saying, did you see this, did you see that. And of course, there's this new show on [Netflix](#) based on [The Home Edit Instagram](#) feed that's very popular, lots of people texting me about that as well.

**NS:** One of the things I was thinking about is, you already kind of mentioned earlier, this idea of your skepticism around consciousness raising, this idea that if you just, for example, show people a picture of a garbage dump filled with castaway toys and clothes, or whatever, people will stop buying those things. Your argument is, just to reiterate, you're saying, we need to also ask, how can we design and also care for things differently such that we don't want to throw them away in the first place. I wrote in my book a lot, against this idea of gotcha environmentalism or exposé environmentalism or whatever you want to call it — that you just need to show people — there's this phrase called the "[knowledge deficit](#)" hypothesis — that people just don't know, and they need to know, or they need to be shown, or they need to see it. And that's what's really going to change things. And I come from this more cynical viewpoint of, you do a bit as well, which is that people know things are bad, people know that they buy too much stuff, we're way past that point. I appreciated seeing your take on that from a different angle, sort of using different examples. The other thing I was thinking a lot about is that we're both really interested in feelings and affect, including pleasure. Just thinking that for you, it seems that this idea of critical consumerism, a critical consumerism without pleasure won't work. We need to locate the pleasure points in different places, perhaps. But just telling people, stop buying things, the austerity approach doesn't work. For me, it's about an environmentalism without pleasure will not work, an environmentalism that's all about what you're doing is bad, and cut it out and so forth. So, I think in a lot of interesting ways, we sort of have the same spirit.

**CH:** Yeah, absolutely. I loved that, too. I think it's the opening quote of my introduction, I cite [Juliet Schor](#), I can't reproduce the quote, but she basically says it's not about donning a hair shirt, we don't need to flagellate ourselves in order to make good choices. I think we both — me through the lens of consumer culture, and I think you explore it in a broader sense — looking at the ways we talk about environmentalism itself. Absolutely, I quote [[Peter](#)] [Sloterdijk](#), and you quote others, to take this posture of we have lots of evidence that say[s], smoking is bad for you. And yet, people still smoke. It's not just about a knowledge deficit. It's about helping or to provide ways of repatterning people's desires and forging new kinds of pleasure and so on — at least as part of the conversation. It might not exhaust the possibilities. But, I think we both agree at least in our work, that a kind of austerity, abstinence, refraining, purity, overdetermines the discourse. I wanted to ask you — your book about environmentalism — first, I would love to hear you explain what you mean by that. But then, to hear you talk about ways that it interrupts that tendency of environmentalist rhetoric to be overdetermined by these things like purity and certainty and a certain version of wearing a hair shirt if you care about the environment.

**NS:** So, I just think of it as environmentalism in a different tenor, with a different



spirit. So, all the texts, all the examples I look at, whether it's performance art or stand-up comedy or animation, you can locate in all of these texts a very real concern for the environment, for environmental injustice and so forth. They're just not doing the killjoy environmentalism, they're not doing the gloom and doom, they're not doing the didactic sort of: I'm here to tell you, I'm here to show you the facts. A lot of these examples come from, I think, a dissatisfaction with mainstream environmentalism not just in the affective sense, not just the guilt that we're both talking about, but a dissatisfaction with the ways in which those affective modes are really tied up with normative social stances. Mainstream environmentalism can be very heteronormative, can be very white, very ableist. So, the examples I'm looking at come from queer environmentalists that are like, hey, let's dress up in really gaudy clothes and be very aggressive and be very indulgent in all these things that environmentalists are not supposed to be. So, I really connect the affective modes that they're working with to these social dynamics or these social demographics that they're coming from. I'm working on a new book right now which is about glitter. There's all these biodegradable brands of glitter that are coming out now.

**CH:** — Are they sugar, or — ?

**NS:** Some are made of sugar, some are made of cellulose. I'm interviewing an eco-glitter manufacturer tomorrow. All the natural minerals. That to me, it's just the perfect expression of that environmentalism. This idea that you're ostentatious, you want to be ridiculous, you want to be indulgent, you want to be over the top, you want to be excessive, but you actually do care about the environment.

**CH:** I think both of us are coming a perspective that at least wants to look at the ways in which — I'm looking at attachment, investment. It's hard to get people to invest in a negative, to invest in a mode of discourse where you're constantly judging yourself. I think the kinds of things that you're looking at, yeah, they're ostentatious, they're kind of ridiculous, and so on. And I think there's a really cool way in which that hijacking or repatterning — so much of environmentalism seems to be about a kind of — and you talk about this in your final chapter — an aspirational lifestyle brand. There's almost a look. There's either the white, middle-class, Whole Foods-shopping mom version, or there's the old-school hippie version, which I think is less prevalent nowadays. But there is a way in which mainstream environmentalism gets reduced to consumer choices, where do you shop, what kind of look does your home have, what kind of look does your style have. And, there's a weird, aesthetic minimalism that comes with that that might not be green at all, but is almost the sign of: I'm someone who's constrained and living minimally, and so on, when really, it's just an aesthetic choice. I'm just really interested in the examples you point to in [Bad](#)

[Environmentalism](#), really challenge that. I'm interested in hearing you talk about — they offer an alternative aesthetic and style and approach. But it's more than that, too; they offer another form as well. So, one of the things that I thought was really interesting, in your introduction you say, that much environmentalist writer[s] tends to privilege things like proximity and presence that might make them allergic to the distancing mode that irony brings. I would be interested to hear you talk about that — because bad environmentalism isn't just a different aesthetic. It's a different structure, too.

**NS:** Right. I mentioned, definitely ironies all around the book and I'll talk about that in one second. But when you said form, I was thinking about how a lot of the forms I talk about are understood to be trashy to begin with and understood to be not environmentalist to begin with. So, something like animation is considered exaggerated, it's crude. Unless you're talking about a few exceptions like Pixar or [Spirited Away](#), things like [The Simpsons](#), which I write about, and [The Goode Family](#), they're not beautiful. The form of it is not beautiful.

**CH:** Right, there's a vulgarity to it.

**NS:** Exactly. And we think of environmentalist texts as being beautiful. Think about [Rachel Carson](#), we have to stoke wonder. And her prose itself has to be wondrous, it has to be beautiful. So, a lot of the texts that I'm talking about are by their very form not thought of, or not believed to be environmentalist. The irony that they all have in some sense, is, as you said, irony is associated with distance; emotional distancing, that you're too cool to care about something, you've got to make a joke or whatever. Personally, I've come to think of irony in such a different way since I've written this book. My own personal mode is I make a joke about absolutely everything; my constant compulsion. For me, it's protection. It's this idea of, God, things are so grim. We all know how grim they are, we live it. So, there's a way in which these texts and me, as a person, we need to have a little bit of cushioning just to get through the day.

**CH:** Is that the distancing?

**NS:** Yeah, it's a self-protection mode. But at the same time, a lot of these texts, and this is the other crucial part of the whole book's argument, almost all of these texts are self-reflective and self-reflexive and they're making fun of themselves; they're not just making fun of other things. If we go back, you mentioned smoking earlier. There's this famous moment in [An Inconvenient Truth](#) where Al Gore shows these old pictures of smoking ads. Just showing the ads, where they're like, 9 out of 10 doctors agree — just even showing these ads, people laugh automatically. Because there's this sense of: They're so dumb, they didn't know, we know better. I think a lot of environmentalists take that approach, which is,

we just have to reveal that Shell [plc] oil is evil, and then, we can feel superior. Ta-da, we've pulled the curtain off of Shell oil and we see it for what it is. So, these texts are ironic in that sense, what [Bronislaw Szerszynski calls a "corrective irony."](#) So, they're using irony. When environmentalists do use irony, which is rare, it's to do that kind of corrective irony. It's to say, oh, we know so much better.

**CH:** You thought it was this one thing, but really, it's this other thing.

**NS:** Exactly. Exactly. And so, what's different about the texts that I talk about is they make fun of themselves as well. So, they're not taking the superior standpoint, which I think makes them more approachable and doesn't get them into that. Even though they are using irony, which is distancing, they can still connect to an audience because they can say, yeah, I'm a mess, too. Either, I still like to buy things, too, yet I care about the environment. So, yeah.

**CH:** Right. I love that. This makes me think of this other — see if I can articulate this — this thing that I think both of our projects share, but in different ways. So, for my work, I'm kind of walking a careful line, looking at really, some of my examples are the epitome of big corporate consumer brands like Target, Ikea and so on. And yet, I'm not just taking a stand of: They're bad for the environment. They promote waste. I'm wanting to look for, more like, what are they a symptom of? Why is it that this appeal to design seems to speak to people so much? I'm interested in kind of looking for like, yes, obviously, Target isn't a path to greener living, but there is this kind of opening up of a particular vocabulary and so on, that I talked about earlier. Or, I look at other examples that are kind of playful and a little bit more ambiguous and aren't perfect, I guess from an environment, like if you are evaluating it on purely green terms, none of my examples are what you could call perfect and yours, of course, that's kind of fundamental to bad environmentalism, but also kind of a queer approach, in general, where you're playing up playfulness, ambiguity and so on. So, one of the things I've often grappled with, and I'm just wondering if you do, too, is that irony and ambiguity, I agree with you that they're more productive in terms of opening up a new space and new patterns of practice and being and so on. But is there a downside to ambiguity? Are there risks in having one's message be so open for interpretation, especially in a time when, as you say, I was devastated by that anecdote you tell in the beginning of your book about how the Senate declared climate change real and then, what it was, and then 15 minutes later voted — can you explain that.

**NS:** Yeah, 15 minutes later, the second resolution was that it was not man-made. It wasn't our fault. So, climate change is real but we didn't do it.

**CH:** I was just blown away. So, given that that's still a matter of debate in some ways seems to call for a response that's fact based and certain and pure, you know what I'm saying? Do you ever struggle with that question of ambiguity in a time where even those we're kind of trying to challenge are themselves ambiguous?

**SN:** Yeah, I mean, I don't want to say that I've given up fighting for —

**CH:** — facts.

**NS:** I don't want to say that I drank the fake news Kool-Aid. I was just thinking today about [how] [AOC tweeted something about, you guys attacked me for getting a \\$200 haircut](#), and Trump spent \$70,000 on his haircuts. That can go back and forth forever. Where it's just kind of, they don't care about facts. That's already been established. They don't care about facts. How are you going to fight with facts with someone who doesn't care about the facts, or whatever. So, and maybe this is just my deep cynicism, I think we're somewhere else right now. I don't think we're back in that zone, if we ever were, of the knowledge deficit hypothesis. Once you point out that Trump spent \$70,000 on his hair, everyone's going to apologize to AOC or something. We've surpassed that moment. So, I guess, I'm just interested in the fact that people, these comedians that I'm talking about, these stand-up comedians, or these animators or these drag queens, all these people I'm talking about in my book are just sort of like, let's just try something else. Let's just try a different approach. I did have this moment writing this book where I was in this crisis, where I was like, do I want to endorse all of these things? I write about this show called [Wildboyz](#). It's sort of a nature program parody, and you can be very offended by it. It's very un-PC, and I had this moment where I was like, is that what I'm trying to do with this book? Am I trying to say, look, these these examples are a better way to do environmentalism? And I realized that's not really the point of the book; it's to say these examples already exist. We just haven't noticed them. And what does it mean that they exist? What does it mean that so many people feel the need to do stand-up comedy about the environment in a world that thinks of environmentalists as killjoys? There's this other narrative that's happening that we're not paying attention to, and we just need to pay attention to it and sort of think about what does it mean that someone who's a vegan — Steve-O, who's the star of *Wildboyz* — he's a vegan, but he doesn't want to make a serious vegan TV show. He wants to make a ridiculous stunt TV show where, [he's being] chased around butt naked, like a hyena or whatever. What does it mean that someone is like, that's how I want to tell the world about my veganism, I run around naked on a television screen. I guess, maybe this is a cop out, but at the end of the day, I think I just say, the proof is already out there that people want a different way to to feel and to talk about environmentalism, whether it's right or wrong. This is just what's already happening. We just haven't paid attention.

**CH:** No, absolutely. And I think, just going back to where we both agree that the traditional message of look at the facts or I'm going to expose this particular corporate evil, and then, people will behave accordingly. In my first book, I look at this example of this organization called the [Biotic Baking Brigade](#), and they say that their slogan is to pie pompous people. And what they would do is they would go to public events, and so, they would pie people like [Milton Friedman](#) and [Bill Gates](#) and whoever was the CEO, I can't remember his name, of Chevron, at the time and other corporate polluters or economists and so on. And they would just put a pie in their face, and they would record it and it's ridiculous. But it's also this moment of rupture. And then, of course, you stick a pie in the face of Bill Gates, then, the cameras are going to turn to you and say, why did you do that? Then, suddenly, you have an opportunity to say why you did that. Any good art or lots of bad art too, makes people scratch their heads and be like, what is that about? And I think that's way more of a moment that — we want to create more of those moments where people can kind of, where something is interrupted. And I would argue that the traditional environmentalist message is the status [quo]. People are very accustomed to it. And so, it's not disruptive. But the kinds of things you're looking at are disruptive in the way that they make people go huh? And in that moment, there's an opportunity there for people to self-persuade or to think a little bit differently, even in small ways, about things that they thought; oh, environmentalism is just for those white ladies at Whole Foods or the hippies or whatever. I think those moments of disruption, even if there's not a clear prescription that follows it, like you saw me naked, now go vegan. It's not necessarily that, but it's just this disruptive moment that could potentially reboot things in a way.

**NS:** Right. Absolutely. So, yeah, these bad environmentalist texts, I think of them as they are disrupting environmental destruction, but they're also disrupting environmentalism and that those two are going together at the same time. So, you were talking about branding as sort of, this was the place that your previous book was sort of oscillating, that sort of like where the world was also, sort of thinking of consumerism and then, you said design is sort of the next thing and what's next? What comes after branding and design? What's the next book, maybe, is another way to ask that.

**CH:** So, I'm not sure at this stage if I've got another book in me, but I have lots of, I have an idea that I'm toying with. So I'm not sure if I'm going to execute on it or not, if it's like an article or a book or what. And also, I'm concerned because there's a lot being done on it. My work always tends to be, I approach things as symptoms. That is to say, in rhetorical scholarship, a lot of times, people will look at a rhetorical text and then look at what it causes in the world. But I'm more interested in looking at rhetorical trends or consumer trends in terms of my work as what is that a symptom of, what does that tell us about the moment we're in, in contemporary capitalism? Why is this thing popular? I'm really drawn towards all

the debates around mindfulness and wellness and the way, the why is that? So, I'm not 100% sure where I'm going with that. And obviously, there's tons being written about it right now, and lots of people challenging it as “Mcmindfulness” and that it's just about making better workers. You have lots of companies and universities that have mindfulness programs as part of their wellness through their HR departments and so on. There's lots of criticism of that. There's lots of criticism of the [Army's Mind Fit program \[Mind Fitness Training \(MMFT\)\]](#) that is basically mindfulness for soldiers. Lots and lots of police departments across the country have various mindfulness programs. And so, the critique is, of course, well, we're just making better killers, better soldiers and so on. I'm interested in those debates. I'm interested in the debates around mindfulness in schools and the challenges that you get largely from religious organizations, Christian organizations, I should say, who are concerned about that being sort of Buddhism or yoga through the back door. But primarily, I'm interested in the commodification of all of that. The commodification of consciousness is how I'm thinking about it.

**NS:** I mean, it fits in with the plants because it's all about — things to me are all sort of — I'm like an old millennial. I'm technically like a year or two too old to be a millennial, but I don't know, I still feel very millennial.

**CH:** You identify, and I think a lot of it is how you identify culturally.

**NS:** Yeah. But definitely, I feel like this, the meditation, the wellness, the self-care, the plant, it's all part of an aesthetic, the yoga. I do feel like more and more, some of these things are just ways for us to cope with these horrible things that are happening in the world rather than stopping the horrible things that are happening in the world.

**CH:** One area [where] it gets concerning is just when it's all about, there are certain versions of this kind of spirituality or mindfulness where it's just all about you imbuing yourself with the fortitude to kind of move through the world. And then, there's other versions of it that are much more about opening yourself up, where a lot of the plant medicine stuff around like psilocybin and ayahuasca and that sort of stuff is a very different patterning. It's a lot about opening yourself up and dissolving the boundaries of self, but then, there's other versions of self-care and whatnot that are all about doubling down on the notion of the self that consumerism depends upon. That's usually my take on most things, that it can go both ways. Sometimes, the commodification of something can be a good thing because it has the power of capital behind it to popularize things that otherwise were on the fringe. And I think, sometimes, that's really powerful. But then, of course, a lot of times, it gets hollowed out in the process, the content of it gets hollowed out in the process.

**NS:** I always go back to this, I can send you a link later, but somewhere online, there's this, it's called something like, "10 self-care activities that don't cost money." It's like that's the thread of self-care where it seemed like such a great idea, and it was absolutely what we needed. And then, it turned out that it was just another way to sell things.

**CH:** Yeah, once Gwyneth Paltrow gets her hands on it, it becomes, you know. I'm interested in reading what you write about plants in the kind of critical theory world. As I'm sure you know, there's all this interesting work. Two of my mentors at Penn State, [Rich Doyle and Jeff Nealon](#), both have written about plants. And I just think it's such an interesting area of study. By the way, have you seen this Apple movie, the documentary about mushrooms that's coming out? I can't remember what it's called. I'll send you the link. It looks really interesting.

**NS:** I haven't decided, but there's definitely something going on — now, there's these young people that call themselves “plant sexuals” and the claim is that not only are — millennials and Gen Z — not only can they not afford to buy houses, and so forth, they have all these houseplants, but they're also having children later and fewer. And so, there's a bit of a moral panic around that. But there's been these sort of joking, I guess, semi-joking sort of slogans, like, “Plant Parenthood,” people calling themselves “[plant daddies](#)” on Instagram and that sort of thing. And so, from a queer studies standpoint and also an environmental studies standpoint, I'm really interested in how the plant is coming in to represent all of these material and social changes. The way people are living is changing, but also the way people are having sex or not having sex is changing. And so, there's all this weird eroticisation of the plant then, that it gets to stand in for the reproduction that's not happening.

**CH:** Well, I'll keep an eye out for it.

**NS:** Thank you so much again for talking.

**CH:** Oh, thank you, Nicole. I really appreciate you making the time.

**NS:** And congrats on the book. Very exciting.

**CH:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

*For more information about both of these books, visit [z dot human, dot edu forward slash things worth keeping](#) and [z dot um dot edu forward slash bad environmentalism](#). Thank you for listening.*