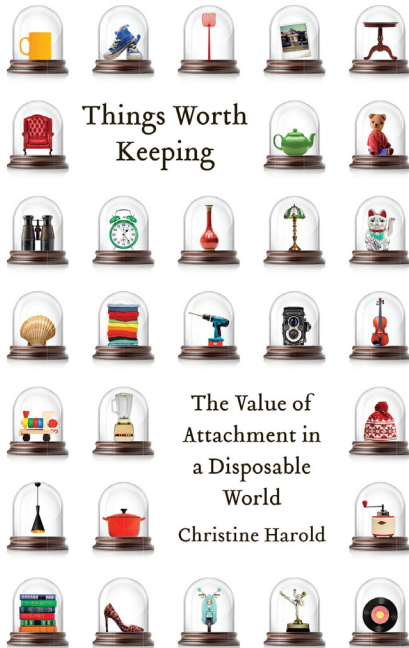


Abby Corbett

# Book Review of Christine Harold's *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World*



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In *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World*, Christine Harold asks her readers to reconsider how we connect with and respond to objects in a world where the excesses of consumer capitalism increasingly contribute to an excess of waste. Scholars and activists from various disciplines ranging from the hard sciences to the humanities have been urgently studying the effects of this consumerist excess, examining the ways it fits into the larger issue of climate change, and proposing solutions to the environmental and social injustices that have occurred as a result. Informed by her training as a scholar of rhetoric and consumer capitalism, Harold offers a unique take on the matter, arguing that we

deepen our attachment to stuff, as opposed to simply scaling down or “greening” our consumption. In other words, she proposes that we be more materialist in our thinking, rather than less so.

Harold’s approach, situated in Marxist and materialist theory and historicity, examines the rhetorical discourses of various forms of media and consumer culture, including films, television, the branding and design campaigns of corporate giants such as Target and IKEA, artist and activist storytelling movements, and DIY, artisan, and handcrafted communities and websites such as Etsy. Rooted in the claim that our alienation from the lifecycle of objects – the stages of extraction, design, production, marketing, consumption, use, and eventual disposal – obscures our interconnectedness to objects, Harold uses the various case studies to show how “objects speak to us through their own affects and language,”<sup>1</sup> in turn generating a value of attachment. The degree to which an object (and the rhetoric that surrounds it) can influence and persuade us into attachment, depends on the type of value an object holds. Throughout the chapters of the book, Harold explores these different value forms, which include sign value, project value, and staging value, each one building upon the next, to show how an object’s prescribed value can increase our capacity to attach to it. In this way, Harold offers a new lens from which to understand the rhetorical discourses that shape our understanding of the connections between culture, consumer capitalism, and the pursuit of environmental justice in the hopes of increasing material attachments in order to decrease material waste.

Harold uses the introductory chapter to situate her major arguments in the larger discourse surrounding environmental awareness and activism. She claims our thirst for more as capitalist consumers is insatiable, yet it is this very desire for more that is a major driver of the environmental

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crisis. Furthermore, we know that our consumption practices are not sustainable, yet we keep consuming despite being conscious and even concerned about the effect these practices are having on the environment. She drives this point home through an examination of various consciousness-raising efforts and the paradox of trends around stockpiling and downsizing, including the popular lifestyle brand known as the Minimalists. She is also careful to contextualize these points by providing a brief history of commodity fetishism, especially useful for readers unfamiliar with the ins and outs of Marxist theory which Harold leans on throughout the course of the book.

In Chapter 1, Harold begins to make her case for attachment, exploring the ways we value and attach ourselves to the things in our lives according to their past and future value, emphasizing the historicity of objects. She demonstrates this concept through a fascinating case study of the phenomenon of hoarding. Citing network shows such as *Hoarders*, *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, and *Extreme Clutter!* as well as various anthropological and psychological studies that have been conducted about the practice of hoarding, Harold suggests that there is a valuable lesson to be learned from hoarders - that of empathy. She juxtaposes this case study with the global tidying frenzy known as the KonMarie Method, which began after the overwhelming success of Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, eventually evolving into the Netflix series, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*. Harold ties these two case studies together by drawing upon George Bataille's concept of the accursed share. With the KonMarie Method, the accursed share is fetishized. The joy of tidying up seems to be found in the act of getting rid of stuff and, as such, is inadequate for addressing overconsumption. Hoarders, on the other hand, often fail completely to dispense with the accursed share, yet their extreme sense of attachment to objects is useful in that it offers a model of empathy that can serve to "slow down the process of disenchantment that causes us to cycle through objects with increasing rapidity."<sup>2</sup> Harold is not suggesting that we all become hoarders, of course, but rather that we learn to attach ourselves more closely to our stuff, slowing our impulse to purge.

In Chapters 2-4, Harold delves into the different value forms, examining the degrees to which they allow for attachment. In Chapter 2, she uses

the rise of the big-box retailer, Target, to discuss sign value; in Chapter 3, she discusses the IKEA Effect and the practice of IKEA Hacking to make the argument for project value; and in Chapter 4 she discusses staging value by drawing upon artist and activist projects such as *The Tales of Things* and *Electronic Memory (TOTeM)* and *Significant Objects*. Harold's strongest arguments can be found in the case studies of Target and IKEA (which are also the most interesting and perhaps relatable of the case studies in the book). Her examination of the rhetorical discourses employed by the corporate giants is both thorough and fascinating and easily invites readers to reflect on their own experiences with these often seductive discourses. Although the case studies in Chapter 4 are less provocative and memorable, her analysis of staging value and the subsequent discussion of emotionally durable design is key for understanding and potentially intensifying our commitment to objects.

Supported by the arguments of previous chapters, in Chapter 5 Harold discusses the rise of artisanal and handcrafted culture (exemplified by the success of e-commerce retailer Etsy) and its potential for deepening our attachment to stuff. Although Harold points out that artisanal economies are potentially elitist and often exclusive to economically privileged white millennials, they are perhaps also best equipped to close the alienating gaps between the processes of mass-production and the resulting objects that we consume. Harold situates the larger points of her argument within a historical framework, recalling the likes of Marx, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and William Morris as major proponents of maker culture and the importance of our connection to the modes of production. She also cites the success of popular films and tv shows such as the documentary film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* and the Netflix show *Chef's Table* as examples of our "seemingly insatiable appetite for what we might call process narratives."<sup>3</sup> Although clearly recognizing its great potential for fostering meaningful attachment, Harold is also critical of the movement, devoting much of the chapter to cases studies of corporations and manufacturers seeking to capitalize on the consumer interest in the handcrafted. She points out that maker culture is not opposed to capitalism, but rather seeks to demystify its inner workings to forge a more intimate connection to objects and potentially "mitigate the insatiable

cravings of consumerism by fostering a deeper commitment to those things we already have.”<sup>4</sup>

In the concluding chapter, Harold reiterates the importance of, not simply striving to consume less, but rather of understanding how and what we consume and our interrelatedness to the whole of the production process. Her analysis of the rhetorical discourses used within media, consumer culture, and by corporations invites readers to reconsider their own material attachments and their potential to either contribute to or ameliorate waste.

Throughout the book, Harold is careful to establish a discourse that is accessible to consumers, designers, and makers outside of academia, maintaining that because the influences of consumer capitalism are far-reaching, we should all seek to help change the course of the political, ethical, and environmental effects of consumerism. Rich with amusing stories and anecdotes that drive her points home, *Things Worth Keeping* offers readers an accessible take on the complexities and contradictions of our material attachments in a disposable world.

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**Abby Corbett** is a first year MA student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She holds a MA in Education and Food Systems from Prescott College and a BA in Spanish from Berea College. Her current research interests include feminist and queer film theory, environmental film, and rural and Appalachian representations throughout film and media history.

#### Notes

1 Christine Harold, *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 21.

2 Harold, 78.

3 Harold, 171.

4 Harold, 198.