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“Get Rich or Die Buying:” The Travails of the Working-Class Auction Bidder

Mark A. Rademacher

These are the rules of storage auctions. This is a cash only sale. All sales are final. We're gonna cut the lock. We're gonna open the door. You're gonna have five minutes to look. You cannot go inside the unit, you cannot open any boxes. We are gonna sell this to the highest cash bidder. Are you ready to go?

Dan Dotson, *Storage Wars* Auctioneer (“High Noon in the High Desert”)

With these basic rules, auctioneer Dan Dotson sets the stage for the drama that unfolds during A&E Network's popular reality TV (RTV) program *Storage Wars* (2010–). The program follows a group of working-class, professional auction bidders looking to “score it big in the high stakes world of storage auctions” (“About,” para. 1) by documenting bidders' attempts to assess the potential value of abandoned storage units, buy them at bargain prices, and convert them into economic profit. Through this process, *Storage Wars* harnesses “the magic and surprise of the treasure hunt” to create an engaging and entertaining program (Belk et al., “Naturalistic Inquiry” 458). As an example of what John Sherry terms “alternative marketing systems,” auctions are uniquely situated to incorporate informal and festive dimensions of consumer behavior with the formal and economic aspects of traditional market exchange (13). This alternative marketing system compliments more traditional marketing systems and provides opportunities for “more satisfying and adaptive marketplace relations” (13). However, it also creates a dialectic tension and “virtually demands that its participants question the nature of marketing and consumption in contemporary life” (28). *Storage Wars'* auctions represent an intriguing context for exploring the dialectical nature of alternative marketing systems within a complex capitalist society in which neoliberalism and consumption organize social life. Consequently, this essay examines how the mediated depiction of auction life documented by *Storage Wars* constructs storage auctions in relationship with the more commonly experienced markets.

torage Wars represents one example of an emergent subgenre of RTV that I term thrift-oriented reality television (TRTV). This subgenre focuses on the consumption practices intended to extend limited budgets or generate profits through the purchase and resale of used goods during a recession. TRTV currently pervade networks' schedules and include such diverse foci as couponing strategies, budget cooking, “picking” for valuable items in collections of junk and antiquities, and the inner-workings of pawnshops and auction houses. At its essence, TRTV shares “Spartan” RTV's—RTV that focuses on individuals attempts to overcome deprivation and restrictions on personal comfort and luxury (e.g., *Survivor*; Deery 10)—emphasis on modern versions of the American Dream in which the American meritocratic ideal is reproduced (Deery 13). Moreover, the thrift “movement” documented in TRTV is reflective of a larger social trend. For example, the recent emergence of coupon and deal websites (e.g., bradsdeals.com, Groupon.com), consumer-generated online classified ads (e.g., craigslist.org), online gift economies (e.g., freecycle.org), and increased participation in “staycations” rather than traditional vacations suggest that TRTV represents what Walters describes as a symptomatic text—a cultural artifact that documents emergent cultural movements (qtd. in Dubrofsky 114)—reflecting Americans' renewed interest in thrift-oriented consumption and television programming in the contemporary social, economic, and political milieu.

RTV has moved from the “fringes of television culture to its lucrative core” and become a popular topic for academic investigation (Ouellette and Murray 4). It communicates instructions on ways to achieve identities and lifestyles through the presentation of idealized consumer types (Arnould and Thompson 875). Consumers use mediated content, including RTV, to make sense of their social world (Hirschman and Thompson; O'Guinn and Shrum). As such, Season 1 of *Storage Wars* and supplemental videos from the program's Web site provide instructions on how to understand the logic of storage auctions. Specifically, the program presents a complex and contradictory narrative that emphasizes the formal structure and economic function of auctions while minimizing its informal structure and festive function. This framing undermines the complementary aspects of alternative marketing systems and constructs auctions and its working-class participants in a way that reflects prevailing dominant capitalist ideologies and class-based status hierarchies (Belk et al., “Naturalistic Inquiry” 458). Consequently, the program fails to realize its disruptive potential and, therefore, ultimately contributes to the transformation of audiences' understanding of auctions in a neoliberal marketplace.

Auctions and Alternative Marketing Systems

As Belk discusses, contemporary capitalism, including modes of market exchange like auctions, involves competitive social relations, commodity trading, and buying, accumulating, and selling for profit (56). Yet markets are not homogenous entities that follow identical logics (Sherry). For instance, Belk and colleagues suggest that swap meets are “modern anachronisms” of more commonly experienced exchange systems because they are smaller in scale, more direct, and often less efficient modes of exchange (“Naturalistic Inquiry” 457). Likewise, flea markets illustrate the dialectical tensions present between formal/informal market structures and economic/festive market functions (Sherry). Auctions, like flea markets, merge what Sherry describes as the stability of an official and highly rationalized structure similar to stock exchanges and retail outlets with the less official and rational structure of fairs and garage sales. Moreover, Sherry suggests that flea markets merge the rationality and utility of economic markets with the hedonic and experiential functions of festive markets. The presence of these tensions in auctions is reinforced by Charles Smith's observations that auctions are heterogeneous markets involving anonymous and nonymous exchange with economic and extraeconomic benefits.

Research on auctions further supports the presence of such tensions in alternative marketing systems. Smith finds that bidders follow culturally established behavior rules, or formal structures. Bidders' success at auction has been linked to their ability to internalize these formal aspects into “decision tools” that generate respect and a competitive advantage at auction (Palmer and Forsyth 235). Auctions possess informal structures as well. Auctions are inherently social events, in which bidders participate in an “auction community” (Smith). While members of the community derive pleasure from acquiring valued items at bargain prices, much of the appeal stems from the extraeconomic benefits bidders derive from socializing with their peers and enjoying the “hunt” for treasures (Smith). Likewise, bidders find enjoyment from the “action” of auctions, including such diverse aspects as the “collecting, bidding, buying, bargaining, selling, preparing, restoring, transporting, stocking, and talking about the [antique auction] business or the trade” with the other community members (Palmer and Forsyth 236). In other words, the economic and festive functions

associated with selling and acquiring goods are not opposed in the auction context; rather, they are mutually reinforcing and create a unique market experience.

The sociocultural significance of alternative marketing systems extends beyond their ability to deliver economic and extraeconomic benefits to consumers, however. Involvement with such markets challenges consumers to actively question their relationship with marketing and consumption (Sherry). Thus, mediated depictions of auctions may possess similar potential. *Storage Wars* invites consumers, like other products of consumer culture, to read the program in relation to their individual identity projects (e.g., Hirschman and Thompson) and reinforces market-based capitalist ideologies (Arnould and Thompson 875). As such, the program is both a descriptive and prescriptive cultural text (Kellner 391). It documents the complexity of auctions while instructing consumers how to behave within them, proposing that they are governed by the familiar logic of traditional marketing systems.

Class and Consumption in America

The sociocultural significance of *Storage Wars* is amplified because the show not only depicts the dialectical tensions present in auctions, but also the consumption-related lifestyles of the working-class bidders. These depictions are relevant because they communicate, reproduce, and legitimate existing social hierarchies, serving as a form of symbolic domination of a social group (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 457). As Pierre Bourdieu argues, individuals' economic (money and property), social (acquaintances and networks), and cultural (cultural knowledge and educational credentials) resources (what he terms capital) constitute forms of power when they are employed in a struggle as valued resources (Swartz 74). And because capital is linked to the material conditions of one's existence, capital serves to mark and reinforce hierarchical class distinctions, which in turn serve as a form of symbolic domination of social groups and cultural practices (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 114). Despite the dominance of economic capital over cultural capital, Bourdieu argues cultural capital plays an increasingly important role in differentiated societies ("Forms of Capital"). As he argues, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (*Distinction* 6).

Bourdieu suggests that those possessing greater levels of capital enjoy social advantages over those possessing lower levels. Focused on the French middle class, Bourdieu's argument is difficult to apply to the American cultural context (e.g., Friedland et al.; Holt; Swartz). For instance his emphasis on markers of "elite culture" is problematic in the American context, which lacks the strong class hierarchies and cultural traditions found in Bourdieu's France. Joan Rubin argues that America's cultural elites constitute a technical professional class and, thus, lack the traditions, training, or leisure necessary to acquire "elite" cultural competencies (qtd. in Friedland et al. 35). Hence, American elites gain access to the cultural capital "only after it has first been mediated by mass culture" (Friedland et al. 35). American elite culture is, therefore, better described as "middlebrow" culture. Due to the pervasiveness of middlebrow culture, elites create social distinctions by becoming "cultural omnivores" who possess an appreciation of a wide range of cultural objects and consumption practices, including those reflective of both high and low culture (Peterson and Kern 900; Peterson and Simkus). Like capital, this omnivorousness is disproportionately distributed among America's wealthy and educated classes (Peterson and Kern

902–03). Members of the working class, in contrast, are disproportionately likely to remain cultural univores—only able to express a singular appreciation for lowbrow cultural forms (Peterson and Kern)—and, as a result, experience limited opportunities for cultural mobility (Emmison).

The narrative framing of *Storage Wars* reveals the connection between capital, as expressed through social class, and cultural omnivorousness. Success at auction requires the bidders to possess the requisite combination of economic, cultural, and social capital to consume in an omnivorous fashion. This connection is complicated by the reality that class differences in the American context are “no longer easily identified with the goods consumed, distinction is becoming more and more a matter of practice” (Holt 5). Hence, omnivorousness requires proper use and appreciation of goods, not just the mere acquisition of goods. *Storage Wars*' depictions of the bidders' market-based knowledge, lifestyles, and behaviors possess the potential to either challenge or reinforce the audiences' understanding of the working class as univores, as well as contribute to the new construction, reproduction, and legitimation of class-based social hierarchies.

“When Storage Units are Abandoned...”

Storage Wars follows a formulaic narrative structure, which focuses on the hunt for valued cultural goods and concludes with an accounting of each bidder's losses and profits. Episodes begin with a narrator providing a vague explanation of the basic premise of storage auctions: “When storage units are abandoned, the treasures within are put up for auction.” This phrase is followed by a tease for the upcoming episode, which typically includes reference to the upcoming revelation of valuable goods and character conflicts. The opening sequence then introduces each bidder over the program's theme song, a blues tune that repeats “Money Owns This Town.” Next, bidders are shown arriving at a storage facility, with a recap of past episodes using voice-overs, interviews, and clips. An overview follows of the type of goods to be found in the storage facility (e.g., industrial items, collectibles), the relationships between the bidders, the type of items for which each team is looking, and the respective bidding strategies each employs. The husband–wife auctioneer team then presents the rules of storage auctions and the first unit is revealed.

The action then shifts to bidding strategies, which are based on the valuation of the goods, and the subsequent competition to “win” the unit. The drama builds as the program documents the winning bidders' exploration of their units. As items are discovered, the value is estimated and added to a tally of the unit's total value. Episodes conclude with bidders taking items of interest for expert appraisal. Experts educate bidders about the details of the items and their economic value. This value is then added to bidders' total profits for that auction, an accounting of each bidder's relative profit/loss is displayed, and the winner of the auction is announced. The program ends with a few parting words from the bidders and a preview of the next episode.

The program follows the basic premise of long-running RTV programs such as PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*. The twist is that *Storage Wars* amplifies the hedonic and experiential nature of the “treasure hunt” by relocating the action from the sterile exhibit halls to the gritty, industrial setting of storage facilities. Moreover, rather than focusing on an ever-changing cast, the program focuses on the consumption-based cultural practices of a core group of working-class bidders—a group of

individuals often conceptualized as possessing deficient capital (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 186). The added drama created by the reveal of the units, the bidding process, and the colorful characters increases the appeal by emphasizing the informal structure and festive function of the experience. As such, *Storage Wars*, on its surface, frames auctions as a vivid contrast to the formal structure and economic function of more common modes of market exchange (Sherry). This formula has delivered ratings success for the A&E Network since its 2010 premiere; *Storage Wars* represents the networks' top-rated nonfiction show in its first season, averaging 2.4 million viewers (Della Cava). The show has grown into a network staple, having aired seven seasons and spawned four spin-off series—*Storage Wars: Texas*, *Storage Wars: New York*, *Barry'd Treasure*, and *Brandi & Jarrod: Married to the Job*. The program continues to thrive despite a recent lawsuit by one of its stars, Dave Hester, claiming that the network's production company, Original Productions, “regularly ‘salts’ the storage lockers...with valuable or unusual items to add dramatic effect” (Johnson, “A&E responds”). A&E and Original remain committed to the program and have dismissed Hester's accusation as “meritless.”

“Money Owns This Town”

From the program's theme song to the closing credits, *Storage Wars* supports capitalist ideology by prioritizing the formal structure and economic function of market exchange. Despite the informal structure and festive aspects of auctions, this ideology prevails because the narrative frames auctions as an individualistic and competitive endeavor in which profits are prioritized over the goods' respective use or symbolic value. By framing auction bidding in this fashion, the program diminishes the disruptive potential of auctions and constructs this market in a way that reinforces the dominant cultural understanding of capitalistic market exchange.

Smith claims that success at auction requires bidders to embrace the communal nature of the market and to earn the respect of peers. In essence, success requires the cultivation and maintenance of social capital. *Storage Wars* contradicts this dynamic by presenting bidders as purely in competition with one another. Bidders are shown wielding money as a tool of domination. Like the theme song suggests, the narrative constantly advocates “Money Owns This Town.” Dave (“The Mogul”) and Darrell (“The Gambler”) are positioned at the top of the social hierarchy based on their accumulated wealth and property (e.g., their retail stores); in other words, their economic capital. Barry (“The Collector”) occupies an ambiguous middle position within this hierarchy, possibly due to his overall “outsider” status as a wealthy collector. Jarrod and Brandi (“The Young Guns”) occupy a subordinate position and play the role of the upstarts struggling to establish themselves. Dave and Darrell, with their greater levels of economic capital, possess an advantage in this cash-only market as they are able to “bid up” units beyond their market value. This strategy serves to deter bidders with lower levels of capital, particularly the “newbies” and “pukes” like Jarrod and Brandi. As Jarrod points out, this apparently illogical strategy has clear benefits for the established economic hierarchy and the “big dog's” long-term potential profits: “I mean the problem for us is Dave and Darrell have more money in their pockets every time they go out than we do. We go out with a couple thousand dollars. They have tens of thousands of dollars. Heads up, they beat me every time” (“Secret Society”).

The importance of economic capital to auction success is reinforced by the way *Storage Wars* frames auctions as a “do or die” opportunity for its less economically fortunate bidders. As embodied by Jarrod and Brandi, economically limited bidders are unable to take the risks at auction that are common among the more economically established bidders. As Jarrod explains the realities of his auction life, “I have to turn around my scores quickly because they pay for the next auction. If I don't flip the items, I can't bid again” (“War on the Shore”). Each unit must deliver a profit or the team may not be able to compete in subsequent auctions, or worse, be forced to declare bankruptcy. Despite his precarious position, Jarrod embraces the logic that money represents a form of power within this market. As he comments after being outbid by Dave for an autodetailing trailer,

Everything's worth something. There's always a bidding war. I just got to work smarter. Just like playing poker. You just start going all-in just to push somebody around, because you know that if they go all-in, you're gonna take 'em out. Whatever it takes to make a dollar. (“War on the Shore”)

Jarrod recognizes his subordinate position, but continues to strategize how he may mobilize his limited economic capital to achieve success. In combination with the strategies employed by Darrell and Dave, such framing minimizes the disruptive potential of the program and reinforces the use of economic capital as a form of power within the auction context and thus within capitalist societies (Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital”).

The show also prioritizes profits through the narrative's treatment of “sacred” versus “profane” goods—goods such as collectibles, antiques, and art that are “a focus of devotion” rather than clothes, household goods, and general merchandise that are treated casually (Belk et al., “The Sacred” 13). In the parlance of the program, the show focuses on bidders' discovery of “wow factor” goods, unexpected finds that are highly valuable. Yet, the majority of bidders are uninterested in goods' collectability, esthetic, or symbolic value. Rather, their interest stems from their ability to make greater profits through the sale of sacred rather than profane goods. Barry's focus on finding collectibles—“something unique, something I've never seen before” (“Midnight in the Gardena Good and Evil”)—represents the exception to this logic. This framing presents bidders as motivated by instrumental materialism (Belk 140): goods are valued solely because they can be converted into profits. Dave reinforces this motivation when he discusses whether he keeps any goods for a personal collection. He comments, “The only thing I like to collect is Benjamins” (“High Noon in the High Desert”).

The prioritization of sacred over profane goods is also apparent in the different ways Darrell and Jarrod discuss the value to be found in units. Darrell's fixation on “wow factor” goods reflects the dialectical tension present in the marketplace: he seeks these goods for both hedonic and economic reasons. But to find these high value goods he must purchase units containing profane goods as well. He often dismisses these profane goods through a brief mention of their meager worth. For instance, he purchased a unit lacking any apparent sacred goods for \$850 that he had a hunch about (“High Noon in the High Desert”). He observes that buying the unit at this premium price “was pretty stupid on my part, but you never know what's in these things.” Darrell's comments illustrate his frustration with only finding small value, profane items: “I'm going to lose money on this locker.” Individual profane goods are shown to have limited value to this seasoned auction bidder;

only in aggregate do they become worthwhile. Darrell's overall assessment changes drastically, however, upon discovering sports trading cards and other sports memorabilia. He exclaims, "Oh baby! This is where we start getting into the money. This is the wow factor right here!" Darrell's excitement is clear, but it originates from the potential economic value rather than the beauty or usefulness of the items. The search was worthwhile only because it results in Darrell realizing a profit: "I can tell you right now by the amount of boxes and stuff in [this collection], I'm gonna get my money back no problem. And that's why I'm in this business."

Jarrold, in contrast, recognizes and appreciates the potential value in profane goods. This appreciation comes from the fact that he and Brandi operate a thrift store and "need to fill our shelves" ("Senior Center Showdown"). To serve the needs of his customers, Jarrold cannot dismiss profane goods outright, especially since selling these everyday items generates his primary source of income. Unlike Darrell who focuses on "wow" goods, Jarrold focuses on what he terms "clean" units containing clothes, tools, furniture, and general household items. His appreciation of profane goods becomes clear after he purchases a unit containing shoeboxes and furniture that most of his contemporaries disregard as lacking value. He concludes, "This is a great unit... This is definitely gonna fill the shelves at the store." This appreciation of profane items reflects his precarious economic position and further positions him at the bottom of the auction social hierarchy. Further, despite his personal excitement regarding the aggregate profane goods he purchased—each item valued between \$1 and \$50—the program shifts the focus away from these items and toward the 100-year-old antique safe also in the unit. The potential economic value of profane goods is therefore undermined by the producers' desire to create compelling content by focusing on this sacred item.

Storage Wars's consistent depiction of two themes, money as a form of power and the economic value of sacred goods, constructs auctions to reflect the formal structure and economic functions of markets. The informal structure and festive function of auctions remain in the narrative, embodied most clearly in the bidders' joy in discovering sacred goods. But these aspects are relegated to increasing the entertainment value of the narrative. They are solely tangential rather than integral aspects of *Storage Wars* depictions of this alternative marketing system. As if to explicitly reinforce the dominant capitalist ideology, Darrell concludes, while displaying a stack of money at the end of an episode, "I'm here to do business. I'm not here to play games" ("Railroad Roulette"). Within the narrative "business" trumps "games," just as the formal and economic trump the informal and festive.

"I Consider Myself, Really, a Walking Dictionary on Collectibles and Items"

Success at auction is a difficult proposition for even experienced bidders with access to economic capital. As Darrell admits, his bidding strategies are based on his past experiences and a "feeling." In his words, "after 32 years...I just feel it, man. I just know and very rarely do I lose on a locker anymore" ("Getting Started"). The ability to quickly assess the potential value of units is a skill that creates a competitive advantage and is accumulated through copious auction experience and the acquisition of a specific form of cultural capital, omnivorous consumption. In this way, the narrative reinforces Bourdieu's argument that relations among individuals and social classes are related to the individuals' specific combination of economic and cultural capital, which is

expressed in their lifestyles and social practices (*Distinction* 250). Ultimately, the depiction of these differences constructs a social hierarchy within the program reflective of the larger structure of capitalist society (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 120).

Among the profiled bidders, Darrell and Dave most clearly illustrate the relationship between auction experience, economic capital, and cultural capital. Darrell, in particular, is presented as the ideal working-class cultural omnivore. Per his own admission, he is capable of talking eloquently about a wide range of cultural forms as a result of “32 years of experience,” which he describes as an “education for me that you cannot go and buy” (“Bidding Strategy”). He elaborates further,

I've been doing it 32 years, they call me the grandfather of the business, and I consider myself really a walking dictionary on collectibles and items. I can hang with women and go shopping and talk about Balenciaga, Coach, Louis Vuitton, Salvatore Ferragamo, I mean if you want to rap we can rap. Or I can go to the mechanic's shop and talk about Snap-On tools. (“Bidding Strategy”)

Dave shares Darrell's cultural competence, but possesses more middlebrow to lowbrow cultural knowledge. While Dave is able to identify antiques, art, and the other markers of elite culture, his extensive knowledge of high-value industrial and restaurant equipment and other markers of the working class illustrate his true expertise. Both bidders possess a relative distance from what Bourdieu describes as the “taste of necessity,” which means their relative financial stability has allowed them to cultivate a knowledge and appreciation of cultural goods (*Distinction* 372). Consequently, both bidders occupy a privileged and advantageous position within the auction community.

The relationship between auction experience, economic capital, and cultural capital becomes clearer when Darrell's and Dave's omnivorousness is contrasted with Jarrod's lower levels of experience, economic capital, and cultural capital. In many ways, he continues to suffer from the “taste of necessity”: his need to worry about his day-to-day financial existence minimizes his ability to cultivate omnivorous consumption knowledge. In essence, he embodies the cultural univore, as illustrated by his insecurity regarding his ability to evaluate items other than general merchandise. For example, while other bidders easily recognized that a mid-century modern dining set was possibly designed by Charles and Ray Eames, Jarrod admits, “I don't know [expletive] about those chairs” (“High Noon in the High Desert”). In partnership with his limited economic capital, Jarrod's univorous knowledge contributes to the likelihood that he will make what Darrell terms “typical rookie mistake[s]” (“Senior Center Showdown”) and further reinforces his marginalized location in the social hierarchy of bidders.

Barry represents an interesting counterpoint to this relationship. In contrast to other bidders, Barry possesses relatively high levels of economic and cultural capital. However, his cultural capital reflects a “snobbishness” (Peterson and Kern 903) related to his myopic appreciation of sacred, collectible goods. Barry's fixation emerges in his description of an antique table as constructed of “quarter-sawn oak” (“Senior Center Showdown”). This nuanced and refined knowledge positions Barry at the midpoint along the cultural omnivore/univore continuum. His consumption knowledge allows him to recognize collectibles reflective of elite, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture, but he remains completely ignorant of the value of general merchandise. Moreover, he is willing to pursue aesthetically appealing sacred items for his own personal collection, which is in

contrast with the purely economic motive of other bidders. Interestingly, within the narrative Barry's "snobbishness" is not framed as a disadvantage despite how it limits his understanding of the value of many of the goods he purchases. Rather, he is shown as an adept bidder capable of transforming his knowledge of collectibles—the goods the program values most—into a relatively profitable endeavor.

Despite bidders' relative levels of cultural capital expressed through omnivorousness, they accumulated their capital outside of what Bourdieu would describe as "the legitimate order" (*Distinction* 328). As autodidacts their knowledge of the cultural realm is compiled through illegitimate means or "heretical mode of acquisition" (328). *Storage Wars* documents this particular mode of acquisition rather than demeans it, and in doing so potentially challenges the need for cultural capital to be earned through legitimate modes of acquisition. A primary means of bidders' acquisition comes about through peer-to-peer mentorship. In a nod to the communal aspects of auction culture (Smith), the program often shows interactions where more seasoned bidders educate their less experienced counterparts. For example, Darrell educates Jarrod ("Senior Center Showdown") that potential value can be found in various forms. While Jarrod's univorous knowledge results in him expecting the value of a safe to be found amongst its contents, Darrell recognizes the esthetic and economic value of the safe itself.

Darrell

Dude, did you see this safe?

Jarrold

There's nothing in it. It's open.

Darrell

Jarrold, I'm not talking about it even having anything in here. Did you see the safe? This thing's the bomb. This is worth three times your whole locker. Pay attention to what I'm telling you now. Two to three grand. You know it just goes to show ya, there's always something to learn in this business.

Darrell continues to educate Jarrod, explaining:

This is the Olde York Safe Company. These things are real collectible. And what makes this thing so nice, and it doesn't take a dummy to understand this, it's got all the original brass fittings, but the printing is on it. And it's all gold-embossed. That was hand-laid on there and hand painted. Uh, turn of the century. Maybe 100–120 years old, if I had to guess.

This example not only illustrates that collaboration is possible in this highly competitive marketplace, but it also illustrates the informal way knowledge is shared among the bidders and cultural capital is acquired. Darrell's sharing of his omnivorous knowledge prevented Jarrod from discarding a valuable item and the potential profit it represented. The narrative implies, consequently, that Jarrod internalizes this newfound knowledge and will not make a similar mistake in the future.

By framing the relationship between auction experience, economic capital, and cultural capital as expressed in omnivorous consumption in this way *Storage Wars* reinforces prevailing logics that these resources can be translated into social advantages that reproduce existing social hierarchies

(Bourdieu, *Distinction* 469; Emmison). Darrell and Dave possess a dominant position over Barry, Jarrod, and Brandi as a result of their relatively higher levels of capital. Yet the narrative also suggests that all bidders may acquire cultural capital through market-based experience and peer-based education, a logic that contradicts Bourdieu's model of cultural capital acquisition. While bidders may struggle to convert their heretically acquired cultural capital into social advantage outside of the auction context, within it represents a highly valuable resource. As such, *Storage Wars* further reinforces capitalistic ideology, specifically that of America as a meritocratic society. According to this logic, any bidder can acquire the requisite capital necessary to improve their position within the social hierarchy despite the subordinate nature of their capital and the presence of structural constraints.

“I Would Have Been Worth Millions and Millions and Millions of Dollars...”

Bidders may be capable of developing relevant cultural capital to succeed within the auction context, but auctions are not completely autonomous marketing systems. Auctions are complementary to the more commonly experienced marketing systems (Sherry). To successfully convert their acquired goods into economic capital, bidders must be capable of determining fair retail market value and identifying potential buyers. The narrative framing of this aspect of the program indicates, however, that bidders' cultural and social capital is deficient in these areas. Consequently, they become reliant on experts to supplement their capital and help them evaluate sacred goods and connect with potential buyers. By documenting this reliance on outside experts, *Storage Wars* highlights the limits of bidders' heretically acquired cultural capital and their working-class social networks, therefore undermining the meritocratic ideal it perpetuates. In short, without the aid of experts who possess the appropriate configuration of cultural and social capital bidders would be unable to convert sacred, collectible goods into maximum profits.

Bidders are quite adept at identifying goods that may possess economic value, but as Barry comments, “winning the auction is great, but that's only half the battle. Now I have to figure out what it's worth” (“High Noon in the High Desert”). Often this task is complicated because bidders are not certain of what they have found or its fair retail value. For example, in one episode (“Railroad Roulette”) Jarrod discovers what he believes to be a Movado watch but is uncertain of its value. Similarly, Barry finds an antique brass container but is uncertain of its exact purpose (“Collector's Last Stand”). Both bidders held high hopes that their items were valuable. But after consultation with experts, both faced disappointing realities. After consulting with a watch expert, Jarrod learns that although Movado watches are collectible, he found a relatively worthless fake. An antiques expert informs Barry that his item is actually an antique pocket spittoon from the 1800s, but, despite its age, it possesses marginal collectible appeal and a retail value between \$250 and \$450. Jarrod was disappointed by the monetary value of his watch, but thanked the expert for the education. Barry also appreciated the education but in keeping with his interest in collectibles also found solace in the uniqueness of the item. As he added, “Honestly, uh, if you said it was worth \$1,000...I just don't want to sell it...This is going right into my personal collection.”

Even when bidders recognize they possess a true collectible, their reliance on experts can result in diminished economic returns. In one extreme example of this phenomenon, Darrell turned to an expert to appraise and sell a comic book collection he found in a unit purchased for \$2,700 (“High

Noon in the High Desert”). The expert validated Darrell's assessment that the collection was valuable, offering Darrell \$130,000. By accepting the offer, Darrell collected a net profit of \$127,300. While an example of one of the largest documented profits, Darrell later learns the expert sold the collection to an insurance company for \$800,000 and it was ultimately insured for \$3.4 million. Had Darrell possessed more refined knowledge of the value of the collection, consulted with a different expert, or dealt directly with an insurance company, he may have realized an even greater profit on the collection. As he later laments, “Had I had that comic book collection right now, and had I taken my time on it, I would have been worth millions and millions and millions of dollars. I would have never had to work another day in my life.”

By emphasizing such failures and the importance of achieving maximum profits, *Storage Wars* continues to subordinate the informal structure and festive functions of the treasure hunt to the formal structure and economic aspects of auctions. The joy of the treasure hunt becomes valuable only if items possess monetary value. Moreover, bidders' reliance on experts to convert sacred, collectible goods into profits suggests bidders' cultural capital is insufficient for success in traditional marketing systems where formal structures and economic logics dominate. It also suggests that social capital, especially connections that span across social classes, is necessary to maximize profits. In aggregate, the program suggests bidders occupy a subordinate configuration of economic, cultural, and social capital in comparison to the experts they consult. And the program legitimates this hierarchical relationship because it shows bidders seeking out these experts, essentially illustrating their consent to this power relationship.

Conclusion and Implications

TRTV like *Storage Wars* can be lauded for documenting and celebrating an alternative marketing system dedicated to buying/selling used goods and cultivating more meaningful marketplace relations. In this way, the program represents a liminal experience for an audience that represents an escape from the logic of more commonly experienced marketing systems. And while alternative marketing systems force consumers to contemplate the dialectical tensions between formal/informal structures and economic/festive functions, mediated representations of such markets minimize these tensions. In *Storage Wars* the informal structure and festive function is exploited to construct auctions as a familiar and entertaining marketing system. Likewise, the formal structure and economic function of market-based exchange is reinforced and legitimated. As such, auctions are presented not as an alternative, but as another iteration of commonly experienced marketing systems, which undermines the disruptive potential of the program. Rather than directly challenge the dominant ideology of market capitalism, *Storage Wars* frames auctions as a market where this ideology thrives. The program acknowledges that auctions possess both formal/informal aspects and festive/economic functions, like alternative marketing systems in general (Sherry), the formal and economic dominate. The informal aspects and festive functions are merely tools used to entertain. Auctions remain an alternative marketing system, but as depicted in *Storage Wars* audiences are no longer forced to question their relationship with marketing and consumption, as Sherry suggests. That possibility still exists, but the particular mediated representation of auction culture is, like other RTV programs, designed to sell as it entertains and represents a triumph of capitalist ideology (Deery 2).

Beyond its promotion of the formal, economic aspects of auctions, *Storage Wars* also promotes a neoliberal approach to achieving economic stability during a recession. Success and economic stability is framed as an outcome of personal effort, skills, savvy, and cunning (Ouellette and Hay) in the marketplace. Auction bidders are shown as subscribing to this approach, relying on economic resources as a means of power. As is common among RTV narratives (Deery; Hay; Ouellette; Ouellette and Hay), this framing downplays the larger sociopolitical issues affecting the bidders' ability to achieve this goal. Not only does the program ignore the circumstances that led to storage units being abandoned, it fails to explicitly address the challenges these working-class bidders face as a result of their class position and their disproportionate levels of capital. The program, therefore, constructs auctions as an egalitarian market where anyone can compete and achieve economic stability although capital continues to be disproportionately distributed across society so as to benefit cultural elites (Bourdieu, *Distinction*).

Despite its potential to depict auction life in a way that challenges audiences' understanding of market capitalism, *Storage Wars* reproduces and legitimates the individualistic, competitive, and economic function of conventional marketing systems. In essence, it sanitizes the communal, collaborative, and festive aspects of alternative marketing systems and depicts them in a way that fits nicely within audiences' existing mental frameworks of capitalism. As such, *Storage Wars* represents a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 358) that negates the value inherent in both alternative marketing systems and the working class. This reductivist narrative reinforces audiences' expectations of the market and class-based distinctions, legitimating their beliefs that conventional markets and access to economic capital remain the primary means to personal and financial stability and that the working class remains responsible for its limited cultural mobility.

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