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TURNING TRASH INTO TREASURE: REALITY TELEVISION, MEDIA GOVERNANCE
AND SECONDARY MARKETS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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In the wake of the Great Recession (2007-2009), a subgenre of reality television (RTV) surfaced that focused on buying and selling old and used things, largely antiques and collectibles, at auctions, pawn shops, flea markets and other secondary market sites. This subgenre, which I have termed Trash and Treasure TV, included programs such as *American Pickers* (2010-present), *Storage Wars* (2010-present) and *Flea Market Flip* (2012-present), and emerged at the exact moment when people needed to cope with the consequences of the financial downturn. Following media theorists Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, Trash and Treasure TV is positioned here as a technique of governmentality that provided viewers with “how-to guides” for learning to participate in the secondary market. This included modeling and direct instruction intended to teach audiences the cognitive and affective skills and practices necessary to be successful entrepreneurs. Given the dismantling of the welfare state and its social safety nets, RTV acted as a form of neoliberal governance meant to produce entrepreneurial subjects capable of navigating the contemporary economic landscape. Having gathered data from interviews with 44 secondary market participants, 75 hours of field observation, and a textual analysis of the initial seasons of the programs named above, my research is the first to combine interpretive and ethnographic methods to study this RTV subgenre.

These methods revealed that although participants were critical of Trash and Treasure TV, they were also informed, inspired and entertained by the programs to varying degrees. I found that contrary to RTV’s “free market” portrayals, the local secondary market operated as a hierarchy

in which those starting out with the most social and economic resources held a powerful competitive advantage over others. Additionally, the local marketplace did not exist in a vacuum, but within a post-Recession environment in which taste and consumption patterns had changed due to generational shifts. This diminished the value of objects and the prevalence of practices such as collecting. Significantly, I found that Trash and Treasure TV's representation of secondary markets centered on the leisure activities and tastes of white, middle-class men trading in high-value objects. In turn, impoverished people, women, and other minoritized populations whom I observed buying and selling everyday items in the types of secondary market spaces depicted on the shows, were largely omitted. This allowed me to locate the limits of RTV as a technique of media governance in its inability to reach groups who were more concerned with survival than "treasure hunting." Moreover, viewer-participants noted how an influx of newcomers inspired by these TV programs had been disruptive to markets rather than invigorating, which caused competition for objects to grow and prices to rise. Overall, using post-Recession New Jersey as a stage, this project examined the intersections of media culture, entrepreneurialism, material culture and economic precarity in the early 21st century.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Reality Television and Trash and Treasure TV -

Project Rationale, Background, and Chapter Outline

Storage Wars I can relate to since I've been buying storage lockers long before the program was on ... When the program came on the air, and became very popular, all of the sudden this core group of die hard storage buyers who would show up at the local storage unit auction ballooned to 50 – 75 people. - Steve, project interviewee, longtime collector and dealer, owner of a large antique shop, and Trash and Treasure TV viewer

Observing that people resist, or read against the grain of any individual media product, does not mean the media lack power. – Media theorist Jenny Kitzinger (2009, p. 415)

At the end of the 20th century, the genre of reality television (RTV) emerged in its most recognizable expression with shows such as *The Real World* (1992) and *Survivor* (2000). Over the ensuing years, hundreds of RTV programs have been developed and aired, spawning a broad range of subgenres that focus on nearly all dimensions of life for people in technologically advanced, liberal societies. These subgenres have included programs about managing one's physical and psychological health, achieving one's ideal aesthetic body, finding love, refining and cultivating taste, etiquette and deportment, and navigating the myriad labor and consumer markets. Among these subgenres is one that I have coined "Trash and Treasure TV." This classification of RTV programs refers to shows such as *American Pickers* (2010- present), and those of the *Pawn Stars* (2009 – present) and *Storage Wars* (2010 - present) franchises, among many others. These shows focus on secondary market sites and practices that straddle the formal and informal marketplaces that include private homes and properties, flea markets, yard sales, pawnshops, and various types of auctions. I argue that this subgenre should be understood as a post-recession phenomenon emerging from a specific neoliberal political-cultural context in the post-industrial era, in which forms of self-responsibilization and entrepreneurialism are central to social organization and subjectivity.

In this framing, we can see Trash and Treasure TV through the lens of media studies research that understands popular culture as a technology that routinely reinforces and justifies dominant cultural and social norms, values and practices through the communication of ideologies, the circulation of discourses, and the transmission of affect. I argue that Trash and Treasure TV encourages viewers to be flexible, self-reliant, entrepreneurial subjects, equipped to survive or even thrive on the contemporary economic landscape. These shows impart information and present role models with the potential to teach audiences about standard secondary market practices, such as appraisal or bargaining, and how to appropriately regulate one's emotions while buying and selling at one type of site or another. Additionally, the influence of the subgenre could have larger consequences, such as in the creation or stimulation of existing markets, the potential resolution of unemployment and underemployment, the generation of tax revenue from new businesses, and the shaping of general social relations as pertaining to how we live and labor together as co-workers, family members, consumers, and market competitors.

Although RTV audiences do not merely consume and internalize the instruction or representations they receive, research shows that viewers still use their favorite TV shows to interpret the world and shape their lives (Sender, 2012; Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Therefore, even people who read particular programs from an oppositional standpoint will likely experience the effects of, or be affected by, a given media product through its resultant cultural impact. For instance, in the quote above, Steve, an antique shop owner who frequents storage unit auctions and is not particularly influenced or educated by *Storage Wars* had noticed a significant increase in the amount of people at storage unit auctions after the program gained popularity. Other interviewees who bid at storage unit auctions made similar observations, and noted the disruptive

impacts on sites and markets, which will be discussed in later chapters. Such social and cultural influence demonstrated the importance of studying Trash and Treasure TV and its audiences.

This research project investigated secondary markets and practices, and the limits of media's intervention into how people relate to one another while exchanging objects at their preferred sites. This was accomplished through field observation and interviews that focused on secondary market techniques and dynamics, and how Trash and Treasure TV was perceived as a useful source of information, an inspiration, or a disruption. These methods allowed me to access broader dynamics concerning media culture, audience reception, and social relationships, as related to economic practices and power, modes of consumption, and regimes of value and taste. This introductory chapter will trace the rise of Trash and Treasure TV in the U.S., from its beginnings in the 1990s to its current form in the early 21st century and place it into context as a mode of governance that provides guidance for becoming a contemporary neoliberal subject. From there, the subsequent chapters will be outlined. The first section offers a brief review of the ways that scholars have conceptualized intersections of media, power, and social organization, as related specifically to popular culture and RTV.

Media, Popular Culture, and Governance: RTV and Governmentality

The influence of media in relation to the production of subjectivity and social relations has been widely theorized. Since the early 1940s, researchers have argued that the mass production and distribution of popular music, film, fashion, and design by what has been termed the "culture industry," encouraged a cultural and social organizational uniformity of taste and consumption practices, predicated on the aesthetic sensibilities and economic priorities of big business (Barber, 1995, 2007; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006; Schiller, 1989). From its earliest formation, the culture industry has been understood as playing an important role in the

production of consumer-citizen-subjects through the convergence of popular culture, advertising, and public relations, as operationalized through print media, and more importantly, the then-new communication technologies of film, radio, and eventually, television (Ewen, 1996; Curtis, 2002).

In the production of media in profit-oriented environments, studios and developers have worked to avoid losing money by relying on tried-and-true talent, formulas and stereotypes that do not disturb the cultural sensibilities of their audiences (Turow, 1997). This routine has resulted in particular forms of representation which scholars have discussed in regard to social organization. For instance, media researchers have theorized the concept of “symbolic annihilation,” arguing that there is a relationship between how groups such as racial minorities and women are or are not represented in popular media, and their subordinate political and economic positions in contemporary society (Gerbner, 1972; Tuchman, 1978). Scholars who have analyzed race and social class in popular media have also argued that media representations of minoritized and working-class populations reinforced forms of discursive power and social ordering (Hall, 1981) and encouraged the public to blame the poor and disenfranchised for their lower class position (Butsch 2003; Leistyna, 2009).

With the appearance of RTV programming, critical media research began to move away from the analysis of symbolism and representation, and toward seeing media, particularly RTV, as a cultural intervention presenting “reality” largely unbound by the need for interpretation (Bratich, 2006). Focusing on surveillance and policing, media studies researcher Gareth Palmer (2003) has written on the potential disciplinary power of shows such as *Cops* (1989 - present) or *World’s Wildest Police Videos* (2012). He proposed that those programs could have a panoptic effect, with the use of CCTV reminding viewers that at any given moment they may be under

surveillance (Palmer, 2003). In turn, media would play a role in the molding of compliant and law-abiding citizens through the circulation of documentary or closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage that depicted the “reality” of crime, the work of law enforcement and the consequences of breaking the law.

Recognizing RTV’s place in the contours of economic life, cultural studies scholar Jack Z. Bratich (2006, 2007 & 2009) has argued that the genre’s games and makeovers modeled a flexibility, mobility, and interchangeability that resembled the competition and cooperation of the contemporary labor market in which workers were required to absorb increasing levels of vulnerability and risk. Further theorizing its relationship to power, media theorists Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) have looked at RTV as a strategy of “governmentality” (Foucault, 2000) from which viewers could learn the skills needed to live in an environment increasingly structured by free-market policies and values. Applying these ideas to the housing crisis, James Hay (2010) has identified what he calls “Realty TV,” a subgenre centered on home makeovers and property speculation which emerged with the financialization and securitization of the housing market, and argued that it reproduced free-market practices as strategies for economically vulnerable or exploited individuals to achieve financial security.

While these scholars have helped lay the theoretical foundations of RTV, power and governance, others have used audience research to explore the potentials of and limits to these ideas. Focusing on ways that viewers exercise agency, media studies scholar Katherine Sender (2012) demonstrated that people who watch makeover programs used the shows to learn fashion, fitness, and weight-loss techniques. Although, they adopted them reflexively and actively accepted or rejected what was presented. Similarly, media researchers Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012) revealed that the genre as a cultural form is, in fact, both an educational

intervention and a source of representation to which people have responded in relation to performances of the self, intimacy, and perceptions of value.

Above all, the theoretical frameworks that were discussed analyzed intersections of media and cultural and social power. This research takes the position that media, such as *Trash and Treasure TV*, is a technology which reinforces and justifies the dominant ideologies and practices of the cultures and societies that produce it (Hall, 1980, 1982; Fiske, 1992; Kellner, 2009). In this, the subgenre acts as a strategy of “governmentality” (Murray & Ouellette, 2004; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Hay, 2010), that teaches people the knowledge and skills necessary to survive in the post-Recession U.S. In particular, it demonstrates for viewers how to engage in the secondary market, by not only mastering the practices of identifying objects, appraising them, and negotiating prices, but also through the management of one’s feelings and passions, and the emotions of the other people who one is competing or cooperating with.

It must be noted that rhetorician Eric Jenkins (2015) has argued that *American Pickers* is a tool for promoting commodity fetishism, deploying business strategies, and creating markets in control societies. Mass communication scholars Mark Rademacher and Casey Kelly (2016) have also discussed programs from this genre when they theorized that *Storage Wars* acts to mediate the crisis of masculinity and labor by providing images of “men at work” in traditionally feminine consumer markets. However, my research makes a unique contribution to the area of RTV studies, as it is the first to combine ethnographic methods and textual analysis to study these programs. By engaging with concepts and theories such as social constructionism, subjectification, the politics of representation, and consumption as a material culture, I was able to study the dynamics of secondary markets and how people had taken up, rejected, or ignored

the information and affective transmissions of Trash and Treasure TV as they bought and sold objects in their preferred sites.

In investigating these matters, my research contributed to the area of media anthropology. Similar to the scholarship of Lila Abu Lughod (2005) and Purnima Mankaker (1999), my fieldwork concentrated on the norms, values, and practices of everyday life in relation to the circulation of media texts. By taking this approach, my project advanced the study of media governance in two ways. First, I moved beyond the “active audience” fan culture of Henry Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) by considering social class, an element that their work had ignored. Second, I conducted my research through an inversion which distinguished itself from the work of scholars who *had* factored class into their analyses, such as Katherine Sender (2012), and Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012). Instead of foregrounding the programs as they had, I privileged the people, objects, and practices that composed secondary markets, which allowed me to understand how secondary markets operated through hierarchies of class power and in relation to economic inequality and precarity. This revealed the ways that Trash and Treasure TV erased the poor, working class, women, and those of color, and portrayed these sites as exclusively for the performance of entrepreneurialism by mostly white, middle class men.

My research also complicated the theories on techniques of governmentality. Those exploring the concept of governmentality have tended to assume a normative entrepreneurial subject who has or can accumulate the cultural and social capital necessary to compete in the neoliberal marketplace. Such presumptions cannot be made so easily due to the lasting impact of job losses, home foreclosures, and the limited recovery from those and other negative economic consequences of the 2007 – 2008 global financial crisis (popularly known as the “Great

Recession”), which has been deemed to be the worst downturn since the Great Depression (Carnevale, Jayasundra, & Gulish, 2016; Curran & Speciale, 2018). As Social theorist Maurizio Lazzarato (2015) has noted, the economic downturn has “imposed new forms of governmentality and new subjective models both on the side of those who govern (‘technocratic governments’) ... and on the side of the governed (‘the indebted man who expiates his fault through taxes’)” (p. 91).¹

In addition, the disruptive effects of RTV have not been addressed in past theorizations and research of governmentality. For example, interviews had revealed that there were upticks in participation with the emergence of the programs that had led to increased competition and prices. These changes in conditions drove experienced people out of the local secondary market, due to the impact on their profit margins. This demonstrated how as a technique of governmentality, RTV’s intervention may not have always produced the intended results. Trash and Treasure TV must be analyzed with these considerations in mind, particularly in regard to those who may not be represented. Here I am referring specifically to the poor and working classes, such as the immigrants and people of color who are among those groups active in secondary market sites for subsistence and meeting the needs of everyday life, as opposed to buying and selling antiques and collectibles. Arguably, as a result of their disinterest in the consumption practices of Trash and Treasure TV, these groups avoid subjectification. These matters and others that are related to governmentality studies will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

¹ In this quote, Lazzarato (2015) is referring to debt as a strategy of governmentality, such as those accrued through student loans. Debt held against real estate can also be placed into the same category. The subjectivity of “the indebted” dovetails with that of “the precariat.” The latter refers to a subject formed through the flexibility and uncertainty of labor conditions, such as the trend toward contingent employment (another technique of governmentality) which leads to discontinuous salaries and the loss of benefits, namely health insurance and vacation time, among others (Berardi, 2009).

This project also contributes to the field of media studies as a historical geography of RTV, in that it sets New Jersey as a stage for understanding people, their labor, the impact of the financial crisis, and Trash and Treasure TV in a localized context. Consequently, another area this research intersects with is production studies. Some participants in the local secondary markets I studied were involved in creating online content. In their videos, they hunted for treasures at flea markets, auctions, and other sites, and documented their expenditures and potential profits in ways that appeared to imitate how these practices were shown on the programs. As informal cultural producers, these amateurs, several of whom were among the sample of informants, had posted on YouTube, among other sites, and even offered exclusive content for paid subscribers. From this activity, a chain of cultural and technical production had emerged that extended the reach of media culture as produced by TV studios (Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009). At the same time, these videos provided viewers/users with on-the-ground, “real-world” perspectives of “real people” (who are arguably more “authentic” and relatable than RTV celebrities) buying and selling on secondary markets. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Finally, my study is relevant to the area of media archaeology through its focus on trash, rubbish, and refuse. As media theorist Jussi Parikka (2012) notes, media archaeology is an “analysis of and from the ruins” which, similar to Walter Benjamin’s cultural historical method, “takes waste, rubble, and ruins as its starting points for a multi-layered excavation of the slow emergence of modernity” (p. 90). Secondary market practices, norms, and values as they are enacted in the world by and on Trash and Treasure TV are concerned with uncovering the past through objects. The media environment, which includes RTV and the Web economy (such as online auctions and the practitioner and fan content found on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram,

and other social media platforms) has raised the visibility and availability of the types of objects that circulate throughout secondary markets. Parikka reminds us that an archaeological approach affords a Foucauldian path leading toward “the materiality of media, especially dispositif and practice” (Hertz, 2010).

In this research, material culture practices are related to the circulation of objects (collecting, buying and selling) and their recomposition (“upcycling” for resale, for use in creating art by combining items - a portmanteau of “recycling” and “upscaling” or “upmarketing”). An archeological perspective can show us how beyond the commercial imperatives, these exchanges and creative efforts are sources for constructing histories of both the past and present. These histories are composed of stories that are learned through the excavation and analysis of objects which illustrate the everyday lives of people in particular cultures and societies at given moments in time. However, they also contain strategies for the subversion of hierarchies across time by presenting opportunities to transgress the economic, social, and cultural order as it is justified and reinforced through objects in their aesthetic forms and overall utility. To contain these potentially unruly practices, Trash and Treasure TV was deployed to provide sociocultural guidance through discursive power and the modulation of desire to conform to the priorities of the market. This is intended to affect the individual in the process of their subjectification, and operate on a larger scale in the formation of social class, and the distribution and accumulation of corresponding forms of economic and cultural capital.

Importantly, my research regarding secondary markets and Trash and Treasure TV is not merely about one subgenre of RTV. This work is an intervention within the range of programming that has encouraged entrepreneurialism and addressed personal finance. This has included, for example, *Shark Tank* (2009 - present), *The Suze Orman Show* (2002- 2015), and

programs that have focused on buying and selling homes for profit, such as *Flip or Flop* (2013 - present). Trash and Treasure TV fits among these other programs in that it brings to audiences models and inspiration for adopting practices commensurate with neoliberalism. In terms of the contemporary economy, the figure of “the entrepreneur” is significant, and at the center of Trash and Treasure TV and the RTV programs discussed above. However, the flip side to the entrepreneur is “the indebted,” a subject rarely represented on RTV, but a considerable population that composed secondary markets as observed in this study. Before laying out the chapters of this dissertation, I will trace the rise of Trash and Treasure TV and place it into the social, cultural, and historical context from which it emerged.

RTV, Recession, and the Rise of Trash and Treasure TV

Trash and Treasure TV surfaced and gained popularity in the U.S. in the wake of the Great Recession. This was a period of economic downturn in the U.S. and across the world that was closely related to the U.S. economic crisis caused by the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble, the subsequent "correction" that spanned the years 2007-2008, and the simultaneous mortgage crisis which lasted from 2007-2009. This period saw millions of ordinary Americans lose their homes, jobs, and in many cases, their life savings. While billions of tax dollars were infused to save many of the financial corporations (deemed "too big to fail") whose questionable dealings were responsible for the crisis, millions of ordinary people who found themselves plunged into poverty, or one step away from it, were advised to stay positive and be creative about new ways to survive. At the same time in an increasingly neoliberal economic landscape, people were being called upon to become increasingly self-reliant, as the state diminished its role in addressing unemployment and poverty in favor of one in which government was the facilitator

of private, free-market solutions to such social problems.² It is in this particular political-economic moment that a proliferation of “trash and treasure” RTV shows appeared.

However, these programs are not the first ones to be about objects and practices located in informal secondary market sites and spaces. For instance, in the U.S., a program on the FX Network called *Personal FX* ran from 1994-1997 before being cancelled in 1998. The show featured people bringing their collectibles to experts for assessment and appraisal. As *Personal FX* was being phased out, the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) launched the American version of *Antiques Roadshow* (1997- present), 17 years after the British version of the program debuted. All of the Trash and Treasure TV programs on US television owe their existence to the UK version of *Antiques Roadshow* (1979 – present), originally airing on BBC One. That program originated the concept of having people bring their keepsakes, collectables, family heirlooms, and other coveted objects to be appraised by experts, a programmatic feature which is now part of every show in the subgenre.

Even more relevant to this discussion is the fact that the original *Antiques Roadshow*, first airing 30 years ago in 1979, was also born out of a financial crisis, a time when the U.K. was mired in economic hardship, mass unemployment, high inflation, and stagnant and falling wages. This crisis resulted in the election of Margaret Thatcher who, while promising a remedy, prescribed neoliberal economic policies that exacerbated the crisis, which lasted until the late 1980s (Sofat, 2012; Nunns, 2013; Medhurst, 2014). However, the U.S. Trash and Treasure TV programs emerging in and after 2009 differ from the *Antiques Roadshow* franchise and *Personal FX*. In the latter programs, neither the people who bring their objects, the expert appraisers, nor

² For example, instead of addressing unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and the day-to-day struggles of the working classes (paying for health insurance and child care through public projects reminiscent of the New Deal, wage and benefit regulations, or mass unionization), President Donald Trump provided a tax cut to the wealthiest people and largest corporations. These initiatives were underpinned by the belief that they would bolster the stock market, stimulate job creation, and increase wages (Stewart, 2018).

the hosts are directly looking to buy or sell the items featured on the programs. Instead, they are shown simply seeking to learn the value and history of their objects. Taking the original *Antiques Roadshow* as the primary example, which emerged from the tumultuous British political economic, social, and cultural landscape of the late 1970s, the message of the show was that, despite the fact that people may not have had jobs, wages were low and things did not look promising, items of value could be lurking under their noses, and if so, individuals had hidden economic opportunities at their fingertips. Viewers were encouraged to look inward – into their attics and basements and selves – for objects of value and to wrestle with their emotional attachments to those objects.

Emerging in the U.S. in 2009 and 2010, the “Trash and Treasure” shows which first spawned the secondary market subgenre were *American Pickers* (the History Channel), *Auction Hunters* (Spike TV), *Hardcore Pawn* (truTV), *Pawn Stars* (the History Channel), and *Storage Wars* (A&E). These programs materialized out of a similar yet different historical moment and sociocultural and political-economic arrangement than *Antiques Roadshow* in late 1970s Britain. Unlike the post-recession U.S., England had enjoyed a strong social welfare system that ensured everyone had access to food, housing, and medical care. *Antiques Roadshow* gave the viewer early lessons in becoming a calculating subject by opening a forum for thinking through, in viewers' particular cultural and social framework, their relationship to their possessions. In contrast, Trash and Treasure TV programs encouraged people to not only learn the value of their own possessions for the purpose of resale, but to also look outward and scour the landscape for things to sell on the secondary market, since the assumption implicit in these shows was that one was expected to be self-sufficient. However, the political economy of post-recession America is drastically different than both that of the late 1970's U.K. and the later period when *Personal FX*

(1994-1997) and the U.S. version of *Antiques Roadshow* (1997 - present) aired. While the U.K. version of *Antiques Roadshow* was developed and debuted under a strong welfare state, the latter two programs emerged in the U.S. at a time when then-president Bill Clinton had begun restructuring “entitlement” programs with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which was a clear expression of neoliberal “responsibilization” in public policy.

The current political economy is arranged in consideration of neoliberal rationales, consumerism, and the country's economic dependence on consumption, rather than industrial production. Therefore, the demands on the contemporary subject in the U.S. differ in very important ways from those of the past, in that the current moment is one of drastic sociocultural reorganization. Mass culture and society have transformed in various ways in recent decades, bringing forth niche markets composed of various lifestyles and interests, unified through the consumption and “viral” transmission of trends. The labor market has, for the most part, decentralized into a network of independent contractors entering into agreements which are largely temporary, to which subjects are forced to adapt through flexibility and a tolerance for ambiguity and risk. Society as organized through the state with regard to work, healthcare, childcare, housing or other necessities, has also fragmented into a network of private subcontracting organizations whose work the government plays a part in facilitating, without actually providing the services itself (Cruikshank, 1999; Ferguson, 2007; Rose, 1999).³

The U.S. TV programs that emerged from the sociocultural and political economic milieu of the late 2000s were a response to the need for meeting economic demands made on people by the surrounding environment. These conditions were increasingly shaped through neoliberal logics and the maintenance of social control, as the world moved from one of hierarchical forms

³ For example, the subcontracting of the construction and management of subsidized housing, prisons, public schools, federal education lending, and security forces, among other initiatives.

of organizing to those that were looser and more networked. During this time, the gap between the rich and poor had grown exponentially in both the U.S. and U.K., where the upper classes had become vastly wealthier since the crisis (Garside, 2015; Whitefield, 2013). Everyone else endured their lives in a state of growing precarity, increasingly responsible for their own welfare. In this, citizens are hailed to embrace the entrepreneurial spirit (du Gay, 1996; Freeman, 2011).

With the growing insecurity and human suffering that had surfaced, including record numbers of homeless families and individuals,⁴ along with neoliberal political economic rationales and practices (for example, the end of public pensions; deep cuts to public education and public housing; the privatization of public utilities and infrastructure such as roads, bridges and prisons; the weakening of labor unions and the selling off of public lands for private gain), there were also potential openings through which people might potentially resist free market capitalism. This could have been done by eluding, at least in part, the capture and rendering of their total productive labor that fits the current needs of neoliberalism. As people have been increasingly pushed out on their own, it is possible that instead of internalizing the ethos of entrepreneurialism and competition, they could begin to build new ways of voluntary association and mutual aid, by practicing pre-capitalist types of economies through the use of alternative currencies or engaging in market practices such as barter, trade, or gifting.

Therefore, containing the potential of people's productive power necessitates some type of intervention to manage the unemployment and underemployment crisis, address issues of consumption and waste, and shape social relations to be in agreement with the cultural norms and values of the market system, such as "responsibilization." I argue that this is where the *Trash and Treasure TV* was deployed to intervene in correspondence with the cultural and social

⁴ As a result of the Great Recession the homeless population grew in the U.S., and in 2017, the number of homeless people increased for the first time since the downturn (Cauvin, 2011; Weber & Mulvihill, 2017).

conditions of the current political economy. This subgenre provided models of entrepreneurial behavior, and at times, direct instruction, intended to encourage people to find creative solutions for economic survival. Although, this was not to be done through the pursuit of non-capitalist forms of exchange or by collective organizing for political change, but by adopting neoliberal attitudes of speculation, financialization and risk taking. Viewers were taught that they must scan the post-industrial landscape in search of opportunities to make money through buying and selling objects which often appear to be junk. This research project has established Trash and Treasure TV as a subgenre, analyzed it, and explored the ways that it circulated among audience members, and if and/or how they engaged with and use it when they bought and sold on the secondary market.

Applying the above ideas, I note that Trash and Treasure TV programs present a version of the reality of buying and selling vintage objects, antiques, and collectibles to a diverse set of audiences. This “reality” is one that is laden with representation that prevents the ability for the production of any neutral presentation of reality, and is instead a version of “the real” that depicts people, their successes, and failures in ways that may or may not square up with lived experience. The viewers composing these audiences watch Trash and Treasure TV and make value judgments, which, while seemingly independent in their negotiated or outright oppositional interpretations, cannot be disentangled from the culture and society that produced the programs and the viewers themselves. Although the power of television may have limits in regard to direct influence over the audience, nobody can ever truly exist outside of the affect of its socio-cultural mediation.

At its foundation, governance in this study is understood through the lens of Michel Foucault’s (2000) theory of “governmentality,” which refers to government as a strategy of

“disposing things,” or “employing tactics” to achieve particular goals, relying on addressing the problem of freedom through the coercion of law. Here, media, in this case RTV, and in particular Trash and Treasure TV, is theorized as a strategy of governmentality through which viewers can learn the skills necessary to be independent, self-sufficient subjects who can survive or even thrive in the increasingly austere political-economic terrain of the U.S. At its foundation, Trash and Treasure TV encourages a spirit of entrepreneurialism, with programs showing people how to find, buy, and sell objects at secondary market sites. Some of the cast members, such as Mike and Frank of *American Pickers*, or Brandi, Jarrod and Dave of *Storage Wars*, are seeking inventory for their businesses. In this, they fold the informal practices of the secondary market into the formal system in pursuit of maximized economic success, or what can be called the American Dream. From there, viewers are shown models, given direct instruction, and provided with specific information on identifying, appraising, buying and selling objects at a given site and within certain circumstances, which they can use or ignore in order to engage in secondary market entrepreneurialism.

In this study, I conducted a textual analysis of the first seasons of three Trash and Treasure TV programs, *American Pickers*, *Storage Wars*, and *Flea Market Flip*. Additionally, I executed long and shorter form interviews with 44 people who traded on the secondary market, 42 of whom were viewers. I spent approximately 75 hours in the field, observing and talking with people who were buying and selling at flea markets, antique and collectible club meetings and shows, antique stores, and a pawn shop. My methodologies will be explained further in Chapter 3. In my conversations and experiences in the field, people told me, and I was able to see, what Trash and Treasure TV programs included and omitted in their presentation of reality, and the significance and potential consequences of the representational politics transmitted,

reproduced and reinforced through the shows. These findings and their importance to the body of literature RTV's role in subjectification and social organization are at the center of this research, and will be revealed in the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters. In the last section, the chapters of this dissertation will be outlined.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, the theoretical overview guiding the project is explained, and I elaborate and expand upon Foucault's concepts by incorporating the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, Nikolas Rose, Franco Berardi and other critical theorists concerned with governmentality and technologies of social modulation. In doing so, I will further illustrate how media, particularly RTV, can be understood as a technique of governmentality and social control, and a source of representation and sensory stimulation for affective transmission. This will include how information and stimulus is transmitted to audiences, and what that means in relation to processes of subjectification and the "performance" of markets. Furthermore, I will show how working in the recently established tradition of media research on RTV, the theoretical framework I provide can be applied to the case of Trash and Treasure TV. Then I will elaborate on the particular secondary market practices and ethical orientations viewers can learn from the programs, and the consequences that the subgenre could have on resolving unemployment and underemployment, addressing individual and social matters of consumption and waste, and shaping social relations within an ever-evolving economic arrangement that has subsumed and marketized nearly every aspect of the human experience.

Chapter 3 is an overview of the textual analysis, ethnographic, and audience reception methodologies used to conduct this research. In that chapter, I will provide the background of this project, explaining how I became interested in these programs and secondary market spaces

as sites of study. Then I will detail each of the methods I utilized. In terms of the textual analysis, I will discuss the parameters of the sample in regard to the number of hours of programming I assessed, and justify how and why I came to choose *American Pickers*, *Flea Market Flip*, and *Storage Wars* for my project. The ethnographic methods included interviews and observation. In this section, I will introduce the interview subjects and the informal market sites I observed, using pseudonyms to identify people and places, and will describe and situate them into the research as relevant to the sites they frequented, their practices, and elements of their identity, such as economic class, race, and gender. Throughout, I critically engage each of the methods and note the ways in which I attempted to remain reflexive as a researcher.

Incorporating data from my textual analysis of Trash and Treasure TV programs along with data from my interviews and field observations, Chapter 4 will discuss these shows in terms of their representational politics and instructional aspects. I will present my analysis of the respective first seasons of *American Pickers*, *Storage Wars*, and *Flea Market Flip* in consideration of the theoretical framework and revelations from conversations with participants and observations at site visits. In this, I will unpack what Trash and Treasure TV reveals, ignores, signifies and strategically deploys in its presentation of reality. The chapter is organized by program, elaborating on each regarding their pedagogical potential, representation of people, places, and things that constitute secondary market sites, and the social and cultural underpinnings through which the programs are constructed. Following those sections I will specifically address social identity and representation as these matters pertained to real-life secondary markets and Trash and Treasure TV.

Chapter 5 will more fully bring together Trash and Treasure TV programs, audience reception and engagement, and participation in secondary market sites, by focusing on specific

practices as they are performed and as markets are made. This analysis will consider how participants have engaged with and used Trash and Treasure TV, and what secondary markets mean to their lives in regard to their financial stability and personal interests. Within this context, I discuss the relationship secondary markets have to the larger economic system, the significance of objects in that system, the potential secondary markets have for constructing alternative relationships in regard to systems of exchange and labor, and how Trash and Treasure TV may work to foreclose those opportunities.

This chapter explains the structure and dynamics of the networked hierarchy that composes the local secondary market, how objects circulate and value is constituted, what social and cultural elements are responsible for the downturn in the antiques and collectibles market, and how identity, such as gender, race, and class, are visible and active in ways not seen on Trash and Treasure TV. The final section offers a challenge to the concept of governmentality in theory and practice in a discussion of the disruptive aspects and interpellative limitations of the subgenre that are related to identity, economics, and affect.

Lastly, in Chapter 6, I offer my thoughts on Trash and Treasure TV in relation to governmentality and social control in the current political and economic landscape, by noting the contributions my research makes to Media Studies and providing some insights and directions for future research that pertain to the migration of secondary markets to online platforms. In conclusion, I will attempt to historically situate Trash and Treasure TV, neoliberalism, and media governmentality, mark the limits of their moments, and briefly argue the lasting significance of media subjectification under the conditions of the new political economy, which in the 2010s saw a rise in libertarian nationalism in the U.S. and around the world.

Chapter 2

Even *You* Can Turn Trash into Treasure: RTV, Governance, and Material Culture

I'm an educated individual. I know that you can't have a television show without having a premise. You got to have a hook. Storage Wars, yeah they're going to show you a lot of the successes, and there are a couple of the losses. They're not going to show you the monotony. They're not going to show you going in there and having to be there for 4, 5, 6, 7 hours. They're going to compress it all down into a half hour, hour show, whatever it is ... It's made me want to become a picker. It's made me want to do that, and I want to try to make money from it. Again, you watch a show or you watch them pick something, and they score a gem. They buy something for \$200 that they're going to turn around and sell for \$1,200 and make a thousand dollars.

– Alex, project interviewee, long-time “picker,” collector, and an avid watcher of *American Pickers*

The statement above illustrates how audiences are active and can exhibit both skepticism (in an oppositional reading) and enthusiasm (through a dominant reading) at the same time. This dynamic demonstrates that the processes of mediation are complex and validates media’s potential influence on audiences in shaping perspectives and channeling desires. In this chapter, I draw from the fields of media theory, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, to construct the theoretical framework for this study. I argue that the subgenre that I have labeled “Trash and Treasure TV” has the capacity to act as a technology of governance by modeling techniques for survival in sites of exchange that straddle the formal and informal economies. These sites include auctions, flea markets, pawnshops, second-hand stores, yard sales, and private residences or commercial properties. These spaces compose the secondary market where people circulate money and a range of goods and services.

The values and practices portrayed on Trash and Treasure TV are commensurate with the contemporary political-economic arrangement. In particular, these programs present models of entrepreneurs buying and selling antique and vintage objects, and provide the exemplary knowledge and skills needed for people to participate in the secondary market. This includes how to identify and authenticate objects, determine their worth, and successfully engage in

financial transactions. Simultaneously, viewers are also introduced to information about the objects beyond identification, authentication, and monetary value, such as their cultural or social significance. This is done through program content placed in between or during show segments that features experts and/or text and graphics that provide “facts” about the objects, namely, information about their manufacturers, uses, aesthetics, and cultural importance. Despite this focus on historical and social contexts (which is often superficial), determining the value of a given object or set of objects is most central to the programs.

Overall, I hope to illustrate that Trash and Treasure TV teaches audiences how to engage in entrepreneurship in modern liberal democratic societies at a historical moment during which people are called upon to bear the burden of economic restructuring and shifting labor markets. By steering people toward the secondary markets, two major social issues are addressed. First, as the role of the state shifts from directly managing public needs (i.e. providing a social safety net), to facilitating partnerships with private organizations intended to distribute or maintain social goods, people must be taught that they can no longer rely on the government for long-term support if, for instance, they lose their job or retire. Additionally, under free-market ideology, the government no longer sees its role as creating job opportunities for people. Instead, it provides the framework through which jobs will purportedly emerge from the private sector and people must learn to understand and accept this shift in the government's role.

Trash and Treasure TV fills the gap left by the dismantling of the social safety net by showing viewers how to create their own jobs and achieve financial security. The small businesses featured on these shows can supplement people’s incomes where the government cannot or will not, as social security or other entitlement programs are curtailed or eliminated (King & Groppe, 2018). Given that in recent years the U.S. has experienced a diminishing

middle class (which has been compounded by growing income inequality and inflation rates) these economic conditions have whittled away at purchasing power (Henderson, 2016). Relevant to New Jersey, between 2012 and 2016 the gaps between the poorest and wealthiest in the state widened, and although the median wage had grown by nearly 4% during the recovery from the Great Recession, wage disparity has remained high (O'Dea, 2017). In contrast to this reality of shrinking jobs and wealth for average Americans, these RTV programs show examples of people circulating vintage and antique objects which are acquired and collected, displayed, refurbished or repurposed, and then sold or resold to wealthier consumers, generating new consumer markets and opportunities for consumption.

RTV's selective depictions of "reality" are indicative of the genre's potential to be read as a social technology that acts as both an intervention and a source of representation (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). I contend that Trash and Treasure TV's portrayals of people buying and selling on the secondary market are about shaping social relations through the objects featured. In large part, these programs show audiences a neoliberal sense of individualism and competition in which the "losers" are disposable, dead nodes to be purged from the economic network (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Ouellette, 2017). At the same time, the genre models interpersonal collaboration, including moments when cast members or contestants are cooperating across purposes (Bratich, 2009). In this, Trash and Treasure TV is similar to, or even a derivative of Makeover TV. It encourages a sense of "Americanness" to which people submit themselves to normative understandings of identity and economic life, which are concerned with producing "free" subjects and democratic citizens (Weber, 2009).

In light of the relationship between social categories such as gender, race, and sexuality, and one's economic class position, it is important to briefly note that the Trash and Treasure TV

characters on the shows I analyzed were predominantly white and male, with very few women and people of color cast in primary roles. The working classes and poor were nearly completely absent (Ouellette, 2017). Real world sites, such as flea markets and yard sales, are actually very diverse. This has been famously observed by anthropologist Robert Maisel (1974) in an early study showing that a range of people participate in the “action” of buying, selling, and co-constructing the “scene” of a flea market. In my research, that diversity lent itself, in part, to complicating theories of governmentality. Many people, particularly those of the poor and working classes, used secondary markets for purchasing the things they needed for their everyday lives. Some also sold lower-end (less valuable) objects, but did not trade in antiques and collectibles as *Trash and Treasure TV* has promoted. In addition, informants discussed how the programs negatively disrupted existing market conditions through the distribution of information and an influx of participants.

These matters will be further explored in this chapter and those subsequent, as they related to how *Trash and Treasure TV* presented the “reality” of buying and selling on the secondary market, and what that meant to audience members in terms of how they understood and used TV in their own lives. Through the responses of study participants and field observations, these issues will be placed into larger socio-economic contexts, such as class, race, and gender in terms of the rise of secondary markets and their relationship to neoliberal economic precarity, income inequality, and market forces. The next section will lay out the theoretical underpinnings concerned with media governance, followed by a discussion of how *Trash and Treasure TV* could operate as a mode of subjectification.

Power, Desire, and Media: RTV, Governance, and Social Control

Foucault, Deleuze, and Media Governance: Power, Desire, and RTV

The ideas of Foucault and Deleuze have been foundational in situating and analyzing media as a technology of governance in contemporary capitalist liberal democracies, such as those in the U.S. and Western Europe. Using Foucault's theory of governmentality, cultural critics Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (1992) have observed that liberal government is heavily reliant on technologies for "governing at a distance." This endeavor is particularly important, as the role of the state has been shifting away from one involved in traditional liberal statist projects, such as maintaining a welfare system, to one which is concerned with producing subjects that can be responsible for themselves in the absence of government intervention (Rose, 1996, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992). These modes of governance are increasingly being applied all over the world, although they are most entrenched in what Rose (1996) has termed "advanced liberal democracies," and the ideal subjects of these societies embody the mentalities and practices associated with what is called "neoliberalism" (Burchell, 1996).

Neoliberalism, also called economic liberalism, or economic rationalism (Burchell, 1996), is a set of political-economic practices which have not merely emerged in the recent past. It is a form of liberalism that can be traced back to the work of both the German Ordo-liberals, who were taking on the intellectual and practical project of reconstructing Germany's economy after World War II, and to the Chicago School of economics, that was based at the University of Chicago (Brown, 2003; Burchell, 1996; Foucault, 1997; Lemke, 2001). These theorists were concerned with advancing a particular form of free-market post-war economics in the U.S., formulated through the thoughts of Frank Knight, George Stigler, and Milton Friedman (Emmett, 2010, pp. 1-3). This mid-20th century philosophical phenomenon was essentially a resurgence of 19th century ideas associated with laissez-faire economic liberalism.

Neoliberalism embraced economic policies such as privatization, fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade, and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society. This constituted a paradigm shift away from the post-war Keynesian economic policies (post 1945- 1980) that had embraced government intervention in the market and investment in social welfare programs to correct inefficiencies in markets (such as a lack of full employment) and the resulting social inequalities. Foucault (1997) notes that both the German Ordo-liberals and the Chicago School eschewed liberalism's placement of limits on the state, and developed their ideas in response to a notion of "excessive government" (p. 78). The Ordo-liberals critiqued Soviet central planning, National Socialism, and Keynesian interventions, while the Chicago School theorized against the policies of the New Deal, and the massive economic and social welfare programs assembled by mid-20th century under Democratic presidents (Foucault, 1997, p. 78).

In the U.S., these ideas began to fully emerge and were put into practice in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that historical moment, American culture was increasingly overcome with anxiety and a cynical perspective regarding the effectiveness of investments in social welfare policies, such as Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs. These policy attitudes were expressed in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan, causing the Democratic Party to respond in 1984 by nominating conservative Gary Hart as the presidential candidate for that cycle (Katz, 1989, p. 35; Rothenberg, 1984, pp. 15-16). In the U.S. through the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberalism became more entrenched through various waves of deregulation and then-President Bill Clinton's welfare reform act (O'Connor, 2002). This exemplified how the Democratic Party was endorsing major tenets of the neoliberal platform. In the U.K., cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1988) examined the rise of Margaret Thatcher and noted that her

philosophical orientation was state-centric in regard to strategizing the use of the government, but anti-statist in terms of public spending and investment in entitlement initiatives.

In the 1990s, the neoliberal “Third Way” politics of the Clinton administration were asserted in an international project with the development of New Labour ideology and policy in the U.K., as enacted through the work of center-left Prime Minister Tony Blair (Atkins, 2016). It was during this period that scholars such as Nikolas Rose (1999) and Mitchell Dean (1996) were inspired to use a Foucauldian analysis of these formations. Taking all of this into account, the ideas of the Ordo-liberals and the Chicago School were influential in developing the primary architecture for the contemporary political economy in both the U.S. and the U.K. As a rationale of governance, neoliberalism did not completely abandon the priority of “the state” to govern. However, government policies concerned with public welfare projects, such as benefits for the poor and unemployed, or the development of robust public schools, were seen as “failures” that have created the need to experiment with alternative methods to address social problems (Burchell, 1996, p. 27; Rose, 1996, p. 53).

These strategies have encouraged the movement toward total privatization, and the utilization of government for the exclusive end of facilitating markets. Within this context, cultural, social, and legal conditions and institutions have composed a game of entrepreneurial competition for individuals and groups. In the process, market mentalities, models and practices have been applied to all areas of the human experience, right down to the way individuals learn to understand and manage their inner feelings (Freeman, 2011). As the role of the state in the organization of the public good has continued to wither in relation to social welfare programs, there have been decreases in benefits for the poor and unemployed, government-funded education, and subsidized healthcare. This has been accompanied by a growth in terms of

contracting out to the private sector the services that had been formerly provided by the government (Brown, 2003; Cohen, 2014; Lemke, 2001). With compounding force, increased privatization has further eroded job security in the U.S., and has widened and reinforced already existing income inequality (Cohen, 2014).

Within this arrangement, people live in a state of “precarity,” which is a type of instability that had emerged with the decentralization of labor and markets. This term was conceptualized and named in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Italy’s economy was being subjected to neoliberal experimentation (Berardi, 2009, p. 148). Under liberalism, the contemporary political terrain has been constructed by neoliberal logics and affected by the conditions of precarity. It has come to demand the composition of appropriate subjects, each ideally able to thrive as productive nodes that continually contribute to the health of a decentralized economy. Considering these circumstances, state and private power are implored to encourage what governmentality scholars describe as a sense of “responsibilization,” in which individuals are called upon to bear burdens once carried by public agencies (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1999).

Analyzing governance in advanced liberal democracies, Rose (1996) has incorporated the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. In this, government is understood as taking place through a “complex assemblage of diverse forces (legal, architectural, professional, administrative, financial, judgmental), techniques (notation, computation, calculation, examination, evaluation) [and] devices that promise to regulate decisions and actions of individuals, groups, and organizations in relation to authoritative criteria” (Rose, 1996, p. 42). Rose (1996) has explained that governmentality is “an array of technologies of government” such as “strategies, techniques, and procedures” that different authorities seek to use, depending

on what resources are at hand and what forms of resistance are expected or experienced (p. 42). Foucault called the mechanisms that deploy strategies of governmentality by the French term, “dispositifs,” which in English translates into “apparatuses.” He argued that dispositifs organize power relationships by regulating and normalizing discourses into “regimes of truth,” which set the limits of power that can be exercised by individuals and groups in a society at a given place and time (Foucault, 1990, 1995; Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 207).

As author and translator Graham Burchell (1996) has reminded us, Foucault noted that government (a mode of governing or governance) is the “‘contact point’ where techniques of domination – or power – and *techniques of the self* ‘interact,’ where ‘technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself and conversely, ... where techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion’” (p. 20).⁵ The gap where this interaction takes place is one that implies that there is some play between the modes of “subjection and subjectification” (Burchell, 1996, p. 20). Techniques of domination in advanced liberal democracies seek to manage this variable through what sociologist Mitchell Dean (2010) has described as the “practices concerned with structuring, shaping, predicting and making calculable the operation of our *freedom* [emphasis added] ... [that work] off and through diagrams of free subjects constituted by forms of governmental and political reasoning” (p. 194).

In this dissertation, I contend that RTV as a technology of government is the “contact point” at which the economic, social and cultural power embedded in a range of media processes “interact” with techniques of the self. I will argue that, as a strategy of Foucauldian governmentality, RTV imparts to viewers particular forms of *techne* that are aligned with,

⁵ Burchell worked from a mimeographed transcript of a lecture given by Foucault in 1980 at Berkeley for The Howison Lecture Series.

justify, and reinforce neoliberal rationales and practices, giving us particular ways to understand what it means to be “free.”

At the same time, the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze can be applied to access another dimension of how RTV can be understood as a technology of governance. As philosopher Erinn Cunniff Gilson (2014) has noted, both Foucault and Deleuze were concerned with matters of ethics and freedom as related to subjectification. For Foucault, freedom was an ethical ontology constituted in a particular set of embodied power relations, which produced subjects and constructed a social order by providing guidance for the transformation of the self (Gilson, 2014, p. 80 - 81). For Deleuze, ontological-ethical orientations were those that, at their origin, are always moving and in constant modes of change. Freedom, in this case, is a state of indeterminate potential that he termed “the plane of immanence” which dispositifs are designed to stabilize and modulate (Deleuze, 1997; Gilson, 2014, p. 80).

Foucault’s theories privileged discursive “power” as the primary force through which society is organized. In contrast, Deleuze (1997, 2006) has argued that the catalyst is “desire,” which serves as a form of productive power to direct the objects that constitute the social field. These objects move through the world in every direction on what he calls “lines of flight” or “lines of deterritorialization” (Deleuze, 1997, 2006; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Propelling “lines of flight,” he argued, are “investments of desire” that collapse the respective concepts of the political and libidinal economies (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977, p. 215; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Smith, 2007, p. 77). This position drew directly from and decentered the philosophies of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, and in doing so, opened up how we can understand formations of sociocultural organization and control (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Smith, 2007).

Lines of flight are always in motion, constantly composing and recomposing the social field (Deleuze, 1997, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In *Anti-Oedipus*, written with psychoanalyst Felix Guattari (1983), he and his coauthor discussed how capitalism seeks new environments to reterritorialize and characterize the “capitalist aggregate” as one that “decodes and deterritorializes with all its might” (pp. 335 - 336). In this, we can see the capitalist logic as expansive and always seeking new resources and markets. Subcultures and nonmainstream economic markets, such as those in the informal and secondary sectors, could be influenced while passing through the dispositifs as lines of flight. Here, dispositifs can be understood as working to block and redirect the lines of flight, or “investments of desire,” that constitute the types of economic markets that are moving away from or could subvert the formal capitalist system.

At their respective essences, the difference between the social theory of governance envisioned by Foucault and that of Deleuze is that the former is constructed through strategies of power and the latter through the regulation of desire and affect (Deleuze, 1978, 1997). The most overlap can be identified in the concept of the dispositif. Franco “Bifo” Berardi has used Foucauldian and Deleuzian understandings to describe what he refers to as a “media dispositif,” which functions as a structuring technology that composes and recomposes the social body (Coté, 2011). Berardi poses TV as an example of a dispositif which “is able to standardize the generation of a certain kind of social composition” (Coté, 2011, p. 383). As a media dispositif or a part of one, TV circulates what Berardi calls “info-stimulus” which is the aggregate of and specific content that is recorded and diffused through communication technologies. “Info-stimulus” has a dual character, as on one hand, it carries within it representational or meaning-

making qualities (Berardi, 2009 p. 146). While on the other, it stimulates the senses, transmitting feeling and emotion in its affect (Berardi, 2009 p. 146).

In this research, RTV was considered a televisual dispositif that circulated discourses of power and transmitted affect. This dispositif included Trash and Treasure TV as it was broadcasted on television, distributed in its licensed and authorized Web presence, and reproduced by amateurs through home-made content posted on YouTube and other online platforms. The secondary market sites featured on the programs at the center of this study were actual spaces of exchange that people constructed together. In this, the bodies and objects that composed the places where things were bought, sold, traded, and bartered for were organized yet unruly, and therefore not easily governable. Through its intervention as a cultural technology, Trash and Treasure TV was intended to redirect subjects away from noncapitalist practices inherent to the performance of secondary markets. These included the social and affective conditions that could displace the impetus on profit maximization, and instead encourage people to give away things to others free of charge for whatever reason they choose.

But rather than open up spaces for encouraging people to think about alternative forms of market interactions as a response to increasing economic precarity, Trash and Treasure TV provided ways for market participants to conduct themselves that conform more closely to the desires of neoliberal state-corporate capitalism. These shows presented to viewers a range of models for “properly” engaging in the secondary marketplace. For example, the cast of *Storage Wars* demonstrated a hyper-competitiveness, and sometimes “win-at-all-costs” subjectivity, in which shifting alliances among “friends” and rivals, money, skill, cunning, and “luck” determined who won and who lost. Additionally, in many instances the cast members were shown running formal business enterprises that presumably contributed to the health of the state

through taxes, while at the same time, unburdened the government from its traditional responsibilities in matters such as job creation or providing welfare assistance.

Their businesses also allowed society to deal with the excesses of consumerism and mass production that have built up since the mid 20th century, particularly in regard to how people managed their possessions and collectively dealt with waste. The secondary market as shown on TV rendered objects into items of respective values, some of which could be sold for very high prices in retail settings. In real-world settings, those objects that could not help a seller generate income ended up discounted at a flea market, or relegated to a landfill. The focus of Trash and Treasure TV shows was almost exclusively on what things were worth on the open market, and not on the cost of disposing what the entrepreneurs acquire and/or do not want. This discrepancy and others will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. By looking at RTV through Foucauldian and Deleuzian lenses, as Berardi had, we can better understand the work of those scholars who have applied their theories in various ways.

RTV, Governance, and Social Control

Theorists who have researched RTV in the past have placed media within the analytic of government, arguing that RTV operates as a technology that intervenes into our realities at a distance to influence the construction of the self (Bratich, 2006, 2007, 2009; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Sender, 2012; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). An early work on RTV and governance is Gareth Palmer's (2003) focus on surveillance and policing in which he speculated on the potential power that programs such as *Cops* or *World's Wildest Police Chases* had in the molding of compliant and law-abiding citizens. Jack Z. Bratich (2006, 2007, & 2009) has taken a Deleuzian-Autonomist approach and argued that RTV intervenes in reality by bringing audiences models for becoming appropriate contemporary subjects. Viewers are shown how to understand themselves as affectively-cognitively malleable, and how to relate to others in the same ways

that we are called upon to do in the ever-changing workplace and labor market. Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) have discussed RTV from a Foucauldian perspective, positing the genre as a technique of governmentality. In their view, RTV provides a range of “technologies of the self” that people can learn from to care for themselves as the welfare state withers and nongovernmental entities, such as businesses or nonprofit organizations, become increasingly responsible for composing social relationships. In this system, the capacity for individuals to be flexible and self reliant becomes increasingly important.

Scholars have followed these earlier conceptualizations of RTV’s role as a technology of subjectification, and analyzed programs that have focused on people’s “conduct” across a range of areas. For example, Galit Ferguson’s (2010) work theorized ways that people could govern themselves through UK shows about managing “the family” such as *Supernanny*, *Honey We’re Killing the Kids*, and *Brat Camp*. Ferguson emphasized the psychocultural aspects of “televisual looking,” which entailed the formation of the inner self through contact with the outer world. In this case, he concentrated on RTV programs that provided models and “expert” guidance for parenting that encouraged viewers to engage in forms of self observation while they watched the subjects on the screen. According to his research, the primary device on these programs was shame, an affective and ideological social emotion that filled the gap between one’s environment and interior. The experts used the language of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy within the discourses of self help to make judgments. The evaluations were those that the audience presumably made about themselves and the people on the program who were seeking assistance.

Media theorists have thought about RTV and governance in relation to not only class, but race, gender, sexuality, and the performance of the self. Dara Persis Murray (2015) analyzed *America’s Next Top Model*, and argued that the program advocated for a postfeminist

subjectivity of motherhood which is based on branding oneself as “fierce.” Through the process of becoming “fierce,” the subjects on the program learned to change themselves emotionally and physically which was understood as a path toward “access[ing] a positive sense of self and career promise” (Murray, 2015, p. 232). Allison Page (2015) has written about *From G’s to Gents*, an MTV contest program produced by actor, comedian, and pop culture personality Jaime Foxx, who is situated as a role model for the contestants. The show is hosted by musician and author Fonsworth Bentley, who was once the personal valet to celebrity rapper and producer Sean Combs, known in the past as “Puff Daddy.” The participants were black men who are not particularly “refined” (possessing the cultural capital of middle-class whiteness) and in most situations in their lives, tended to rely on either not showing their feelings, or only displaying the capacity to be “tough.” Through their transformation, Bentley coached the men in “proper” etiquette and other social skills, which included learning to manage one’s emotions. In turn, becoming a “gentleman” involved renouncing a “particular type of blackness” while under the impression that doing so will lead to financial success.

Assessments of RTV’s capability to act upon the biological body have also been conducted. Katherine Sender (2012), whose work will be discussed further below, focused on the potential for Makeover TV shows, such as *The Biggest Loser*, to act as a technique of governmentality and influence how people managed their health and shaped their aesthetic selves. Meanwhile, Melissa Zimdars (2017) has discussed RTV as a technology of governmentality as deployed in relation to militarism. She argued that military themes, styles, and plotlines were deployed on weight loss and fitness television to reinforce the disciplinary logics presented on the programs of that subgenre. At the same time, she noted that in order to manage what is understood as a “fattening” or softening among its ranks, the military had

become increasingly reliant on commercial training and weight loss practices that include what was found on TV (Zimdars, 2017). All of the scholarly literature referenced thus far posits RTV programs as sources for learning techniques of the self that are considered useful for being successful on the neoliberal socio-economic landscape.

Relevant to this project, Hay (2010) has looked specifically at real estate TV programs and their rise within the context of the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis, which was a central part of the Great Recession. He designated these shows as a “transactional reality and transactional technology” that emerged from this turbulent period, and called this reality and technology “Realty” TV. He suggested that these shows emphasized the entrepreneurial skills needed by the “new *homo oeconomicus*,” particularly in terms of surviving the housing and economic meltdown by learning how to extract value in the “new political economy” through the financial securitization of personal property, which in this case is the home (p.393).

Writing specifically about the programs that I refer to as Trash and Treasure TV, Eric Jenkins (2015) has made a Deleuzian argument that *American Pickers* is a tool for promoting commodity fetishism, deploying business strategies, and controlling markets. He contended that this occurred through what Deleuze termed “images-of-affection,” specifically, “action images” (those depicting “reality”), “affection-images” (those showing that positive affections are a possibility), and “impulse images” (those naturalizing production as a source of value). Additionally, Mark Rademacher and Casey Kelly (2016) have discussed programs from this subgenre when they theorized that *Storage Wars* acts to mediate the crisis of masculinity and labor by providing competitive images of “men at work” in traditionally feminine consumer markets. The ideas of these scholars are applied to this study to discuss RTV as a mode of governance.

However, Jenkins' (2015) work only pointed out how *American Pickers* presented audiences with models for laboring as "pickers" and encouraged the valorization of antiques and collectibles. He did not engage with the scholarly literature on RTV and neglected the element of Trash and Treasure TV that seeks to formalize the informal market. These shows encourage entrepreneurs to build their own businesses that resemble those such as Antiques Archaeology, the large-scale brick-and-mortar and online enterprise featured on *American Pickers*, the Harrison family's Gold and Silver Pawn shop of *Pawn Stars*, or the various companies and stores that were owned and operated by the cast of *Storage Wars*. In addition, I contend that a thorough theorization and analysis of Trash and Treasure TV and its potential to operate as a technology of subjectification cannot be Foucauldian or Deleuzian alone. It is necessary to access the registers of both power and desire, as RTV the televisual dispositif deploys information and affects that carry meaning and conjure feelings. My research is the first to comprehensively investigate these programs and the audiences who watch them in terms of the power to shape ethics and direct desires.

Finally, Ouellette (2017) has made a contribution that is also directly related to this project. She placed shows focused on pawn shops, repossession services, foreclosed home flipping, and storage unit auctions into a category she called "dispossession TV." Ouellette has argued that these programs presented enactments of "bare enterprise" that operate via a "biopolitics of disposability." This is a concept borrowed from cultural critic Henry Giroux that is concerned with the social processes of rendering invisible the bodies of those that are of no use to the neoliberal project. To demonstrate this, Ouellette has noted the near complete absence from the small screen of those who have had their homes and cars repossessed, or have defaulted on their storage locker payments. When the poor and working classes were represented, they

were stripped of their property and treated as merely a part of the undeserving, anonymous, and disposable masses.

Such depictions were central to the storylines on *Hardcore Pawn*, a program about a family owned pawn shop in a poverty-stricken area of Detroit that serves a clientele largely composed of underprivileged people of color. Here it is important to point out how post-Recession economic conditions have changed the significance of the televisual dispositif, which is a significant challenge to governmentality theory. Neoliberal discourses and affective images in RTV have tended to assume a particular type of subject who will enmesh themselves within what they are seeing on TV. Because of this, the poor and indebted may be out of reach of the RTV dispositif. This limits its power of subjectification, since scouring the secondary market for rare antiques and collectibles may not be seen as a priority or a viable way to make money for these groups.

Laurie Ouellette's (2017) work dovetails with that of those scholars who have critically engaged with garbage as object and concept. Cultural theorists Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini (2012) have noted that garbage is "productive of subjectivities ... constitutive of social relations" and "embodies a story about the larger refusals and values of contemporary U.S. culture" (pp. 12-13). In this, they cited authors such as John Scanlon (2005), Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (2003; Hawkins, 2006), and Dominique LaPorte (2002), who "take seriously the experience of everyday life, the way that social actors interact with the metaphors and material that create their worlds, and from which they create their sense of selfhood ... [and] address the ambivalent politics of recycling and repurposing as well as the affective attachment people feel about trying to make a difference in the sheer volume of trash" (Foote & Mazzolini, 2012, p. 12). My analysis of Trash and Treasure TV and secondary markets was concerned with

subjectification and the composition of social relationships, specifically as directed by the ethics of neoliberalism within the context of U.S. culture and society. This included how we constitute the world through wanted and unwanted objects.

The limitations of theories of RTV as a technique of governmentality have been discussed by critics. For instance, cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg (2010) has pointed out that these concepts ignore the biopolitical, and noted that everyone is not always working on the same neoliberal project. Taking another perspective, media theorist David Morley (2010) has distilled these ideas on media and governance down to pure functionalism.⁶ Bringing viewers into the analysis, the respective audience studies of Katherine Sender (2012) and Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012) have helped parse out the strength of RTV as a source of social and cultural influence. Sender's (2012) contribution concerned audiences of makeover television programs, and illustrated viewers' agency. Her investigation into how people have used these shows as guides for self care helped clarify the potential and limits of media as a technology of governmentality. It demonstrated that the audiences she studied had applied what they learned and were inspired to transform themselves through their engagements with the programs. However, they did so "reflexively" and often critically, and made evaluations regarding which techniques to apply to their own lives and which to leave behind (Sender, 2012, pp.13-14).

Skeggs and Wood's (2012) study recognized the relevance of governmentality theory, yet complicated it in their claim that RTV is not only an intervention into reality, but also a representation of it (p. 80). A major conclusion of their research is that people reacted to RTV from their position within the dominant social relations, and criticized the participants on the

⁶ As pointed out in Skeggs and Wood (2012, p. 137).

programs with the same culturally-driven evaluative scrutiny that they imagined being subject to as well (Skeggs & Wood, 2013, pp. 184, 215 - 216). This understanding, in conjunction with Stuart Hall's (1980) theorization that audiences are active readers of media products, rather than merely passive receivers (which will be explained further in Chapters 4 and 5), guided the interpretation of the data generated from this study's interviews.

This section has provided an overview of the rationales and practices of neoliberalism, the precarity of everyday life that has emerged within the contemporary political economy, and the foundational ideas involving media as a technology of governance as they have applied to RTV. These ideas will serve as the foundation for the rest of this chapter, and in the next section, these theories will be applied to the subgenre of Trash and Treasure TV to explain it in relation to the particular cultural and social conditions of the historical moment from which it surfaced.

Trash and Treasure TV and Governance: Viewers, Subjectification, and Material Culture

In this dissertation, Trash and Treasure TV has been positioned as a component of the RTV televisual dispositif designed to normalize and regulate the neoliberal economic discourses that constitute the secondary marketplace. The sites of exchange that have composed the secondary market intrinsically deviate from formal consumer and wholesale markets in their distribution of new merchandise, their role in the state-corporate institutional structure, and the social relations that are established through consumption practices such as going to a shopping mall. Also, in contrast to formal consumer markets, the secondary market is something that people in advanced liberal democracies engage in out of the desire to accumulate and circulate *used and old* objects. This is done in order to make money and purchase things for personal use or resale. Although the informal and formal sectors are a part of the same marketing system, the informal market sites (e.g. flea markets, yard sales, peer-to-peer "picking," auctions) provide

greater options for consumers in regard to the variety and uniqueness of objects available for purchase, and avenues for building interpersonal relationships (Sherry, 1990).

Therefore, Trash and Treasure TV works to draw that productive power, as it is a deviation from idealized forms of capitalist consumption (i.e. buying lots of new products at formal sites in close alignment with the larger neoliberal capitalist arrangement). Ultimately, as a form of media governance, the genre is intended to redirect the ways people have understood and enacted economic practices. This is done through providing guidance for the circulation and assignment of value to the objects being bought and sold, and by setting the parameters for disciplining the social relations that constitute the secondary markets of post industrial, technologically sophisticated, advanced liberal democracies. Overall, Trash and Treasure TV is focused on labor and material culture, namely that which comes in the form of consumption (Miller, 1987; 2013), collecting (Belk, 2013; Benjamin, 1955/1969), hoarding (Frost & Steketee, 2010), and appropriating and repurposing objects (Hebdige, 1979).

I propose that Trash and Treasure TV programs impart techniques of the self that viewers can decide to take up or leave behind, which are capable of opening up and closing down pathways toward the construction of new forms of subjectivity and coproduction. This occurs through the subjection and subjectification of the contemporary person into a form that is largely a combination of two classifications of people. One is the *homo oeconomicus*, who is guided by rational market action in this new political economy (Hay, 2010, pp. 389-392). The other is a strain of the *homo consumericus*, who is preoccupied with consumption. This type is specifically concerned with the ethos and practices of consumerism that were borne out of the industrial production of goods and desire that emerged at the turn of the 20th century (Curtis, 2002; Leach,

1993) and adapted for negotiating the current cultural, economic, social, and technological terrain (Augouard, 2008).

The environment that produced Trash and Treasure TV was that of a post-recession economy guided by the practices and rationales of neoliberalism. As a result of the “Great Recession,” (2007-2009) millions of workers in the U.S. were rendered unemployed or underemployed, tens of thousands of people were left without homes, and those with the largest bank accounts had acquired even more wealth (Lee, 2014, June 22). In the subsequent years that the U.S. had been in recovery from the economic crisis, thousands of people were still unemployed and dealing with sluggish housing and employment markets (Demos, 2013, October 14; Lee, 2014). This was in spite of the rebound in the amount of available jobs, as many that had been created were low-paying and lacked benefits or opportunities for advancement, particularly for those without college degrees (Carnevale, Jayasundra, & Gulish, 2016; Demos, 2013, October 14; Lee, 2014).

On top of the continued erosion of financial compensation and working conditions, such as job security, there was intensified competition for existing positions. The year 2009 saw the emergence of Trash and Treasure TV with the debut of A&E’s *Pawn Stars* (2009 – present). It was also the year that the ratio of jobs to applicants was the highest since the Great Recession began, with more than six people competing for each job (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). As of January 2017, the ratio had dropped significantly, to 1.2 to 1.4 people per job opportunity (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). However, again, the benefits of this “recovery” had been largely limited to college graduates who have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. Those with an associate’s degree or some college credits, and those with a high school diploma or less, had seen little to no improvement or even further decline in their job prospects (Carnevale,

Jayasundra, & Gulish, 2016). In light of these circumstances, the much hailed "recovery" did not have a strong effect on easing the economic anxieties that had loomed in the psyches of many Americans (Saad, 2013, September 2). This was evidenced by the results of the 2016 presidential elections. In fact, Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton in counties which relied on jobs that were susceptible to automation or outsourcing, and where people felt threatened with regard to what little economic vitality has remained since the recession "ended" (Kolko, 2016).

Paradoxically, neoliberal rationales and disciplines, which were central to the emergence of the financial crisis in the first place, have only become more deeply embedded in both the private and public spheres in the wake of the Great Recession, and have been called upon to guide the effort of "recorrecting" the market (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012).⁷ After the Recession was said to have ended and Donald Trump arrived on the political scene, there were public debates during the 2016 presidential campaign over neoliberalism as an economic organizational form, as compared to more nationalist or protectionist economic orientations. Regardless of the nationalist political rhetoric and posturing of President Donald Trump during his campaign, his administration has not deviated significantly from neoliberal policies, and in fact, has further entrenched them in the form of tax cuts for the wealthy, and the encouragement of deregulation, privatization, and anti-unionism (Bessner & Sparke, 2017).

Neoliberal late-capitalist markets and the corresponding precarious conditions of everyday life demand appropriate subjects and subjectivities in order for the market to thrive and for those individuals constituting it to endure or prosper. The televisual dispositif is a significant part of the production of those subjects and subjectivities. Its influence can affect how people learn to constitutively "perform" markets by directing people away from practices that create and

⁷⁷ In free market theory, "natural" economic fluctuations are understood as "corrections." Efforts to improve conditions are attempts at "re correction."

encourage alternatives to traditional capitalism (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015). Such arrangements would involve barter, trade, and mutual aid, rather than the pure pursuit of individual financial gain and intense competition. This latter concept of “performing” and therefore constructing markets will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. The following sections will elaborate on specific ways that Trash and Treasure TV provides practical instruction and presents cultural messages to viewers in regard to self fashioning as directed by neoliberal rationales.

Embodying Flexible Entrepreneurialism

As a technique of governmentality, Trash and Treasure TV programs impart to viewers what Ouellette and Hay (2008) call “guidelines for living,” with TV serving as *techne* for cultivating oneself into a neoliberal subject (pp. 2, 14, 15, 75). The personalities who are the hosts and other protagonists of Trash and Treasure TV demonstrate ways of buying and selling objects in secondary market sites, and encourage subjective aesthetic judgments of objects as directed by the practices of neoliberalism and consumerism. Within these practices are modes of consumption that take place through aesthetic judgment and self fashioning that fill the gap between the processes of subjection and subjectivity (Bennett, 2011). In this, there is an ability to disrupt the discursive power of capitalism, which in turn demands an intervention through the presentation of social and cultural guidelines (Bennett, 2011), such as neoliberal and consumptive *techne*. At the foundation of Trash and Treasure TV’s instructional techniques is the neoliberal rationalization of personal responsabilization, with these programs encouraging viewers to become “entrepreneurs of the self” and embody the ideal “neoliberal spirit” (Bourdieu, 1998; du Gay, 1996; Freeman, 2011; Giddens, 1991; Harvey, 2005; Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

Every Trash and Treasure TV program is about entrepreneurialism, and conveys to viewers the practices and rationales necessary for shaping themselves as economic actors within the framework of the formalized neoliberal economy. For example, the earliest programs of the genre, which have also been the most popular, were *American Pickers* (2010 - present), which is about two antique dealers who own a store; *Storage Wars* (2010 - present), a show focused on a group of competitors at storage unit auctions; and *Pawn Stars* (2009 - present), a program about a family-owned pawn shop in Las Vegas. On all of these programs, cast members took part in business transactions which, at some point, would deliver tax dollars to the state or profits to corporations. This transfer of money to the government and private sector brings secondary market activity, which is largely informal, into the formal system. It also reminds us that although neoliberalism and its subjectifying power are often understood as pertaining to the private, the state is always present (Lazzarato, 2015). Trash and Treasure TV presents viewers with examples of ideal neoliberal subjects. The entrepreneurs of the secondary market programs model practices that are, as anthropologist Carla Freeman (2011) notes, concerned with being competitive, and “fashion[ing] [oneself] as flexible, self-aware, and innovative actors in the new era,” who are “self propelled, autonomous, economic actor[s], ever responsive to a dynamic marketplace” (pp. 355-356).

In terms of flexibility, the personalities on the respective *Storage Wars* programs traveled around their respective areas of California, Texas, New York, and Ontario, Canada to compete against one another at auctions held at storage unit facilities. It was at these auctions that the possessions of people who could not afford to pay their storage fees were taken home by the highest bidder. “Pickers” Mike and Frank of *American Pickers* were perhaps the perfect embodiment of flexible entrepreneurs. On their show, they traveled from their home base in

Iowa, sometimes long distances, to “pick” through amassments of objects such as collections or hoards (the distinctions and commonalities of these terms will be set out in future chapters) and look for objects of value for resale.⁸ They obtained leads and utilized existing relationships to find new inventory, and incorporated what they call “freestyling” into their business model. This latter practice entailed spontaneously finding “picks” on the road by looking for visual clues such as older homes, antique cars parked in driveways, and cluttered-looking properties that appeared to be owned by “hoarders.” Upon their arrival, one man, the other, or both would knock on the door, and gave the person who answers their pitch and a flyer detailing the categories of items they were interested in buying.⁹

At times, the subjects interviewed for this project also traversed very long distances during irregular hours to buy and sell objects at different sites in the hopes of making good money. While Mike and Frank performed what some of the interviewees termed “house calls,” the people I spoke with traveled to auctions, antique and collectible shows, and flea markets, among other secondary market sites. The sites that participants in this study frequented were mainly in central New Jersey and the Jersey Shore, although they also traveled across the New York-New Jersey-Pennsylvania Tri-State area. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

On Trash and Treasure TV, entrepreneurial flexibility was not just limited to the disruption of conventional business practices concerned with acquiring commodities and

⁸ Mike and Frank have also talked about how they travel long distances and have to take care of their bodies. One of the ways they have mentioned is by eating “healthy” food. In true entrepreneurial and corporate form, the pickers have tied the transnational sandwich chain store, Subway, directly into their program. You can see a low-quality version of this *American Pickers* product placement segment here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRHhuiSiJik>

⁹ In an example of “freestyling” from season 1, episode 2, Mike and Frank saw a house with an outbuilding covered in old and weathered advertisement signs (portrayed to viewers as a “clue” to the discovery of potential “treasure,”) and were shown knocking on the door, in what is known as a “cold call.” After they spent some time chatting with the owner in a friendly way and looking at his collection, they bought a rare vintage moving promotional statue of the Phillip Morris Mascot. In this way, viewers are taught how to find treasure and manage interpersonal relationships in ways that can give them access to it.

facilitating exchanges (for example, drumming up unique business opportunities by knocking on doors and negotiating prices, as opposed to going to a mall where homogeneous products are displayed and pre-priced for purchase). The portrayal of malleability was also incorporated into showing viewers how to manage their emotional and affective states, and recognize and understand the financial possibilities for objects and markets. This was necessary in order to be effective in interpersonal exchanges which take place within shifting economic relationships and settings. These modes of instruction will be discussed in the following sections.

Reimagining Objects, Recognizing Markets

As flexible entrepreneurs, celebrity pickers Mike and Frank were very creative and responsive to the market environment, and able to see the potential in what others see as “junk.” In one episode, Mike saw a very rusty Vespa motor scooter which he had been trying to buy for a year from the person he was bargaining with, and said that it looked more like a “sculpture, a piece of art.”¹⁰ In a private aside following that scene, he told the audience a bit about his and Frank's business strategy by saying: “we’re not just looking for antiques, we’re looking for stuff decorators can use, you know, art directors can use, I mean, we have a lot of different clients.” So, the pickers are not simply concerned with having collectors as clients, but they also adhere to the neoliberal ethos in which one is always seeking out new markets. *Trash and Treasure TV* works to intervene in the overall consumer marketplace by encouraging an entrepreneurialism that operates in the niches and fringes of taste culture.

As communication scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has pointed out, mass culture and the mass consumer market has become fragmented, transforming into a near infinite array of lifestyle interests and categories. Entrepreneurs on the contemporary sociocultural landscape

¹⁰ *American Pickers* season 1, episode 2

who seek out or even create new money-making opportunities are taking part in extracting value from and composing niche markets. This practice is something that was also brought up by interviewees, who talked about buying objects for resale that could be repurposed. For example, at one flea market auction house, I met an African-American man in his late 60s named Ed who was negotiating with the proprietor over a steel radiator that no one had bid on the previous evening. After successfully buying the item at a price that would leave him the opportunity to bargain upon resale, I asked him what he was going to do with it. He explained that he would clean it up and sell it, as there are people who will take one of those old radiators, adorn it with flowers, and place it in the corner of a room as art.

In seeking out these new opportunities to fulfill the consumption needs of specific markets, the entrepreneurs on Trash and Treasure TV called upon viewers to have an open mind about the potential new uses of objects found in the field, and to recognize the value that different things can have to potential buyers from various niche groups. While Mike discussed the Vespa motor scooter, he talked about aesthetics and design, and declared that “it’s cool when you take something that’s rusty and dirty and sun-baked, and you hang it in a completely abstract area and all of the sudden it’s in somebody’s home.” Frank interjected and finished Mike’s statement by saying, “it takes on a whole new life.” In this instance, the pickers demonstrated their adaptability in terms of seeking out markets and seeing new possibilities for unwanted “trash,” while making aesthetic judgments and reimagining how we should see and relate to the objects around us. In another episode, while they assessed a man’s amassment of items, Mike said that there was a lot of “junk.” Then he quickly qualified his statement by saying: “I use the

term loosely and not disrespectfully, junk to me still has potential, like those old sewing machines, I'm sure there's someone out there who is just dying for that kind of stuff.”¹¹

This suggests that Trash and Treasure TV may work to unify the fragmented market and energize consumer purchasing power found outside of the formal retail marketplace. In other words, disparate consumer niches that compose the marketplace, particularly in regard to the secondary market, can be identified and tapped into as people learn about these lifestyle interests from Trash and Treasure TV. Indeed, Trash and Treasure TV entrepreneurs are model neoliberal subjects with businesses operating within both the formal economy, such as antique shops, second-hand stores, pawn shops and online storefronts, and more informal modes of exchange, such as auctions, flea markets, yard sales, and peer-to-peer picking and trading within social networks.

Direct Instruction, Knowledge, and Expertise

As an example of a Trash and Treasure TV program which can be read as a strategy of governmentality, *American Pickers* explicitly teaches viewers the technologies of the self which are most useful for learning how to successfully perform secondary market practices. Mike and Frank model and provide direct instruction to the viewers regarding techniques such as bargaining and price setting. In a scene from Season One, episode one, Mike even set up a “school masterly” tone, saying: “This is Picking 101” and proceeded to give a quick lesson to the audience on price setting. That phrase – “This is Picking 101” - is uttered by the pickers in future episodes whenever something arises that can be used to teach the fundamentals of picking. *American Pickers* and programs such as those in the *Pawn Stars* and *Storage Wars* franchises,

¹¹ *American Pickers* season 1, episode 3

among many others, also explicitly educate the audience concerning the moment of negotiation and transaction.

Expertise, a key feature of these programs, brings legitimacy, and in turn, power, to the educative content. On *American Pickers*, Mike has given the audience quick lessons on vintage bicycles, as that is one of his core areas of interest. Outside expert appraisal and analysis were often featured on all of the Trash and Treasure TV programs when no one in-house had the necessary expertise, or when outside confirmation was wanted by the buyer or the seller. After a main personality on a given program such as Mike or Frank on *American Pickers*, or Rick Harrison of *Pawn Stars*, looked at an object and made their assessments, experts from different organizations and businesses were often brought onto the shows to confirm what was already known and/or bring new information to light. In these appraisals, the experts talked about a particular object, its use or novelty, its history and/or the manufacturer, what the object means within a cultural-historical context, and the significance of the object's design or other aesthetic features. They also provided the most important detail which was explicitly stated as such, namely, the object's worth.

The presence of experts and their function on the programs is in line with the mentalities of neoliberalism which privilege the authority of expertise in efforts to govern (Rose, 1996, p. 46). Often, these experts were able to inform those on the show about whether an item was valuable or not and consequently played a role in setting a dollar amount from which to start the negotiation. On *Pawn Stars*, experts told clients how much money can be made through selling or auctioning off an item, which then provided a point of departure for the exchange. Experts also told their clients on Trash and Treasure TV programs when a mistake was made, such as the time Frank of *American Pickers* notably flubbed with his purchase of a 1939 Plymouth "business

coupe” for \$5,500 dollars, appraised later for \$3,000-\$5,000. Frank did not know enough about what he was buying. He was also committed to bringing the car home because he really liked it and became emotionally invested. The seller was reluctant to part with the vehicle, and raised the price, which resulted in Frank paying much more than the car was worth. Frank also failed in buying antique World’s Fair milk glass vinegar bottles, picking up two for \$40 dollars, under the mistaken assumption that they would be valued at \$40 dollars each, when these items, in reality, fetch under \$20 dollars each at auction.¹²

There are ways to use technology that could help avoid such mistakes. At the very least, one could look up an item online to identify it or check closed listings on online auction sites such as eBay. This allows browsers to gauge what an object could be worth. With the exception of Bubba and Ricky from *Storage Wars: Texas*, technology was not used by those on the picking and storage auction programs when they are out in the field, as possessing accumulated useful knowledge in the field was valued and a point of pride. Bubba and Ricky, in contrast, responded to a competitive market by taking routine advantage of using a wireless tablet for quick on-site assessments of items. The device came in handy after finding several signed mini football helmets in a storage unit. Access to that information helped them determine these items’ authenticity and value. However, the cachet among pickers and collectors of personally embodying the necessary appraisal skills is exemplified by Ricky’s condescending attitude toward Bubba’s preference for using the tablet. Ricky dismissively referred to the device as the

¹² This observation was noted by John, a collector, author, historian, antique glass expert, numismatist, and deltiologist in a pilot interview conducted on May 6, 2012.

“wizard box,” and stated that one should rely on their internal abilities, as has been traditionally done by those who participate in that secondary market venue.¹³

In the interviews, I found that possessing a breadth of knowledge on a range of categories was revered as a point of pride and admiration and that it took making mistakes to truly learn. Neoliberal subjects are called upon to be responsible for their own successes and failures (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar, & Roen, 2016). This perspective on failure is one that has been promoted in Silicon Valley as a pathway to innovation and success as evidenced by the phrase “fail early, fail often” (Trapp, 2014). MIT Sloan Business School scholar Anjali Sastry and former MIT fellow turned management consultant Kara Penn (2014) have authored a book on the topic, titled “Fail Better: Design Smart Mistakes and Succeed Sooner.” Their work encouraged embracing failure as a part of the learning process, which requires resilience, yet guarantees progress over time.

The knowledge people amass trading on the secondary market is something that, while guarded in some ways to maintain status and competitive advantage, is shared among people who have the same interests. However, devices such as smart phones do come in handy. They have become a part of how people buy and sell objects beyond their circulation in physical sites by utilizing online auctions, specialized “apps,” and “groups” on platforms such as Facebook (this will be discussed further in Chapter 6). Some interviewees talked about how they and others have used smart phones when buying and selling objects to identify and assess their authenticity and value. There are websites such as EBay, and those that specialize in particular subject areas that can serve as on-the-spot research tools. However, on the TV programs, this is generally

¹³ This is an instance in *Storage Wars: Texas* season 2, episode 10. It is important to note that self-sufficiency is a strong neoliberal value, and that the preference for avoiding technological help and “going it alone” is illustrated in this behavior.

downplayed and discouraged to emphasize a “do-it-yourself” survival mentality evocative of rugged individualism.

Regarding the determination of authenticity, theorists have discussed aspects of such processes. For instance, archaeologist Siân Jones (2010) has set out two broad ways in which authenticity has been thought about over time: a materialist approach and a constructivist approach. The materialist approach sees authenticity as objective and measurable, identified by characteristics that are “inherent in the material fabric” (p. 182). The constructivist approach complicates materialist notions of authenticity, and understands authenticity as culturally constructed, with objects “embedded in regimes of meaning and exchange,” largely “produced and negotiated” through “*experts*” [emphasis added] (Jones, 2010, p. 182). These two means are named and described as “dual processes” which operate in practice, and in “how people use authenticity to negotiate their own place” in the world (Jones, 2010, p. 184).

Moreover, it is important to understand that authenticity, while arbitrated within cultural enclaves, is also taken up across borders and cultures. This was demonstrated by media scholar Regina Marchi (2009) in her study of the Day of the Dead traditions in the U.S. and Mexico. Authenticity involved the verification of an object's use value as well as a cultural value that came from symbolic associations connected to consumption (Marchi, 2009). Following Regina Bendix (1997), she also noted that whether or not an object or practice is “authentic” is less important than who is making the authenticity claims and *why* (Marchi, 2009).

Being mindful of such cultural contexts is crucial for practitioners in secondary markets, due to the co-phenomenal relationship between globalization and neoliberalism. Successful entrepreneurs and specialized collectors (who circulate objects within their extended networks) possess an understanding of the uses, histories and values of objects across cultures. This helps

to explain why so many people appreciate and respect *Antiques Roadshow* as a source of credible information regarding identifying, authenticating, and appraising objects. Having discussed some of the lessons viewers of Trash and Treasure TV shows learn regarding being entrepreneurial and creative in trying to make money from items that many onlookers might consider as “junk,” I will next explain how these shows teach viewers to manage their emotions and relate to others as they perform the affective labor involved in this type of livelihood.

Affect and Affective Labor

What has been outlined above can be understood as rooted in the cognitive, but entrepreneurs must also understand and engage in the management of emotions. Trash and Treasure TV provides guidelines for doing so. Carla Freeman (2011) reminds us that the embodiment of flexibility, responsiveness, and self awareness is not just reducible to the restructuring of the labor market, but has reached so deeply into all areas of life that “feeling and subjectivity itself is being constituted, managed, and experienced in new ways” (p. 356). One approach to understanding this is to think about affective labor, which involves feelings and emotion, as the flip side of the calculative labor we perform (Freeman, 2011; Hardt, 1999).

The primary underpinnings of the affective dimensions of this study were forged from Deleuze’s (1978) lectures on philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s theory of affect. He begins by explaining two terms: “affectio” (affection), which is “a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body,” and “affectus” (affect), which is a “non-representational” “mode of thought” (p. 1) To Spinoza, “affection,” or action, “always implies a contact, and is even a mixture of bodies” (p. 3). In this framework, the variations of affect as experienced by bodies pivots on whether an idea, even before conscious register, contribute to an impression that one’s “power” to act is being enhanced or diminished (Deleuze, 1978, pp. 2-3). This results in a feeling

that falls in a zone between two poles that bind gradations of joy and sadness (Deleuze, 1978, pp. 2-3).¹⁴

Theresa Brennan's (2004) research is also important here, as it established that affects can be transmitted, and demonstrated that people are not just self-contained capsules, but permeable in their capacities to affect and be affected by others. Related is the work of Anna Gibbs (2008, 2010), who has written on the topic of "affective contagion" and mimesis, and argued that subjectivity is modulated through the circulation of affects and forms of suggestion that encourage mimetic communication. Such conceptions are useful for thinking about trends among secondary market consumers, such as collectors, or the psychological workings of the competitive market practices people perform in bidding wars or other scenarios. Affect can also operate through what cultural studies scholar Sarah Ahmed (2004) has theorized as "stickiness." In this, affective intensities are attached to objects and bound up in emotional states and contradictions (Ahmed, 2004). As an example, she posited the affective dynamics of racism, specifically that of white supremacists, noting that according to Aryan racialism, white bodies are associated with feelings of love, while those of "othered" groups are associated with derision and melancholy.

Ahmed (2010) has also advanced a notion of "happy objects," which are those that we desire that potentially embody a simultaneous sadness in their unattainability or inability to meet expectations. These concepts are applicable to further understanding object relations in secondary markets between the bodies of people, the objects being bought and sold, and those that construct the physical and virtual sites of exchange. Finally, Elizabeth Wissinger (2007) has

¹⁴ Affective intensities, resonances, and transmissions confound scholars since both ideas and the affective register are bound up in these phenomena, causing stark divides regarding how to think about the concept of affect. For social theorist Brian Massumi (2002), the preconsciousness of the affective defines it, which essentializes affect as a psychosocial phenomenon that is *always* removed from representation.

reminded us that the emotional dimension of affective labor only exists after the naming of an affect as a particular emotion. The salient aspect of Wissinger's (2007) work on affective labor in regard to this project is derived from her research of the high-end food service and modeling industries. She demonstrated that one of the primary skills possessed by models and servers is the transmission of affect and emotion during the performance of their jobs. These ideas are useful for analyzing secondary market phenomena on TV and in the field, such as the in-the-moment dynamics of negotiation or the composition of business alliances, including those which are extremely temporary.

The social bonds on RTV are primarily affective and convey to viewers models for how to understand, experience, and manage emotion in the encouragement or discouragement of cooperation and divergence at given moments (Bratich, 2009). For example, on the original *Storage Wars* program, the regular cast played out their loyalties and rivalries during bidding competitions. These relationships have manifested themselves in heated and competitive interactions between major characters Darrell Sheets and Dave Hester, and between Dave Hester and married couple Brandi Passante and Jarrod Schultz. These conflicts illustrated the psychological games at work in the temporary alliances which are made and betrayals which may need to happen in an environment of cutthroat competition. The message viewers learn from these programs is that it is a dog-eat-dog world, and that the individual entrepreneur can only rely on his/her own hard work and emotional fortitude to be successful, without being able to count on help or true loyalty from those around them. At the same time, in order to thrive as a market actor, he or she must also know how to massage and "work" the emotions of others to obtain desired objects at desired prices.

In the episode of *American Pickers* titled “Frank’s Gamble,” we can see two examples of affective labor being discussed and used consciously to facilitate business.¹⁵ When dealing with a particularly apprehensive and intimidating seller that Mike and Frank met, Mike showed audiences how to stay calm and composed. He explained that when he and Frank “try to warm up an intimidating guy,” they don’t treat the person as if they are threatening, but as “just another collector.” In another scene that demonstrated the role of emotional work, their assistant, Danielle, informed Mike and Frank that the son of a client at an upcoming “pick” may be resistant to selling things off. This was because he was “interested in stuff” and had an “emotional attachment” to the things being sold since they belonged to his late father. However, she said that if they are able to “charm” his mother, they should be able to buy quite a bit, because she is less emotionally connected to the items and ready to start selling. This particular engagement illustrated how these entrepreneurs need to be able to “read” people and understand feelings in order to be successful in their line of work. They have to be mindful of the complexities of human life such as the grieving process of family members engaged in an estate sale, being careful not to offend some sensibilities while specifically exploiting others to their benefit.

The personalities on *Trash and Treasure TV* also performed affective labor when doing “care work” that was not aimed at softening up a negotiation, but at sincerely making people feel better when they are disappointed. This was most commonly seen on these programs when a person looking to sell an item believed an object to be worth more money than it was. The personalities encouraged the disappointed party to remember and appreciate the other forms of value that the object in question possessed, whether it was historical, culturally nostalgic,

¹⁵ Season 1, episode 7

sentimental, or otherwise. For instance, when informing a seller that her 1924 \$20.00 gold coin, which would be very valuable if authentic, might be counterfeit, Rick Harrison of *Pawn Stars* attempted to provide some comfort. In doing so, he reinforced the idea that although there was a chance it was a reproduction, at the very least it was still worth its weight in gold, which made the seller feel better. Overall, these depictions teach audiences the appropriate and inappropriate ways to feel and respond, and how to successfully modulate their affective capacities to fit the needs of particular moments, being affectively flexible in order to maintain productive relationships with clients and potential clients (Wissinger, 2007).

This is important to sustaining neoliberal subjectivities because as people engage with others and are put into new situations, affective flexibility allows them to be responsive to successfully navigate unpredictable social interactions as they unfold. However, the scenario involving Rick described above shows that there are limits to the cultivation of economic and consuming actors and that managing emotions is not always done merely for business reasons. Rick asserted his humanity to make a distressed client feel better in that situation. Still, it is in his best interest to treat all clients respectfully, since someone may not have an item of value during one interaction, but in the future that person may seek him out to do business if they acquire something new to sell. This practice of positively managing affective relations was raised by several professional dealers I spoke with who regularly bought objects for resale. Other affectively driven engagements were seen in secondary markets. Some of these phenomena diverted sharply from the profit-seeking orientations promoted by capitalist ethics, and will be discussed further in later chapters.

Additionally, *Trash and Treasure TV* can show viewers (who are also potential buyers and sellers), the culturally appropriate ways to feel about their own possessions or the things they

may want to buy. For instance, many of the entrepreneurs on the shows are collectors, and have emotional attachments to the things they like or would like to possess. On *American Pickers*, Frank's strong feelings for the 1955 Plymouth led to his mistake of paying too much for it, and Mike has admittedly overpaid for motorcycle parts out of a love for them. This demonstrated that to be successful in the business of trading on the secondary market, one must learn to manage such emotions, even if one's attraction to a particular object is inexplicably strong. Regarding sellers, Carol and her son who were mentioned above, like many characters featured on *American Pickers*, were parting with things that had personal sentimental and nostalgic value, such as heirlooms or coveted possessions of deceased relatives. These sellers were shown as coming to an intrinsic understanding that the right thing to do, for financial reasons, was to break their emotional attachments and sell their things.

Then, there are those individuals who have enormous amassments of junk, as seen on *American Pickers* who, as literary scholar June Deery (2012) has pointed out, are not pathologized as are those on the program *Hoarders*, but are instead revered for having so many old and unusual things (p. 154). Although not therapists or organizational specialists such as the experts coaching hoarders on the TV show *Hoarders*, Mike and Frank also want people to let go of their emotional attachments to their things (Deery, 2012, p. 154). In contrast to the show *Hoarders*, in which compulsive accumulation (overconsumption) is portrayed as problematic, *American Pickers* frames hoarder's relationships to their objects as culturally (and financially) beneficial or not. In one episode, Frank said of his efforts to get a hoarder named Dan to sell something that "the strategy is to keep on him" [i.e., to be persistent]. However, Dan did not part

with things easily, and said of his consumption habits, that what “started off as a hobby, ended up as a disease, I guess.”¹⁶

The forms of affective labor discussed above were all touched upon by interviewees, who talked about their own experiences in similar ways that were reflected on the Trash and Treasure TV programs. Multiple people reported that dealing well with failure was important, because, as they noted, everyone makes mistakes and may do so if their excitement about an item is not properly tempered. Those I interviewed also mentioned that they took into consideration how others perceived them and felt about the terms of a negotiation while they interacted with people during house calls. They expressed that this was crucial, since the buyer is often permitted to come into the seller’s personal space. Acting as if one is conscious and appreciative of that fact can help build trust and potentially cultivate an ongoing commercial relationship.

Interviewees also talked about their personal presentation and tone when they had appraised items. For instance, Colonel Mark often kept in mind the emotional investments that a seller may have if an item is an heirloom or something that the owner is convinced is more valuable than it is. As research on collecting and hoarding has revealed, attachments to objects are inherently emotional, and recognizing this fact can help practitioners in their financial interactions (Akhtar, 2005; Cromer, Schmidt, & Murphy, 2007; Frost & Steketee, 2010). More importantly, affect and emotion are central to how people organize themselves. Trash and Treasure TV focused on intensities of feeling as associated with business relations, such as the “rush” of competition or making a big “score,” which reinforced capitalism as a cultural norm over other priorities, such as social justice. The affective as it circulates and organizes social relationships secondary markets will be discussed further in chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁶ American Pickers, season 1, episode 2

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the programs of Trash and Treasure TV offered strategies of governmentality, and provided models for living in the contemporary moment of advanced liberal democracies, particularly in the post-recession U.S. The personalities featured on these shows, whether the primary cast or the guest experts, guide our understanding of how to perform as free agents in secondary markets. They teach us the self-starting principles of entrepreneurialism concerning strategies for buying and selling, general and particular knowledges about a range or niche categories of objects, costly mistakes that can be made, and how to understand and manage emotions during cooperation and competition. The successful entrepreneurs on Trash and Treasure TV also owned formalized businesses that were integrated into the greater economy. In turn, their small enterprises provided revenue to the state and the private sector through taxes and business-to-business consumption (purchasing supplies, shipping through FedEx or UPS, communication costs, etc.) respectively.

In addition, Trash and Treasure TV programs show us appropriate and inappropriate ways to relate to our own possessions, playing a role as Foote and Mazzolini (2012) have asserted, in the conversation on how the consumptive excesses of consumer capitalism are to be managed (pp. 256-257). Moreover, the attention given to the consumption practices of individuals and groups must be concerned with matters that go beyond pathological psychologies such as hoarding or compulsive shopping, and the larger consequences for markets, capital, and class relations. Crucially, they are directly related to the contemporary environmental crisis that has resulted from the extraction, production, distribution, and disposal cycle of industrially produced, new consumer goods. In this instance, the exchange and utilization of existing object-resources through buying second hand objects, fixing broken things, or other alternatives to

buying new items in a retail setting are potential solutions to the environmental problems that consumption has wreaked.

However, Trash and Treasure TV shows largely ignored these potential challenges to mainstream capitalist consumption, and reduced buying and selling old and used objects to just another form of consumerism, rather than a set of practices which people might deploy to critique and counter the broader culture of over-consumption and its socio-environmental consequences. Most importantly, these shows teach viewers how to be “flexible” and creative agents in response to difficult economic times, turning “trash” into “treasure.” Importantly, these lessons reinforced the status quo of capitalist mentalities and practices, as opposed to inspiring viewers to perform alternative economies that deviate from the ways the contemporary market operates. Analyzing these programs can help us understand media as a technology of governance and RTV as a strategy of governmentality, meant to capture our productive power as subjects of the new political economy.

Chapter 3

Method: Textual Analysis and Ethnographic Techniques

Findings about television use are also findings about the articulation of personhood. – Media researchers Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012, p. 120)

The methodologies used for this study entailed 1) executing a textual analysis of Trash and Treasure TV programs, 2) conducting interviews with viewers who also buy and sell on the secondary market, and 3) engaging in field observation at secondary market sites such as flea markets, antique and second hand stores, a pawn shop, and collector's club meetings. Within the field of RTV studies, my approach differed from those such as Katherine Sender (2012) and Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012). Their research investigated how viewers used and “reacted” to RTV, and foregrounded the respective TV programs watched by the audiences they studied. In contrast, my methods resembled those used by media anthropologists Purnima Mankaker (1999) and Lila Abu Lughod (2005). These scholars were not only interested in media's *influence* on viewers, but the strength of its *presence* in their everyday lives as they evaluated and integrated what they were watching on TV into their own subjectification. Both Mankaker and Abu-Lughod went beyond focus groups, interviews, and surveys, and integrated themselves into the worlds of those who participated in their research.

In this project, I observed buyers and sellers on the secondary market, and spoke with them about their participation in the context of their economic lives. This opened up opportunities for gaining a greater understanding of how media texts circulated among those who constituted markets, and the significance, or lack thereof, of Trash and Treasure TV to the practices of the individuals and groups involved at the various sites. In turn, this project is a historical geography of RTV, with New Jersey as the stage for mapping out the pathways Trash

and Treasure TV has or has not taken through the hierarchies and networks of people who perform the local secondary market. Throughout the textual analysis and ethnographic portion of the study, I attended to matters related to social identity categories such as economic class, race, and gender. In doing so, I teased out the representational politics embedded in the programs, and analyzed the hierarchical and networked structural arrangements and dynamics at work in the organization of real-world secondary markets. Within this, my approach allowed the observation of Trash and Treasure TV's range of circulation, and the limits to the RTV televisual dispositif as a technology of governmentality.

At the same time, this research fits into the field of production studies, as it was able to show how participants had built themselves into the televisual dispositif and reproduced media culture through online activity. This included the creation of web-based shows and short-form videos that documented the act of treasure hunting and/or the yield from a day out "picking" (which will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6). My methodology also offered a media archaeological approach in its focus on dispositifs and material cultural practices as they involved trash, waste, rubbish, and old objects in their excavation, circulation, restoration and/or recombination for new uses, and artistic endeavors, among other purposes.¹⁷ All of what has been detailed above will be further illustrated in subsequent chapters. In this chapter, the methods used in this study will be elaborated upon, which includes specifics about the programs I analyzed, coding, how the participants and sites were selected, and subject recruitment.

This project began in 2012 as a paper for my graduate research practicum, but its beginnings long predated that. My father had been a collector since the mid 1950s, and had been

¹⁷ By "recombination" I am referring to the ways objects are used when being restored or "upcycled." The latter refers to when one or more objects are reconditioned and modified for use in creating a final product that they were not originally intended to compose. For example, on *Flea Market Flip*, contestants used a vintage bicycle, and a fire extinguisher and a piece of a countertop from the early 20th century to make a rolling table.

buying and selling antiques and collectibles on the secondary market since the late 1970s. From a very young age, I would accompany him to flea markets, auctions, yard sales, estate sales, swap meets, and antiques and collectibles club meetings and shows. When my sister was old enough, she would come along too. Over time, my participation waned, and became limited to the occasional flea market or record show, where I would scour bins for vinyl records and music-related items. My father would continue to be a connection to the secondary market and feed my collection of political ephemera when he would see things of interest to me, particularly postcards and pamphlets advocating radical positions (such as an activist produced booklet about the opposition to the 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic).

The subgenre I have coined “Trash and Treasure TV” emerged as a televisual subgenre when I was in graduate school. When I was home visiting during school breaks, my father and I would watch *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers*, and *Storage Wars* together. We would talk about how these shows presented reality. In particular, we would discuss how the cast members, experts, and others with on-camera roles identified, appraised and priced objects, and how accurate the information and performances were in relation to my father's lived experience and those of the many people he knew. That community of collectors and pickers that my father was a part of eventually served as the initial snowball sample through which I recruited interview participants. These interviewees were all long-time members of clubs for those who collect antique bottles and “paper” (photographs, postcards, and ephemera). Some of them made their primary living or supplemented their incomes as dealers in antiques and collectibles, although many bought and sold only to fund their hobby of collecting.

Since the time frame in which we watched together was just after the Great Recession (2007-2009), I thought about how the various programs portrayed what the people did, and what

that meant vis-a-vis lived reality. Some of my earliest observations on the subject concerned media effects and the economy. On *Storage Wars*, the units up for bid were described as “abandoned.” This struck me as a sanitizing term that hid the dire economic circumstances that forced growing numbers of people to give up their belongings. It was also disturbing in its normalization and reinforcement of the dog-eat-dog ethics of neoliberal capitalism. From there, I began to theorize that the subgenre of Trash and Treasure TV had the potential to influence viewers as a mode of governance aimed at producing subjects agreeable to the contemporary economic arrangement. It is from those origins that this project developed. The following sections will provide a detailed summary of the specific methodologies used to conduct this research.

Textual Analysis: Reading Trash and Treasure TV

This is a cultural studies project in which I used the qualitative method of textual analysis to understand the cultural meanings, utility, and broader social contexts related to Trash and Treasure TV. I did this by analyzing the first season of three of the subgenre’s most popular programs. These were A&E’s *Storage Wars* (2010 – present), History’s (The History Channel was rebranded to “History” in 2009) *American Pickers* (2010 – present), and HGTV’s *Flea Market Flip* (2012 – present). Each program was chosen for its popularity and longevity, and the diverse formats and sites that each one respectively offered (explained further in the next subsection and in chapters 4 and 5). Methodologically, textual analysis has long been a practice that cultural studies scholars have relied on in their research, while questioning and remaking it over time (Kovala, 2002). The problem of interpretation has been at the center of these critiques and adjustments, particularly in terms of how reception processes are reduced to explain how

shared meaning is constructed through texts, and often assume that all audiences understand texts the same way (Kovala, 2002).

I address these issues by taking to heart Lawrence Grossberg's (1998) prescription that the field of cultural studies and the methods of scholars, such as textual analysis, should not only be concerned with what texts mean and what people *do* with them, but also with how discourse operates in the larger world. This brings meaning and utility into broader contexts that go beyond the reciprocity of text and culture, and considers how media organizes power relationships (Grossberg, 1998). Similarly, Douglas Kellner (2009) has called for a textual analysis and cultural studies that places media within the political economy of how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. He noted that texts are to be analyzed from a multiplicity of perspectives, and that media reception research must recognize how audiences understand and use media culture in vastly different ways (Kellner, 2009). At times, this engagement with media works to constitute oppositional subjectivities and cultural forms (Kellner, 2009), which will be discussed in the section addressing this project's ethnographic methods.

Programs, Total Running Times, and Selection Rationale

In terms of the textual aspect of this study, I analyzed the full first season of each program, which entailed a total of 16 hours and 30 minutes of Trash and Treasure TV. This included 12 episodes of *American Pickers*, totaling 7 hours and 3 minutes, 19 episodes of *Storage Wars*, amounting to 6 hours and 39 minutes, and 8 episodes of *Flea Market Flip* which came to 2 hours and 48 minutes. I chose to analyze only three shows because while TV shows are at the center of this study, audience engagement with the genre was my larger focus. These programs were chosen in part because they have been sustained over time, while many others have been cancelled since the subgenre emerged. Additionally, *American Pickers* and *Storage*

Wars were two of the original programs that established the Trash and Treasure TV subgenre, as they aired just after the very first one, which was *Pawn Stars* (2009 – present), a show about a family owned and operated pawnshop in Las Vegas.

American Pickers retained and gained viewership in the years after it debuted (Medialife, 2014). It's popularity eventually spawned the short-lived imitator *Picked Off* (2012) and the B-reel compilation show *American Pickers: Bonus Buys* (2016 - present), a program of new content and outtakes featuring cast members Mike, Frank, and Danielle acquiring stock for their shop.¹⁸ High ratings and sustained popularity have also been enjoyed by *Storage Wars*. Their second-season debut scored the highest ratings for any show in A&E's 30 year history (Sellers, 2011), and continued even after accusations surfaced that the "finds" on the program were faked (Hibberd, 2012). The immense success of *Storage Wars* also produced a number of spinoffs, including *Storage Wars: Texas* and *Storage Wars: New York*. Finally, *Flea Market Flip* also maintained and developed a large enough set of audiences to remain on the air for 12 seasons, and continued to be in the top five daytime programs on the HGTV network for upscale women 25 - 54 (Broadway World TV News Desk, 2015). It was also nominated for an Emmy (HGTV, 2015), and outlasted competitors that aired around the same time, such as PBS's *Market Warriors* (2012 – 2013).¹⁹

High ratings and other indicators of success, such as awards and the phenomena of imitators and spinoffs are important in demonstrating the value of these programs in terms of potential reach and influence - indicators of cultural importance and power. These shows were also chosen because the sites and practices were relevant to the ethnographic portion of this

¹⁸ Both of those programs aired on History.

¹⁹ Even PBS has embraced the competitive, aggressive tone of these commercial TV shows, as indicated by the title of their program *Market WARRIORS* (the capitalization is for emphasis).

study. The people I interviewed bought and sold items at the same kinds of places, and I was able to observe them and others in action. For example, on *American Pickers*, Mike and Frank are shown going into people's homes and properties to make deals. The cast of *Storage Wars* competitively bids against each other on storage units that are being auctioned off, and on *Flea Market Flip*, experienced flea marketeer and celebrity host Lara Spencer brings contestants to buy and sell at flea markets, coaching them along the way. The interview subjects I worked with bought and sold in peer-to-peer arrangements (which many termed "house calls"), at storage unit auctions, and at flea markets, making their perspectives particularly salient in terms of the specific programs analyzed, which a number of them watched regularly.

Coding: Language and Imagery

This analysis was concerned with both language and video imagery. In regard to language, there were a number of codes that surfaced. On all of the programs, the theme of "entrepreneurialism" was primary and applied to the way cast members and others on camera engaged with the people and the objects they encountered. In *American Pickers*, a program with a heavy emphasis on modeling "best practices" and "how to" instruction, entrepreneurial "tactics/techniques" emerged as codes, such as "freestyling" (or, stopping at houses and making "cold calls"), "price setting," and the "treasure hunt," which focused on finding and identifying objects of "value."

The theme of "value" was also found across the programs. Those modes of "value" broke down into the sub-codes of "historical," "cultural," "aesthetic," and "monetary" categories. The latter was the most common in all three shows, particularly in segments that presented the expenditures and projected profits being totaled up or calculated for the audience's benefit. On *Storage Wars* and *Flea Market Flip*, the theme of "competition" was emphasized (which is a

dominant feature of neoliberalism), along with the calculative labor of “bargaining,” “price setting,” and “strategy,” a greater catch-all code for how these practices were being performed strategically. These programs also modeled “relationships” and “affective labor,” which produced related codes, such as “emotional attachments.” That code referred to the feelings individuals developed for their objects that fueled a desire to keep them. In those instances, people were coded by such terms as a “difficult seller,” who either would not part with an object at all or required significant persuasion. Or, they were coded as a “hoarder,” which is a person who has amassed an enormous amount of things that, to the eyes of most people, would be indistinguishable from trash (Frost and Steketee, 2010).

Some other codes worth mentioning here concerned “knowledge” and “expertise.” These two related concepts were prominent across the programs. These features were also easily identifiable on other Trash and Treasure TV shows such as *Pawn Stars* or the short lived *Combat Pawn* (2012), the latter of which was about a family-owned pawn shop in Spring Lake, North Carolina, that specialized in firearms. The possession and ability to recall “knowledge” is an epistemological capacity and ontological position valued among those who buy and sell on the secondary market. Having and conjuring knowledge can be an advantage on the secondary market, whether placing a bid at an auction, making an offer at flea market, or identifying a rare item at a yard sale that has an unbelievably low price tag. Unlike retail shopping, these items are often one-of-a kind or hard to find again if an opportunity to purchase them is lost. “Expertise” is also seen on these shows, which like “entrepreneurialism” is another marker of neoliberal mentalities and practices, since with increasingly few well-paid jobs for low-skilled laborers, one needs “expert” specialization to survive in the new economy (Rose, 1999).

Cast members have their own bodies of knowledge, which include forms of “expertise.” For instance, Frank Fritz of *American Pickers* is extremely well versed in early 20th century German-made tin toys, such as cars or zeppelins. Lara Spencer on *Flea Market Flip* has built an expertise in assessing items’ value and the potential financial risk that is inherent with repurposing. Repurposing or refurbishing objects does not always increase their value and can, in fact, decrease it through alterations. For example, removing patina (a form of metal oxidation) from the base of a Tiffany lamp will diminish its desirability and monetary command. Additionally, “experts,” certified as such through their affiliations with high-end specialty retail stores, museums and universities, are brought on to *Storage Wars*, *American Pickers*, and many other Trash and Treasure TV shows to engage in identifying and appraising the “finds.” The History website has provided a list of experts that have appeared regularly on *Pawn Stars* (a program about a family owned and operated pawn shop in Las Vegas).²⁰

In terms of visual images, codes also emerged involving social identity and class. Regarding the coding of people from lower economic and social strata, they were portrayed as “rural” or “backwoods” in their eccentricity, such as “Charlie” the hoarder, or “Bear,” the old “carnie” (someone who works traveling with a carnival). Also commonly shown on TV (via pan and close-up shots) was a focus on the ramshackle or disheveled places where these people lived, often crammed with hoards of things stored in barns, garages, or other structures, if not inside their primary residence. For instance, Bear had a long white beard and wore blue jeans and a tucked in shirt with a “gypsy-style” headscarf (like a bandanna) on his head. He also had a belt with a buckle that said “carnie power.” Although some of the sellers had the flamboyance of

²⁰ Here is the URL, as accessed July 25, 2017 <http://www.history.com/shows/pawn-stars/articles/experts>

Bear, the others dressed simply, often in clothes made of denim or flannel material (pants or jackets) and baseball hats.

In season 1 episode 8 (“Five Acres of Junk”) Mike and Frank met a very knowledgeable man named Vic who owned an enormous hoard spanning five acres. His amassment contained rusted cars, motorcycles, advertisement signs and other objects. Vic’s appearance was that which is associated with “vagrants” or the “hobo” lifestyle. He had a bushy white beard, wore an old dirty zip-up fleece, was missing a tooth, and in one scene was shown sitting in front of his dilapidated home accompanied by two “junkyard” cats. In another shot, Vic was warming up next to a fire that was in a 50 gallon metal drum, similar to what homeless people or “bums,” in the pejorative, are portrayed doing in popular media depictions of the poor. Mike and Frank frequently claimed to revere those who embodied these authentic “down home” characteristics, as they implied that such people possessed innate wisdom about all types of “rusty gold” (a term for valuable things that may not be in pristine condition).

Similar to *American Pickers*, the first season of *Storage Wars* also had very few women or people of color, all largely in the background. The primary cast contained one woman, Brandi Passante. She was white, blonde, conventionally attractive, and the long-term romantic and business partner of Jarrod Schultz, with whom she owned a second-hand shop. The other woman regularly on the program was affiliated with the company that conducted the auctions, and played a minor “supportive” role. She was placed in the background with a clipboard for the administrative work, while her business partner and husband facilitated the “main” action of auctioneering. Otherwise, there were no women or people of color in the primary cast or in any significant role. Socioeconomic class could also be read in the cast members, in regard to the way each person spoke and dressed. Lead characters often portrayed as rugged individualists

with a working class, “roll up your sleeves” attitude. For instance *Storage Wars* cast members Darrell Sheets and Jarrod Schultz both wear inexpensive-looking clothing and do not appear very educated or well spoken.

The presence of those on Trash and Treasure TV casts who do not embody middle-class norms and values, such as Darrell and Jarrod, implies that buying and selling storage units is something that one does not need to have a college degree to do. This is relatable to a large portion of the total viewership, as nearly two-thirds of Americans do not have a bachelor's degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Additionally, the country as a whole has developed a growing “anti-elitist” sentiment against college educated leaders and others (Smith, 2011; Boot, 2016). Because so many under-educated, unemployed or underemployed people (the very demographic that brought Donald Trump to the White House) are seeking ways to make money, given the disappearance of well-paid, unionized jobs for less educated workers, this population may comprise a considerable quantity of the viewership. While precise socioeconomic data were not available regarding the viewership, it was clear to me, not only from watching the shows, but also from my ethnographic observations, that this demographic is significant in the world of pawn shops, flea markets, auctions and other secondary markets.

Regarding identity politics and coding, *Flea Market Flip* deviated from *Storage Wars* and *American Pickers* in that the star and sole recurring cast member was a woman. Her name was Lara Spencer, and she was also a co-host on ABC's *Good Morning America*. She was white, middle class, and clearly possessed economic and social capital. This was evidenced by her high-profile TV hosting jobs, the stylish clothes and jewelry she wore. Additionally, she spoke and carried herself with confidence and authority. On the program, the contestants that Spencer guided and judged were also middle class, at least in regard to cultural and social capital, visible

from the clothes they wore, cars or homes they owned and ways they spoke, among other indicators. These features also produced codes related to social identity categories.

Many of the teams competing on this show were composed of artists and designers whose lives were not necessarily economically stable, although they clearly came from the middle class. While they shared economic precarity with less educated members of society, they were better able to claim cultural knowledge and harness social relationships than people with lower educational status, due to their higher levels of learnedness, more affluent social circles, and more sophisticated or “cultured” presentations of the self. Additionally, the teams on this show were diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexuality/gender performance, as composed of men and woman of various races who at times could be read by audience members as gender-queer and possibly homosexual.

As far as the coding of the “economic,” “cultural,” and “social” forms of capital related to physical space, the flea markets shown on TV where the teams bought and sold items were more upscale than most actual flea markets, including those I visited. For instance, at the time this research was conducted, the rental cost for a space at the Elephant’s Trunk, a flea market site on *Flea Market Flip*, was \$75 per day. This is opposed to the weekend rate (often the highest fees charged) at Farmingswood Flea Market (the site I frequented the most), which was \$19 per day. Farmingswood spanned a large, treeless area covered by hundreds of worn tables with their various shades of green, brown, and blue chipped paint. Garbage littered the outer aisles and was blown up against the fence line. Several people I had become acquainted with had said that the accumulation of trash on that edge of the property had been much worse until the management of the neighboring motel complained and threatened to take legal action if there was not an effort to clean it up.

Compounding the unruliness of Farmingswood, the junk peddlers who sourced their stock from dealers that brokered house cleanouts or bid on storage units sold their goods at the market all weekend and would leave their things on the premises under tarps, “camping out” for the duration.²¹ This practice was so common that I began referring to one particular section where dealers stored their stock as the “junk corner,” which was readily understood by people I spoke with that were familiar with that flea market. In this area, vendors would place objects on the ground displayed in categories, jumbled up in piles, or out on the market tables for sale. These included used clothes and shoes, old rusted tools, opened and partially used cleaning agents, dented cans of food, expired dry goods, art and home décor, furniture, pre-owned kitchen supplies, and other miscellaneous things.

Overall, the coding I used with regard to identity involved terms such as “gender,” “race,” “class,” and “sexuality.” Other than the handful of instances in which Mike or Frank made an off-handed male-oriented gendered joke, these codes were gathered from what could be read visually in terms of people, places, and things.²² Importantly, visual imagery was coded by what was absent just as much as what was present. For instance, on *American Pickers*, other than when someone would cite the death of a spouse, reasons why people may have been selling their collections or heirlooms were sparsely mentioned. On *Flea Market Flip*, while working class vendors were shown, the poor – a group that frequents flea markets in large numbers in real life – were completely missing from the program. Also absent were the economically strapped owners of the “abandoned” units that are auctioned off on *Storage Wars*. This section detailed the coding

²¹ It was not uncommon for local homeless vendors or traveling “antique” and junk peddlers to stay at the local campground, which was a quick 10 minute drive from the flea market.

²² For example, in episode 1 season 1 of (show name), Mike and Frank make an offer to Bear, the carnie, to buy his belt buckle. He refuses, and in a candid scene Frank remarks to Mike’s great amusement that Bear “wouldn’t have sold that in a lifetime. That’s like his penis. He wasn’t going to let that go. That thing is on, you know?”

process and some of the codes that emerged from the textual analysis data. The next section will describe the ethnographic methods.

Ethnographic Methods

This project is not an ethnography; although, it incorporated ethnographic methods, particularly in-depth, individual interviews and observation. From June through December of 2016, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 44 people who watched Trash and Treasure TV. All of the participants bought and sold merchandise in the types of secondary market sites portrayed on the shows I analyzed. I often conducted the interviews in the secondary market sites that these people frequented, whether at the flea market tables they rented, in the antiques shops that they owned, or at other meeting places of their choosing. Forty-three of the people I interviewed had watched Trash and Treasure TV shows regularly over time. One person, who did not own a TV, only watched the programs online once in a while or when visiting friends. Twenty two of the interviews were audio recorded, while 22 were recorded via pen and note taking.

The subject pool was generated through snowball sampling, using contacts from networks of people interested in antiques and collectables. Many of these individuals were contacted by email or phone, and through a call I put out on a popular Facebook page for “pickers.”²³ Recognizing that Facebook attracts an economic demographic that generally does not include indigent people, recent immigrants, and others who may lack Internet access, I also recruited participants by physically going to flea markets and striking up conversations with people who were selling things. I spent approximately 75 hours in the field, observing transactions and typical goings-on, as well as courting interview participants at flea markets,

²³ The Facebook group was called “Jersey Pickers – Antiques and Collectibles in NJ.”

auctions, antique shops, and a pawn shop. I will discuss this methodological process further in the next subsection.

This research was conducted in central New Jersey in the counties of Monmouth and Ocean, an area that includes beach town areas known as the Jersey Shore. This region was chosen due to my access to a rich network of buyers and sellers located there, but also because it exemplified specific regional and economic challenges, issues, and conditions relevant to my study. Like many other states, New Jersey suffered large-scale deindustrialization in the 1980s and 1990s, which left many formerly prosperous towns down-and-out (Hanley, 1980; Courtney, 1987; James 1989; Reuters, 1994). However, New Jersey was more insulated from the economic blow than the Rust Belt areas of the Midwest and Great Lakes regions. This was due in part to its proximity to New York City. The state was also the home for the executive offices and production facilities of some of the leading companies in the pharmaceutical, food science and chemical industries. Many organizations had their headquarters and factories located along the profitable corridors of Route 1 and the New Jersey Turnpike. In addition, New Jersey possessed the robust commercial hub of Port of Elizabeth, which is the largest seaport on the East Coast.

Regardless, the trend of outsourcing jobs to countries such as India and the use of automation in manufacturing changed the composition of the New Jersey labor market to one more focused on highly-skilled information and technology services (Hughes & Seneca, 2015). These jobs require high levels of training and education that those who would have worked in the manufacturing sector do not have and often lack opportunities to obtain. This environment does not sustain the employment needs of people living in central New Jersey, and in particular the Jersey Shore, which has always been limited in its industrial development and traditionally catered to summer tourists visiting from elsewhere.

The service and retail industries that comprise the economic system that serves the tourists and locals on the Shore cannot absorb everyone who lives there. One reason is that when business incomes dip during the off-seasons, hiring new workers or even retaining year-round workers is unnecessary. In addition, New Jersey's once-robust state economy suffered the impact of Hurricane Sandy. That storm caused millions of dollars in devastation by seriously damaging or destroying thousands of homes, and laying waste to the beach area resorts and businesses the region relied on to employ people and generate private and public revenue. The storm could not have been timed worse, striking the shore in 2012, just as the economy was beginning to recover from the Great Recession, which had caused the greatest job loss in New Jersey's history (Hughes & Seneca, 2015).

As the trend in deindustrialization continued, companies closed their doors in the state. Between 2013 and 2016, New Jersey lost 15 manufacturing plants (NJ.com, 2016), several close to the areas where I conducted my research. With jobs scarce, affordable housing in short supply, and a lack of social services such as homeless shelters and food pantries that are found in larger urban areas, many people in central Jersey found themselves in dire straits, and some have formed homeless camps in wooded areas in Ocean County (Napoliello, 2017). The poverty in these areas created fertile ground for the rising number of pawn shops, thrift stores (that sold used clothing, books, housewares, etc.), flea markets, low-end antique shops and the growing numbers of people who make up the client base that depends on these sites for subsistence. In all of this, my project amounts to a historical geography of RTV that illustrates the emergence of New Jersey from the global downturn of the Great Recession in terms of media culture, entrepreneurialism, and precarity.

Participant and Site Selection

As selection criteria, interview subjects were viewers of Trash and Treasure TV programs or earlier incarnations of these shows, such as *Antiques Roadshow* and *Personal FX*. Most had significant experience with these programs. Heavy viewing was not required, but a familiarity with the programs was necessary. Subjects were also selected based on their engagement with buying and selling goods on the secondary market, ideally in sites and spaces featured on the programs analyzed.

The interview sample contained people with a range of interests and experiences in collecting and appraising. However, white men were most heavily represented. One primary reason for this homogeneity may have been the use of snowball sampling, which produced the initial pool of people who came from common racial and class backgrounds. Another explanation is that in the antiques and collectibles communities, there are gender divisions based on interests. For instance, middle class and working class white men tend to be involved in antiques and sports memorabilia, two areas that are reflected on Trash and Treasure TV shows. In light of these phenomena, I attempted to diversify the group of people I spoke with by seeking women and people of color for interviews, and taking notice of social class dynamics in my observations. A breakdown of the interview subjects, and their ages, races, economic statuses and other characteristics will be discussed later in this chapter.

Observation and participant recruitment took place primarily at two major flea markets and three antique shops. Several other locations were also sites for observation and discussion. These included an antique/vintage shop, a pawn shop, and another flea market. The flea markets differed in the way they operated, the types of dealers they attracted, and the clientele. The first, Farmingswood Flea Market, operated on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. The management offered tables for \$2 to \$4 on Fridays and \$19 to \$36 per table on the weekends. Table space on

Fridays was designated on a first come first served basis, and participants reported that there were often arguments over desirable spaces that, at times, erupted into physical violence. As part of the flea market space, there was also a building filled with tenants who sold new and used objects, clothing, food, and services such as screen printing, tailoring, and cellular phone and cable plans.

A large cross-section of people appeared to shop at this site, which included antique and pop culture collectors (such as Robert Bruce, producer of AMCs *Comic Book Men* which was similar to *Pawn Stars*, but involved comic books and pop-culture related toys and memorabilia), artists looking for unique media, vintage clothing enthusiasts and other secondary market consumers spending their money on “leisure” or “luxury” items. However, this market was also a place for lower working class and poor people to find daily necessities, including used housewares, clothes, and even outdated or nearly-expired dry and canned foods. Many of these items were not in good condition. In other words, while there were people exchanging in the “rusty gold” (hidden treasures) similar to those which are sought after by Mike and Frank, there were many others picking through piles of second-hand items that many people from the middle-class would see as garbage and would never consider buying (e.g., used clothes, pre-worn shoes, dented cans of food, outdated boxes of cereal).

The second observation site was called The Country Village Flea Market which was set up as a “village” and operated on Wednesdays and Sundays, with an auction on Tuesday evenings. The site was composed of individual buildings, some of which were U.S. military surplus barracks sourced from a nearby Army installation.²⁴ The buildings were constructed of wood in two primary designs. One looked like a small narrow cottage that could be called a

²⁴ This was confirmed through the market’s website.

“shotgun style,” meaning that the layout runs the rooms from the front door through to the back door, which made it necessary to pass through one room to get to the next. This style of building had one to three rooms that contained small storage spaces. The second building type was set up in a “ranch” layout, and known as the “barracks.” Vendors paid monthly rent for the buildings, with some people having more than one edifice that they stored their things in and sold from. As part of this flea market research site, there was also an auction house that opened on Tuesday evenings and approximately ten roadside tables that were available for \$2 per day to anyone interested in vending during the market’s hours of operation.

This market was rustic, as the colorful schemes of paint on some of the buildings were faded and chipped. There were also structures along the edge of the property that were in disrepair and filled with what many would identify at first glance as garbage. However, this market was also actually much less transient than Farmingswood. At that market there were “regulars,” but at the same time, there was a great variation week-to-week and even day-to-day among those at the outside tables, which composed the majority of the market. As noted above, the Country Village had some tables to rent daily, but the primary vendors operated individual shops that they occupied through lease agreements. Many of the buildings had been occupied by the same sellers for years. Each offered a particular specialty, such as vintage or unusual gifts, toys and collectibles, low-cost and practical furniture and appliances, and mid-century clothing and housewares. The buildings had locks and heat, and vendors ran their enterprises like mini retail stores. Therefore, the sellers worked to build reputations for having higher-quality items than Farmingswood, a flea market they were all aware of. For instance, vendors Rich and Dana, who operated a toy and collectables shop, prided themselves in having items in the store that would “wow” their customers, even if they did not sell them right away because the price was

too high. Their perspective was that they would show customers that they had the ability to obtain high-value toys and collectibles, and they felt it was worth waiting for the right buyer.

The arrangement at “the Village” did not bring in the same socioeconomic clientele as the first market, Farmingswood, as it attracted mainly middle and upper middle class customers. Michael, one of the market managers, was in charge of the social media accounts. In promoting the market, he consciously branded The Flea Market Village to draw a more upscale clientele. However, while poor people did not come there to purchase specialty items, they did come to try to sell items to the vendors, which if bought, would be resold at a profit. During my interview with Michael, a woman around 20 years old drove up in an older, weathered car. As we were talking, she approached us and said she had heard that he was looking to buy a rocking chair. Michael replied that he was no longer looking for one, but that he would help her to sell it if he knew anyone who was. Dejected, she asked if he was sure that he did not want the chair. When he said no, she returned to her car and drove away, presumably to find another buyer. When I asked him if that was a common occurrence, he said that people who need money frequently went to the flea market to sell things to vendors.

The antique shops where I observed and met people were all located in towns on the Jersey Shore, and owned by single proprietors who sold their own stock and rented out space for other vendors to sell theirs. Those vendors were also allowed to “work” the shop floor (or serve as sales people for the owners) for an agreed amount of time per month in return for a discount on their spot. These shops provided me with opportunities to talk to a range of people dealing in a variety of subject areas with a consistency that allowed relationships of trust to develop. It is at these places and others that I had on-the-spot conversations and recruited subjects for off-site interviews held later. Each site offered a different pool of people to talk to and observe as they

performed market practices in varying ways. My analysis based is on this field work which will be incorporated into the discussion in subsequent chapters. The next subsection will provide some more information about those who participated in this study and the recruitment process.

Interview Participants and Recruitment

The total amount of subjects I spoke with numbered 44. Out of that sample, 22 were formal, audio recorded, longer-form interviews. The other 22 were informal conversations notated via pen and paper with lengths ranging from 10 minutes to upwards of an hour. Thirty-two were men, of whom 28 were white. Of those, 16 were over 60 years of age, five ranged from their late 40s to 60, five were in their 30s to mid 40s, and two were in their mid to late 20s. I also spoke with three black men (two African-Americans and one man from the Caribbean) and a Latino. One of the African-American men was in his mid 60s and the other appeared to be in his late 30s or early 40s. The Latino was in his 40s, and the man from the Caribbean was approximately in his early 50s. The remaining 12 interviewees were women, none of whom were people of color. One of the women was in her 70s, three of the women were in their 60s, three were in their 40s, two were in their 50s, one was in her 30s, and two were in their 20s. I recruited my participants through three techniques mentioned above that I will elaborate upon and use as a way to group those I spoke with.

I started recruiting using a snowball sample that began with a single participant active in antiques and collectibles clubs, particularly those formed by people interested in antique glass (bottles, decorative ware, etc. from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries), paper (postcards, photographs, and ephemera), and coins (numismatics). This pool consisted of 10 people total and was largely made up of white men over the age of 50 and a few women who were in the same age bracket. This grouping was also largely composed of middle-class people who were either

still working or retired. However, while there were college graduates, there were also many among them who were non-college educated “blue collar” and “white-collar” workers. To expand my search, I asked one of the subjects from the snowball sample, the moderator of a Facebook group called “Jersey Pickers – Antiques and Collectibles,” if I could post a notice to find participants. From that call I interviewed two more white men over the age of 40. I did have several women respond, but was unable to secure any interviews within the time frame of this study.

Throughout, I expanded my search to include those I met at flea markets, antique and second-hand stores, and a pawn shop. From this approach, I spoke with 32 people. This portion of the sample was composed of those from a broader range of backgrounds than I had found through the snowball technique and the Facebook page. It was at these sites that I was able to expand the pool of women, people of color and younger participants by starting conversations with shoppers and vendors alike. However, most of those who I interviewed were sellers. To initiate an interaction I would browse flea market tables or store sections, ask some general questions, and possibly make a purchase in order to take steps toward establishing a rapport, and over time, trust. Subjects I recruited out in the field also introduced me to their peers who bought and sold in the same sites. In addition, there were participants in the initial snowball sample who owned antique shops where I met other interviewees who had floor space in those stores. Observing these connections unfold over the course of the research, among others within the sample, helped to illustrate how secondary markets are performed in both networks and hierarchies, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This chapter served to outline the methodologies used for this dissertation, and explain how combining textual analysis and ethnographic approaches allowed me to access to multiple dimensions of media and cultural production related to secondary markets and Trash and Treasure TV. In turn, my research can be distinguished from that of previous scholars in the field of RTV studies who were primarily concerned with how people responded to and used their favorite programs. This project's design did not only allow for an understanding of how viewers used and judged the shows, but it also allowed access to a particular vantage point for observing the range of the subgenre's circulation and significance among the potential audiences available for the capture and formation of audiences and secondary market segments. The remaining chapters will illustrate what I found through the course of the investigation.

Chapter 4

Shows and Sites: Trash and Treasure TV as Intervention and Representation

These shows have caused people to be experts in their own mind. They'll come to me. I rent a shop, I have merchandise, I pay for the electric here, and I pay for my rent. I deal with people all of the time who feel they are more knowledgeable than me because they watch these shows - Michael, long-time “picker” and vendor and manager at the Country Village Flea Market

Ideologies are of course, worked on in many places in society, and not only in the head. The fact of unemployment is, among other things, an extremely effective ideological instrument for converting or constraining workers to moderate their wage claims. But institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter, since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production. – Stuart Hall, cultural theorist (2003, p. 90)

In this chapter, the Trash and Treasure TV programs analyzed as part of this study will be discussed within the context of the theories laid out in Chapter 2 and data generated through both the textual analysis and ethnographic methods. People who watched Trash and Treasure TV and bought and sold on the secondary market were often resistant to the presentation of “reality” on the programs. In the interviews conducted for this research, viewers were critical of what people did on the shows, such as when things were bought and sold for unrealistic prices, and skeptical of information that concerned the supposed scarcity and value of objects. At the same time, they were motivated by the shows, and saw some of what was presented as potentially useful for learning about how to participate in secondary markets. For instance, I interviewed Alex, a Caucasian man in his early 40s, who had been buying and selling at flea markets, yard sales, shops, online auctions and websites for over 25 years, after attending his first auction with a high-school friend in the early 1990s. My conversation with Alex illustrated a contradiction found in numerous interviews. On one hand, he saw himself as a savvy media consumer, knowing that “reality” is produced on reality television programs, such as *American Pickers*. While on the other hand, he was at times “inspired” by the successes of the characters when they found treasures.

Criticism of the programs among the participants was rooted in their cynicism about media. Commenting on the production of reality on Trash and Treasure TV, one of the participants, Thomas, who was in his early 60s and had been trading on the secondary market for over 40 years, summed up his perspective after being asked if he had learned anything useful from the programs:

I've learned some things, only that antiques are very territorial, that rusty stuff only sells in the West, not the East. Just watch them for entertainment. Don't take them at face value. I think they are mostly bogus. I don't trust any of them as being on the up-and-up because they are only there for ratings, and now that they have become famous they don't even spend their own money. They spend the **producer's** money. They spend whatever they want, and they do overvalue stuff, and it's just to make people [watch]. They should follow me around (laughing)!

In an exchange with Jeff and Paula, a couple in their late 60s who were long-time pickers and the proprietors of a small vintage-goods shop in a flea market for approximately six years, Jeff commented on what they considered to be *Pawn Stars'* deviation from realistic business practices and pricing:

Pawn Stars pay too much for everything. If you are a pawn broker, you are going to pay no more than 25 percent because it's going to sit in your store for a long time, and it's going to sell for less than retail. They're paying full retail for this stuff! Yeah! Because they're making too much money too. That's the trap, the Hollywood trap. It's just fiction.

Most commonly, participants reported suspicion connected to the frequency of "big finds," which participants said were much rarer than Trash and Treasure TV implied. Many were aware of how Dave Hester, one of the primary cast members on *Storage Wars* pulled back the curtain on the show by making the public aware that the producers had planted objects in the units, a practice called "salting" (Paskin, 2013). Hester claimed that he was fired after complaining and filed a lawsuit against the A&E station, and accused producers of asking him to place his own stock of items in storage units and deceiving the public by failing to depict the auctions accurately (Gardner, 2013; Paskin, 2013).

Fabricating finds and inflating prices instills hope in viewers that they may turn trash into treasure, which lays the groundwork for “investments of desire” (Deleuze, 1997). In our conversation, Paula lamented the consequences of this, noting that “the unfortunate thing for customers is if they watch this sort of thing, they have the idea that there is gold out there in them hills. It just doesn’t work that way.” According to interviewees, this mentality did not just inflate expectations of what could be found, but also impacted how buyers interacted with sellers. Thomas, the veteran picker mentioned above, said the shows have taught viewers that “antique dealers get all of this stuff for nothing, and they have a hundred percent mark up on it.” He said that from his own experiences, this encouraged people to “go into [a dealer’s] booth and offer them half [of the asking price]” based on an unrealistic perspective on pricing and market dynamics.

These accounts, along with others to be highlighted in this chapter and in Chapters 5 and 6 suggested what has been termed the “CSI effect.” This means that media portrayals of procedure, in this case, secondary market entrepreneurial techniques, influenced public perceptions of how they are supposed to be performed (Brewer & Ley, 2010; Harriss, 2011; Mauratonio, 2012). All of the people I spoke with came to the secondary market in different ways and at differing points in their lives, as well as at varying times in history. This influenced the ways that they interpreted the programs, as well as in how they used them. For instance, older and more experienced antique collectors and dealers reacted dismissively or were agitated by the practical information and the representation of secondary market practices. Less experienced and potentially younger counterparts responded more positively to the shows.

As covered in the Chapter 2, Trash and Treasure TV can be understood as an intervention in reality that provides models for self fashioning, and a representation of reality that is

embedded with cultural meaning (Bratich, 2007; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Keeping this in mind, each of the next sections will respectively focus on a particular program and the interview and field observation data that was relevant to each show. First, *American Pickers* will be addressed. That will be followed by separate sections that concentrate on *Storage Wars* and *Flea Market Flip*. Each will be concerned with the respective shows' broader comparisons and relationships to secondary markets, and the ways people that participated in them. Chapter 5 will delve more deeply into the secondary market sites by examining the practices and objects exchanged in real life and their relation to what was portrayed on Trash and Treasure TV.

American Pickers: “House Calls” Across America

This History Channel, simplified to History in 2008, debuted *American Pickers* in 2010 to great success. The show featured primary cast members, Mike Wolfe and Frank Fritz, who bought objects in homes or on private property, such as outbuildings on farms, and then resold them through their store called Antique Archaeology, a brick-and-mortar business that also had an online component. Since this program first aired, their retail operation expanded to two locations, one in Le Claire, Iowa, and the other in Nashville, Tennessee. They also had one on-camera assistant, Danielle Colby Cushman, who became an integral part of the storylines. On the program, Mike and Frank acquired leads in geographic areas all over the U.S. by working with established clients and contacts, and fielding phone calls from people looking to make a deal. They then traveled to specific states or regions to visit those they have arranged to meet, and “pick” what they can find to buy for resale.

Mike and Frank were shown on the road driving in tight quarters over great distances and long periods. While they were away from their home base in Le Claire, their assistant, Danielle,

fed them information in real time about new leads in the area that she acquired in order to maximize their productivity. The intimacy created through the close shots and camera angles inside the cabin of the van as the two men traverse the country gave the appearance that they were out on the road, in the "wilderness" and "alone," and unsupported by a production team during the filming. This was in keeping with the theme of "do-it-yourself" rugged individualism promoted on the Trash and Treasure TV shows. Therefore, these images and portions of each episode were in keeping with the values and practices of neoliberal mentalities (Ouellette & Hay, 2008) and the free-flowing openness of traversing the terrain of control societies (Jenkins, 2015).

Along with the leads they received from Danielle, Mike and Frank engaged in what they called "freestyling." This involved looking for homes along the way that have cluttered properties, antique cars and other visual cues. Once they picked one, they knocked on the door, and gave the person who answers their pitch and a flyer. These cold calls were often unsuccessful, which was demonstrated in the episode *White Castle on the Farm*.²⁵ During one segment, there was a montage of freestyling failures that culminated in an interaction between Mike and Frank and an unknown man at the front door of his house. In line with neoliberal mentalities, this clip was meant to convey the need for self-determination if one wants to make money in the picking business.

To reinforce the inherent risk in being a full-time picker, Mike explained that he and Frank "don't get a regular paycheck," and followed up by bluntly stating "if we don't buy and sell stuff we don't make any money." This declaration operated beyond warning viewers of the instability that came from drawing an income from picking, which is an experience similar to being a freelance worker. The explicit enunciation and acceptance of such terms as if they were

²⁵ Season 1, episode 3

merely “natural” and “normal” served to make enduring austere social conditions and the challenges of performing atomized, non-organized labor, both prominent features of neoliberalism, into “common sense.”

Throughout their travels, the duo is shown meeting different people, who were referred to in a voiceover during the opening credits as being “a breed of their own.” These words were accompanied by a shot of an older white man wearing overalls and a baseball cap, who was identifiable as “rural,” or a “redneck.” He was also behaving strangely, which suggested that he was potentially “inbred” and as a result, developmentally disabled or mentally ill – a stereotype of “backwoods” rural people. This was particularly evident in the first shot, which was a close up of the side of his face as he turned wild-eyed toward the camera. It was also noticeable in the second shot, during which he looked directly into the lens with a crazed glare, and then, surrounded by his hoard, rushed forward holding an old oil can and squeezed the trigger as if he was firing it like a “weapon” at the viewer. He then stared out at the audience with a distant gaze that one would associate with someone who may have been unstable.

Again, this type of imagery reinforced the unpredictability and potential danger of dealing with this “special breed” and doing this type of self-motivated work. The message was that one needs to be prepared for the unexpected. The final shot was at first slightly more redeeming. It showed the unnamed man in front of his home, which appeared to contain a hoard that had spilled onto the front porch. However, when the man smiled at the end, he was shown in a close-up to be missing a tooth, which further instilled the idea that he was a “hillbilly.” This was immediately followed by the end of the voiceover, when Mike declared that he and Frank made “a living telling the history of America, one piece at a time.” By saying that this show is “telling the history of America” immediately after the “hillbilly” montage, there was also a

recognition of a largely unnoticed “history” of rural poor people who often lack a social safety net. This included loner vendors like Mike and Frank, who precariously piece together their living on their own, without help from the government, or the expectation of any should they experience hardship or crisis.

Despite the often heart-wrenching realities of thousands of people in similar situations throughout the U.S., this scenario was treated with humor and an adventurous “wild west” tone that was seen on this and other Trash and Treasure TV programs. Here *American Pickers* moved between stereotyping poor people from rural areas and tapping into the folksy aesthetics and nostalgia associated with a romanticized idea of working-class America. The words and images that were supposed to pay homage to “the past” and the “regular people” who curate it through their objects helped to move the representation of the exchanges on the program away from the rhetoric of crass capitalism that was expressed at the very beginning of the opening credits. In that portion of the show it is declared that they will “buy anything [they] can make a buck off.” Viewing this through a cynical lens, this posturing can be seen as designed to help Mike and Frank avoid accusations of being solely concerned with money and lacking reverence for the objects that potential sellers may hold dear due to personal attachments, an interest in historical or cultural significances, or other reasons.

This is particularly important. As anthropologist Paul van der Grijp’s (2002) study on philately has shown, communities that engage in exchange as a hobby and in some professional trading for money are subcultures motivated by their passions for the objects of interest, as opposed to simply a desire to generate income. Since many of the people who composed these “informal” or “underground” economies were amateur dealers (collectors who do not solely rely on their trade for income), monetary value was important, although not necessarily central (van

der Grijp, 2002). In Dutch stamp collecting communities, van der Grijp (2002) had found that the sale of a collection rarely turns a profit, which demonstrated that money was spent to invest in objects for reasons beyond money. In this, speculators were not always considered serious collectors, as they were more interested in doing business through the trade of the objects, rather than being passionate about the objects in and of themselves (van der Grijp, 2002). In other words, one's authenticity as a collector was connected to their motivations for participating on the secondary market.

Therefore, one can understand Mike and Frank's presentation as intended to create a baseline for *ethical* "pickers" (in terms of being "virtuous") on the neoliberal landscape. This included a self-monitoring and consciousness in consideration of the norms and niche subcultures of collectors and dealers in specific subject areas. In addition, such behavior was also affective in nature and shaped social relations. This resonated with some informants. For instance, Rich and Dana, young pop culture toy and collectible dealers (both in their late 20s) from the Country Village Flea Market, mentioned in our conversations that they believed that Mike and Frank's performance was authentic, and cited moments on the program when the *Pickers* would offer more money than they had to for an object, or offered to return to pay more if they turned a greater profit than expected (a practice that participants in my sample reported doing). In our conversation, Dana explained how she felt about the ethical direction provided by *American Pickers*:

I feel that they are definitely more honest. Ya know? Where as somebody says "I'll take 50 for this," and Mike looks at them and says "I'll give you a hundred and fifty because it's worth more." I feel like [compared to the other programs], they are definitely more whole hearted about the business, and I like to try and think that we are gonna try and follow them as much as possible. Like, I can see the good in them.

In this same discussion, their friend Hank (a picker in his late 20s who had long hair, scruffy beard, “gauged” earrings,²⁶ and wore a leather jacket adorned with pins and patches with the logos of heavy metal rock-and-roll bands) had claimed to have met Mike and Frank when scouts for the show came to an antique shop he was working at and said that they were “nice guys.” This pointed to the value placed on “nice” or respectful human interactions in the field. It must be noted that under particular circumstances, offering or returning to pay more money runs in contradiction with the profit orientation of capitalism. Such practices reorganized social relations as based on values other than the desire to make money, such as a common affection for a particular subject area of antiques or collectibles (this will be discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6). Nevertheless, the mindfulness on *American Pickers* was largely motivated by market logics, which are specific virtues that extend into other practices that consequently provide the foundation for building relationships. This is discussed further in the following sections.

Neoliberal Pickin’

On *American Pickers*, Mike and Frank were the embodiment of neoliberal subjectivity. They are flexible entrepreneurs traversing the landscape in search of opportunities to make a profit from the objects they found. Because every encounter was different in terms of the personalities they met, the array of objects they came across, and the physical spaces and conditions in which they conducted their business, Mike and Frank were best served in being as malleable as possible. On the program, they were shown discussing how to psychologically understand and communicate with the different people they bought from, even going as far as to frame particular moments as instructive for audiences. In a scene from an episode titled *Frank’s Gamble*, Mike and Frank were given a tip by a seller they were dealing with in regard to a friend

²⁶ This term refers to earrings that widen the hole in the ear. They are commonly associated with heavy metal fashion and other popular subcultural styles.

who also had a lot of things up for purchase.²⁷ They were only given an address, but were not introduced, and were left on their own to knock on the door and present themselves. As they pulled up to the house, they saw that it was surrounded by large fences adorned with signs bearing anti-government messages, such as “God, guns and guts made America free, let’s keep all three,” to which Frank muttered, “I don’t know about that.” This indicated that he was already feeling uncomfortable.

This tension was maximized through the close-up camera angles that focused on Frank’s face as they pulled onto the property and saw another sign. That next message threatened death for trespassing. The drama built. Although afraid to knock, Frank noted that the resident or owner appeared to be very direct, which could be an advantage in bargaining, since one would not have to guess what the person was thinking. Mike retorted that trust might be tough to get, to which Frank replied: “money usually builds trust.” They then met the owner of the property. His name was Galen, and he was a tall, intimidating looking middle-aged Caucasian man with a long white beard. He was wearing traditional-looking working-class clothing consisting of blue jeans and a blue denim button-down shirt. Immediately, Mike and Frank began to size Galen up. After trying to “break the ice” (the term they used to name the first purchase which normally opens up an engagement), they decided that although the visit did not yield any purchases, they would keep this man on a list of potential sources for the future.

In that segment, Mike and Frank taught the audience skills for success, which included the need to be flexible in various ways. At the core of the scenario was the spontaneity of meeting their new contact, which required them to change their original course. Adding another layer, they were willing to establish a relationship with someone who might be antagonistic,

²⁷ Season 1, episode 7

which showed another kind of flexibility. Before even getting to the door, Mike and Frank exhibited proactive attention to this person's potential psychological and affective-emotional conditions, in order to know how to respond. Therefore, the episode demonstrated that subjective flexibility is just as required of neoliberalism as is the acceptance of irregularity in the frequency, location, and type of labor someone performs (Wissinger, 2007; Freeman, 2011).

Across the first season, there were multiple instances in which Mike and Frank were explicitly concerned with the personalities of the people they met in regard to psychological and affective-emotional conditions, starting prior to even arriving at their location, and continuing until they were packing what they had bought into their van. The scenario described above depicts a situation that was laden with risk and uncertainty and showed viewers one of the wide range of risky possible interactions a "picker" may encounter. This included a lesson: money alone cannot always build trust. There are other factors that need to be considered when asking if something is for sale and making an offer. For instance, there are emotional attachments the seller may have to their things and whether s/he is hoarding, collecting, or merely possessing the objects. In a confessional-like debriefing at the end of each encounter, common to RTV and an integral part of the *American Pickers* format, Mike and Frank discussed Galen's personality as a potential future business contact. While pondering Galen's disposition, Mike psychoanalytically opined that "it was as if Galen was locked in this world with all of his memories, all of these things represented all of these memories around him. He just wasn't going to give up his stuff."

Pickin' Practices: Modeling and Instruction

With modeling flexibility at the foundation of *American Pickers*, Mike and Frank have taught audiences specific practices (both directly and indirectly) regarding how to find things to buy, bargain, and assess condition and value. As noted above, they found valuable objects by

obtaining solid leads or “freestyling.” Once the *Pickers* were given access to browse, they went to great lengths to find objects they want. At times, they went into decrepit and potentially dangerous old buildings, and squeezed into small crawl spaces, sacrificing comfort, risking their safety, and getting very dirty in the process. For instance, in an episode titled *Moleman*, the pickers climbed through a 26-room underground tunnel network. These tunnels were packed with an enormous hoard amassed by a man who went by the name “Mole Man.”²⁸

The pickers were also known for having great knowledge about things from very specific categories. For instance, Mike was passionate about bicycles, motorcycles and automobiles, and collected objects related to those things. Frank was more interested in antique and vintage oil cans, old signs related to oil and gasoline companies, and early 20th century tin toys. Both had a great degree of amateur expertise in their respective areas. Similar characteristics were held among the participants and reflected in the sample. For example, John, a long-time antique glass collector, knew a significant amount about many categories of antique glass, which ranged from soda bottles to “carnival” glass (decorative glass pieces popular in the early to mid 20th century). So he was generalist, but in actuality he was an expert in the antique bottles (such as milk bottles) and stoneware (such as jugs and crocks) that were used or produced by businesses in his local area.

In another subject area, pop culture collectibles dealer Rich was very familiar with the rarity of a variety of toys, such as G.I. Joe and Star Wars action figures. Although, when it came to expertise, he had a firm command over what one could know about the enormous amount of objects produced in connection with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise. Regardless of possessing a vast amount of knowledge, prior to committing to making a deal (and often

²⁸ Season 1, episode 6

afterwards), Mike and Frank normally consulted an actual expert in the particular type of object they were buying. This gave the audience a chance to get professional guidance, as many viewers may not have the robust knowledgeable networks that Mike and Frank and those among my participants had. Developing expertise is central to neoliberalism in that it transmits the skills and insights people need to adapt and survive in the contemporary economic arrangement (Rose, 1996), and is seen across the programs. Although Mike, Frank and their guest experts were all proficient in regard to general knowledge concerning the range of categories of vintage or antique objects they may encounter, their actual expertise is very narrow. When professional experts were consulted, they looked at an object within the breadth of their specialization and provided detailed information on the manufacturer, history, cultural significance, scarcity, and of course, it's market value.

The *Pickers* also incorporated lessons on specific techniques. Mike and Frank did not merely model how to be a picker. They also gave direct instructions and at times referred to these moments on the show as “picking 101,” a term that alluded to the basic-level college courses. During a scene where Mike explained price setting,²⁹ he advised the audience to allow the seller to start the negotiation, but also suggested that the buyer could also ask “what do *you* think it is worth,” so that both parties are not far off from one another at the outset. In another instance, after the segment described above in which Mike asked Galen if he knew any other people in the area who might have things to sell, Mike informed the audience that asking for a referral is “picking 101.” In this he emphasized that looking for referrals was something that all pickers should remember to do when they were unsuccessful at one site and want to find another. These

²⁹ *Big Bear*, Season 1, episode 1

were blatant examples of Trash and Treasure TV's pedagogical potential to teach viewers how to engage in the secondary market.

When the *Pickers* were not modeling or instructing, they were indirectly educating the audience when they passed on information to the sellers they were talking to or when they were talking to each other about an object. For instance, in one episode Frank was talking to someone who had a tin toy car he was trying to buy. In that conversation he had noted to the seller (and to the audience by glancing toward the camera) that the label on the bottom of the car was in good condition, which added to its value.³⁰ That type of information was transferrable to other objects that may have a paper label or sticker affixed to them. Thus, the *Pickers* provided general knowledge that people could apply regardless of what they were trying to buy. One of their modeled techniques is what they called "bundling." This entailed a buyer finding several things s/he wanted without establishing a price right away. It is only after the desired items were gathered that Mike and Frank suggested a fixed cost for everything in the pile. They would then find immediate agreement or engage in further negotiations with the seller.

On the program, Mike and Frank bundled when there are many similar items, or when they feel there is momentum with an agreeable seller. This yielded reasonable prices for putting the objects back out on the market for resale. As evidenced by the testimony of Michael, a long time picker and dealer and the social media manager at the Country Village Flea Market, viewers have employed this practice at his shop. In a recounting of these experiences, he noted how he has "had multiple people come in, and I [knew] what they are doing right away - they're bundling. I [would] say 'let me guess, you're bundling,' and they're like 'how do you know?' And I'm like, 'because I've seen the show' (laughing)!"

³⁰ *Back Breaker*, season 1, episode 5

What Mike and Frank did with their business is what people interviewed for this research refer to as making “house calls.” These participants obtained their leads by posting flyers, using social media, getting direct referrals and/or having a word-of-mouth reputation, or a successful shop to help generate interest. None of the people I spoke with “free styled” exactly like Mike and Frank. One informant, John, who was mentioned above, reported that long before the show debuted, he knocked on people’s doors when he would see authentic antique glass displayed in their windows. However, he was not interested as a professional dealer prepared with a pitch and a flyer, but as a passionate collector who occasionally sold items to fund his hobby and earn some extra money. Regardless, many interviewees had opinions on Trash and Treasure TV in terms of its pedagogical usefulness and authenticity, the effects they felt it had on the market and how it impacted their own experiences. The modeling and instruction of *American Pickers* was extensive and Mike and Frank bring viewers many lessons that composed what can be called an “ethics of picking.” This ethos emerged through Mike and Frank as embodiments of the contemporary philosophical and material neoliberal milieu.

This milieu included the actual markets that participants in this study performed and constructed through practice (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015). As Marxist geographers Kevin St. Martin and J.K. Gibson-Graham (2015) have theorized by taking up ideas of Deleuze, Foucault, and Judith Butler, markets are performed. "Performing" refers to the ways people behave while constructing heterogeneous economies as they mobilize and transform their desires while forging new social identifications and bonds to make markets together with others (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015). This concept of performing recognizes the agency of market actors and their capacity to create relationships that move away from the formal capitalist arrangement and toward organizational forms that breach limits of the state and private power

and become what could be understood as alternative economies (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015).

As a part of the televisual dispositif (Coté, 2011), the show *American Pickers* modeled a subjectivity to illustrate how people should understand how to perform secondary market economies. These sites and commensurate practices were already propelled away from the formal market structure, where much of the business had been traditionally facilitated via cash exchanges and taxes are not paid. Out of the three Trash and Treasure TV programs analyzed here, *American Pickers* provided the most detailed picture of how to buy and sell on the secondary market, particularly in regard to making “house calls.” The program also brought the most explicit modelling for “formalizing” the secondary market through its depiction of Mike and Frank’s business, Antique Archaeology. In this, *American Pickers* can serve to direct people from using the secondary market as the foundation for building a robust alternative economy, and toward state-capitalist models informed by neoliberal rationales.

The show instructed viewers how to extract value from what Mike and Frank have found while out picking, which were informal exchanges in which cash was paid on the spot to the sellers. From there, the objects were placed up for sale in their brick-and-mortar locations and their online store, through which people shopped in a formal retail setting or while they interfaced with an e-commerce platform and paid a fixed amount of money. This removed the price or exchange flexibility that is inherent in secondary markets, in which people were free to bargain, barter, or trade – types of payment that are not normally used in the formal retail environment. By making this conversion from the informal to the formal economy, the pickers took previously unwanted or overlooked objects, much of which would be identified as trash, and brought them to a wider consumer market.

This approach watered down their claim of having an authentic reverence for the objects and people that composed secondary markets. Their telling of the “history of America, one piece at a time” became a story told through mass consumption, rather than one that recognized the place of consumption in the emergence of modernity in the U.S. In other words, from the perspective of media archaeology, the televisual dispositif intervenes through RTV to direct people’s passions toward entrepreneurialism and consumerism. This shapes the material cultural practices for the excavation and circulation of old, used, and broken things that fit into the categories of antiques and collectibles (Hertz, 2010; Parikka, 2012). At the same time, the historical and sociocultural significance of the objects traded on the secondary market is reduced to monetary value and superficial trivia, as opposed to a rich, layered narrative of the past resembling that which an archaeologist would unearth.

Several individuals from the pool of informants had formal businesses for which they sourced their stock through house calls. Others had ventures that straddled the formal and informal economies that supplemented their primary incomes beyond funding the building of collections. These people and their enterprises will be discussed and elaborated upon in Chapters 5 and 6. The next two sections of this chapter will focus respectively on the shows *Storage Wars* and *Flea Market Flip*, both of which also produced and reproduced neoliberal subjectivities that included culturally specific manners of understanding and performing modes of labor and conceptualizing the value of objects circulated on the market.

***Storage Wars*: Auctions, “Abandoned” Possessions, and Vulture Capitalism**

First airing in 2010 on A&E, *Storage Wars* was a program focused on a group of entrepreneurs who competed for valuable objects at auctions held at storage unit facilities. The cast has remained largely stable since the initial season, and has consisted of veteran auctioneer

and shop owner Dave Hester, long-time independent dealer Darrell Sheets, avid collector and retired businessman Barry Silver, and young married upstarts Brandi Passante and Jarrod Schultz, who co-own a second hand shop. The program was very formulaic. Each episode entailed the cast converging at storage unit auctions, largely across Southern California, and engaging in tensely competitive bidding wars during which cast members make and break temporary alliances in cooperation and competition for the best lockers.

At its foundation, the modeling that *Storage Wars* provides in the form of competition and competitive selves can be drawn into dialogue with theories on RTV programs as reflective of the flexibility of the modern work environment (Bratich, 2009) in which people are always switching jobs, teams, tasks, and even companies. Through the formats of games and challenges, these programs showed people how to be affectively and cognitively malleable, which are invaluable capacities necessary for refining the self into a subject of contemporary capitalism (Bratich, 2009). However, the competition and cooperation of *Storage Wars* was not predicated exclusively on contrived games and challenges, but was represented as taking place in the “real” world, and incorporated the notion that cutthroat competition is necessary for participating in a market. This program exemplified Trash and Treasure TV as a form of “capitalist realism,” which refers to media theorist Michael Schudson’s (1984) observations regarding the way that capitalist aesthetics promote ways of life centered on private consumption rather than social, public achievements.

Even before actually watching an episode, based on the program name alone, viewers received the message that it’s a cutthroat world, and that one has to look out for oneself. The entire premise of the show is built upon what is, in essence, a form of “vulture capitalism.” This is a practice in which people seek ways to make money off of the financial misfortune of others.

For instance, people who enriched themselves after the subprime mortgage crisis through buying up foreclosed homes and turning them over for a profit engaged in “vulture capitalism.” In the case of *Storage Wars*, the units up for auction are understood (as indicated by the program’s introduction) as “abandoned,” which can be read as a euphemism for the many ways of losing ownership of one’s possessions. These “abandoned” storage units are auctioned off because the lease holder lapsed in his/her monthly payments and are contractually obligated to release their property to the storage facility for auctioning in order to recoup the money owed for past fees.

The use of the term “abandoned” placed the responsibility squarely on those whose things were at auction, and obscured the economic realities of how people fall into arrears. As Ouellette (2017) has noted, the absence of the former owners of the objects is representative of their “disposability.” This is indicative of the contemporary economic arrangement that privileges the “bare market” over any concern for the unfair conditions the people within that market endure. In this case, people are disposable, just as objects are understood to be in the context of a “throw-away society” that is focused on mere consumption of new products which are eventually discarded when they have served their purpose, or have become fashionably or practically obsolete.

Reasons someone may default on their monthly storage unit bill can range from losing a job due to downsizing, cuts in hours or pay, contracting an illness while lacking quality health care, or dying. The cast members of *Storage Wars* never raised these concerns, which erased the lives and problems of the property’s original owners and the circumstances which led to the loss of these units. Many of these factors may have been out of the owner’s personal control and rested on larger economic structures absent from these shows. Unlike those on the *Trash* and *Treasure TV*, several people interviewed for this project that participated in storage unit auctions

specifically discussed these economic considerations, which will be detailed in the next chapter. The next section will elaborate upon the instructional potential of *Storage Wars*. This will include the greater context from which the show had emerged, that was composed of elements related to media culture, consumerism, precarity and entrepreneurialism in the post-recession economy. Following that conversation will be a discussion the program *Flea Market Flip*.

A Formula for Learning: Practices and Larger Phenomena

Overall, as a means for teaching people how to engage in storage unit auctions, *Storage Wars* lacks the pedagogical richness of *American Pickers*, which, as noted above, provided direct lessons on a variety of aspects related to buying and selling in that particular manner. In contrast, *Storage Wars* followed a rigid formula, in which the cast went to an auction, bid on lockers, and then assessed the value of what they have won. Whatever they could not identify that may have been worth significant amounts of money was taken to an expert for appraisal. During those segments, information and pricing popped up onto the screen for viewers to see what the objects were and what they were worth. In regard to neoliberal-capitalist subjectivities, the cast members of *Storage Wars* largely modeled how to perform as ideal competitive subjects as they strategized how to outbid their opponents and demonstrated their individual mastery over forms of knowledge about the objects.

Direct instruction essentially came in the form of the cast's commentary about what they thought the things they acquired were worth and from the input of experts who appraised objects as a service or prior to buying them for sale in their own businesses. Interviewees in this study reported that they considered *Storage Wars* as a representation which was generally straightforward, and relatively reflective of reality. Long-time auction participant and antique shop owner Steve, also an RTV skeptic, said that the drama and fierce competition of *Storage*

Wars reminded him of his own experiences. Nonetheless, he noted that the program did not depict the downsides, including what he called “the disposal problem.” Elaborating, he said that “rotten mattresses and ... other things you ... find even if you’re careful, ... can be buried in units ... There’s a cost to disposing of this stuff, time, and if you’re not equipped with a truck, a helper, and a permit to use the dump, it’s a headache, and so they don’t show that aspect of it.”

The value of *Storage Wars* as a transmitter of specific practices applicable to storage unit auctions was not as detailed as *American Pickers* in terms of the specificity of instruction promoted by house calls. However, the show can be seen as exemplary regarding Trash and Treasure TV in relation to addressing the excesses of consumer capitalism, by rendering the abundance of objects into being suitable for the marketplace or resigned to the landfill. The phenomenal rise of storage facilities over the past two decades speaks volumes about the excessive consumerism in the late capitalist U.S. (Vanderbilt, 2005), what philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2006) calls “hyperconsumption.” According to a 2015 fact sheet from the Self Storage Association, a self-storage industry trade organization, out of the approximately 58,000 self storage facilities worldwide, 48,500 are located in the U.S. (Self Storage Association, 2015). In the contemporary consumer culture of the U.S., people are continuously encouraged (whether or not they can afford it) to buy things as a way to de-stress, reward themselves and “live the good life.”

Interestingly, while people in older generations who lived through the Great Depression and WWII were taught frugality as a national value and emblem of pride, the national response to recent economic meltdowns (as well as violent attacks such as on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001) has been “keep shopping America.” The evolution of this “shop ‘til you drop” mentality has supplanted the older American values of thrift and debt avoidance as a

matter of personal honor, and the nation's earlier emphasis on saving over spending. In the end, many Americans today purchase much more than they can use or store and need to rent storage units for a monthly fee in order to keep the things which cannot fit in their living spaces. In many cases, they are paying to store objects that they will never actually use, and when the burden of paying rent to store excess objects becomes too great, storage facilities are "abandoned."

According to interview participants, the debut of *Storage Wars* inspired many to try their hand at the auctions. This increase in attendance raised unit prices due to having more competition for the best units, which were very scarce to begin with. Steve, mentioned above, said that after the show aired "all of the sudden, this core group of die-hard storage buyers who would show up at the local storage unit auction had ballooned [from 5 – 15 people] to 50 – 75." Anthony, a dealer who had been attending storage unit auctions and performing house calls for nearly seven years at the time of the interview, noted that "real rooms," units that are "about a ten-by-twenty full of nothing but collectibles," came up in reality only "two to three times a year" in contrast to the common frequency shown on TV. This was an observation shared across the sample of interviewees, many of whom were skeptical that the casts on *Trash and Treasure* TV would be able to find such high-quality items at the same frequency "in reality."

Anthony pointed to his personal experience to explain his skepticism. He had been present for a filming of the TV show *Auction Hunters* when the production company chose New Jersey as a site for the show. In his recounting of the experience, he said that it was shot by a small crew using one camera, and elaborated:

Yeah, it wasn't [a] big [production]. A room went up [and] they bought it for three hundred dollars. You can see the whole room, and all of the sudden when they went on TV, there was a horse drawn chariot that was in the room that they bought for three hundred dollars. It wasn't in the room. So those shows are all staged.

However, the perception of the other participants (with the exception of two who were at the same taping as Anthony) was substantiated in large part due to the public accusations noted earlier in this chapter that were leveled by *Storage Wars* cast member Dave Hester (that objects were being placed in storage units for television purposes).

My informants who went to storage unit auctions said they usually found less valuable things, including lower-end vintage and antique items, coffee makers, microwaves, televisions, clothes, shoes, furniture, stationery supplies, office equipment, and furniture from businesses that had folded. These, among many other things, were originally destined to be disposed of as trash. As opposed to heading to a landfill, these objects were sold at flea markets to poor people in need of clothes, shoes, furniture, and standard household items, among other things. This dynamic created and sustained the secondary market while managing the excesses of consumer capitalism (overconsumption and the waste associated with the consumption of a “throw-away” society). In addition, the effect on pricing as demand grew made it difficult for new people to participate successfully in the auctions, and eventually pushed them out of the market. This impact on the practice even motivated cash-flush dealers such as Anthony to stop sourcing his stock from auctions and turn to “house calls.”

This called into question the power of the RTV dispositif in its effectiveness in producing entrepreneurial subjects and invigorating the larger economy through the secondary markets. These matters related to the limits of governmentality and power will be expanded upon in chapters 5 and 6. The next section will focus on the program *Flea Market Flip*, which teaches viewers how to buy things at flea markets at a low cost and sell them for a profit. As a site, flea markets were “fed” by the people who do “house calls” or bid on storage units. This meant that the things that were acquired at private properties or auctions were sold at the flea markets. This

included things that under different circumstances would be destined for landfills. Thus, these shows had the potential to teach people how to deal with the challenge of managing trash in a consumer society that valued convenience and organized consumption through life-cycles of disposability that were driven by planned obsolescence and aesthetic innovation (Haug, 2005).

Flea Market Flip: Flea Markets, “Free Markets,” and Do-It-Yourself Entrepreneurialism

The final program analyzed for this research was *Flea Market Flip*, which first aired in 2012. On this show, host Lara Spencer pitted “design teams” against each other to scour flea markets for the best items to buy and resell. Each team must find one or more objects at a flea market in less than an hour, and then take their respective objects to a shop, where, with the help of professional craftspeople, they recycle, repurpose, or rehabilitate the items and then sell the things they have made. The team that made the most money from their transaction won a cash prize of \$5,000. The recycling and rehabilitation process was referred to on the program as “upcycling.” Upcycled objects were not necessarily restored to their original condition, but were radically repurposed, redecorated, or redesigned with the goal of selling the object for the maximum amount of profit possible. Like on *American Pickers*, neoliberal-entrepreneurial discourse and practice shaped the ways participants sourced, traded, and gave purpose to the things on *Flea Market Flip*, particularly in their appropriation for works of art and craft.

For instance, in an episode titled *Creative Best Friends*, a team bought a vintage bicycle, an antique fire extinguisher and an old wooden tabletop.³¹ From these components they made a table by affixing the fire extinguisher to the bike frame in order to build a creative support structure for the tabletop, while they took advantage of the wheels which gave the table the

³¹ Season 1, episode 2

ability to roll. Another example can be seen in the episode *Stormville Flea Market Flip*,³² during which a team bought two Flexible Flyer snow sleds with the intention of building a bench. The team had planned to use one sled for the seat and the other for the back of the bench and add cushions.

However, sometimes contestants had to assess whether or not they should restore what they had found, rather than incorporate their pieces into a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) art project. Restorations were normally done on furniture and entail some creativity, such as reupholstering or repainting pieces which are not the original color or texture. In one instance, a design team reupholstered a pair of midcentury modern chairs with a different colored fabric than the manufacturer had used, and after not selling them, were left pondering whether or not they should have made the change.³³ This demonstrated the extent to which decisions are made based on marketability and maximizing profits, rather than authenticity.

Drawing from media archaeology, one can analyze the products of upcycled, restored or repurposed objects on *Flea Market Flip* through a political-economic lens. This can lead toward comprehensive understandings of their life-cycles in historical sociocultural contexts, as they were moved from their nascent phases as new technologies or aesthetics, into those in which they are consumer commodities, and finally into their use for DIY projects (Hertz & Parikka, 2012). Additionally, an archaeological view can allow us to see how discursive power directs material culture practices. Like the other programs discussed above, *Flea Market Flip* can be understood as a means of instruction and representation. Its purpose is to show viewers how to use their creative talents to become entrepreneurs who can see objects, envision an enormous range of

³² season 1, episode 3

³³ *Creative Best Friends*, season 1 episode 2

potential uses for them and reap profits out of castoffs, rather than interfacing with objects for sake of art, knowledge, or social justice. This production and deployment of the creative application of taste through the recognition of desirable aesthetics and the market logics which underpin this skill on *Flea Market Flip* will be discussed in the next section.

Free Market Flip

As a Trash and Treasure TV program, *Flea Market Flip* has presented the gamification of secondary markets and reinforced and encouraged a notion of competition. In season 1, episode 6, “design bloggers” (team members) Andrew and Jessica talked about their strategic approach when they told the audience, “We’re thinking, we’re thrifting, we’re building, we’re selling. We’re not here to shop.” In saying this, they emphasized the creative imagination work required to be successful in the market, as opposed to the passive, less creative action of simply “shopping.” In each episode, as the teams looked for objects, host Lara Spencer followed along and asked for their rationales for choosing certain pieces and about their plans for them. During the search for things to upcycle, contestants were shown bargaining. As an experienced designer and flea marketeer, Lara Spencer occasionally provided input on the necessary strategies. This guidance served to give the audience ideas for “flipping” as she interacted with the teams.

After the objects were selected, each episode had an extended montage of the rehabilitation and/or repurposing phase of the upcycling process that provided an easy-looking and accelerated glimpse into how the projects were carried out. For instance, in episode 8 of season 1, one of the team members and an in-house specialist were shown reupholstering stools just at the moment that they are tapping in one of the last tacks that held down the new covering. That emphasized a hands-on DIY ethos, but in no way could serve as a how-to tutorial, as the

complicated nature of the work is hidden. The viewer was not shown the specialized techniques required for upholstering furniture that must be learned over long periods of time.

Labor was often reduced in this way on RTV programming, as shows have largely placed the focus on dramatic interactions between cast members and their everyday lives running their respective businesses, instead of on the actual hands-on work being performed (Leistyna, 2009). As with the object selection process, the attention of audience members was directed toward thinking about what styles were most desired and marketable for upcycling. When contestants were shown selling the objects, Lara Spencer gave tips to the teams on how to most effectively market their creations and how to think about what offers to accept and when. At the end of the program, the total amount of money made by each team was revealed while Lara Spencer congratulated the “winners,” debriefed the competitors and discussed how each succeeded or could have done better.

At its core, this program was focused on providing guidance for aesthetic practices (Bennett, 2011) by anchoring them in speculation and monetization. It also promoted a class-oriented taste culture (Bourdieu, 1984) in its presentation of stylish objects that appealed toward middle-class sensibilities, such as mid-century modern Danish-designed furniture and other vintage objects that command high prices even prior to their “upcycling” or restoration. *Flea Market Flip* was also overflowing in representation. During each episode, the flea market was portrayed as a space where people are engaging in the free exchange of objects and money, unencumbered by the interference of the state or corporations. Cash was exchanged, tax was not calculated, and there were no receipts. Individual sellers were shown verbally agreeing with buyers on terms decided upon mutually in the moment, which gave the impression that the flea market space is one in which everyone accepts the same risks and yields rewards.

Steve, the owner of a successful antique store extolled the virtues of the flea market as a free market when he said:

The flea market's a great thing in my opinion ... I hope it never changes. But it could with Big Brother and everything else that's closing in on us in all directions. It's just basic buying, selling, trading, bartering, untampered with, ungovernment regulated, and I shouldn't even say this [knocking on wood], well once in a while they send tax people through, but basically there aren't taxes. It's open, free, fun, enjoyable. It's a great thing.

My fieldwork has shown that this is a romanticized view, as people entered these markets with differing levels of economic and cultural capital (glossed over by Trash and Treasure TV) that determines one's success level. This will be discussed further in the following chapter to demonstrate how the secondary market is a part of greater economic arrangements at work in the ways that determine how social relations are shaped, and how money and objects circulate in those sites. These are the dynamics that did not appear in the TV portrayals of the flea market spaces seen on *Flea Market Flip*.

These structural features pertained to those of the larger secondary market in all of its sites and niches. The secondary market straddled the underground/informal and formal economies in how they operated in relation to the overarching formal consumer marketplace. For now, it is important to see how this program functioned in terms of subject formation as it taught people that they can use their creativity and DIY spirit to make money in a flexible, open, marketplace of entrepreneurs. This was seen in terms of cultural trends and their streamlining into the economic system such as "shabby chic" design (wearing "old" clothes as high fashion, buying old furniture that has been refurbished or that looks aged and distressed), and the emergence and growth of online storefronts. Among these storefronts was Etsy.com, a website on which individuals sold their handmade, individually designed objects such as decorative items, clothing and other things for people to wear or use. The next section will discuss how *Flea*

Market Flip worked to subsume DIY ethics and practices into neoliberal capitalism by combining objects, aesthetics and entrepreneurial values.

The Object and Power: Creativity, Capitalism, and DIY Entrepreneurialism

As a widely successful program for eight seasons, *Flea Market Flip* merged DIY creativity, individual entrepreneurship and profit motivation. In this, the show also worked to erase the tension between these profit-motivated activities and other types of exchange that occurred in countercultural spaces, such as those associated with environmentalism, feminism or punk rock. As examples, one could point to the feminist-oriented “stitch and bitch” sewing, knitting and embroidering circles. These groups tended to uphold DIY ethics as being inseparable from anti-capitalism and asserted that craft practices and the product of their labor were sources of power in the pursuit of social justice (Bratich & Brush, 2011). In embracing entrepreneurial competition, the contestants on *Flea Market Flip* had to be adaptable and creative in terms of how they saw the objects found at the market, not mainly for the creative expression that motivates many artists and do-it-yourself vendors on sites like Etsy, but rather, for the expressed purpose of generating profit.

The contestants were encouraged to reimagine how objects can be used and to be as creative as possible, although solely in the pursuit of selling their projects for as much money as a buyer is willing to pay. As evidenced by the creation of the table from the vintage bicycle, antique fire extinguisher and old, rustic tabletop, the two young artists that made up that design were not concerned with restoring the objects to their original conditions by using as many “authentic” replacement or reproduction parts as possible. They weren’t thinking of the fire extinguisher as something that could be cleaned up, or left with its patina and then used as a decorative object on its own. Instead, they modeled “American ingenuity” by creating something

new out of something old. This prioritized an aesthetic for the purposes of making a sale, rather than being concerned with the pure value of preservation. In this, the team desired to produce *entrepreneurial power* through an object's potential to hail a buyer in the marketing of taste.

Similarly, in the example of the rusty Vespa discussed in the previous chapter, Mike and Frank of *American Pickers* also modeled for viewers how to be imaginative with envisioning the potential for objects encountered in the field, and even gave direct instruction. However, the *Pickers* did not engage in DIY projects on their own, and tended to sell objects to people who could do what they would liked with them, often using those objects for purposes other than what they were intended for, such as for decoration. Also, although Mike and Frank were well known for buying and selling “rusty gold” (objects that are not in perfect condition but still have an aesthetic and monetary value), they also looked for items which are in conditions that fell within the upper region of the varying grading scales that exist for different objects and markets.

As on other programs such as *Pawn Stars*, these higher-end objects were revered for their status in regard to their particular historical, cultural, and social values, while monetary value was given primary importance. Commensurate with neoliberal rationales and practices that seek to move away from the past and encourage constant change in the name of enterprise, *Flea Market Flip* gave viewers permission to go beyond those conventional treatments of objects that accompanies such orthodoxies, such as accurate restoration, or the incorporation of items into a public or private collection, archive, or display in a museum. The things featured on *Flea Market Flip* which were in their original condition and largely “affordable” on the actual market, were transformed from being accessible to a large cross-section of flea market consumers into new pieces that are very expensive and obtainable by only relatively few affluent people. On TV, starting prices on these transformed objects were high and the asking resale prices were even

higher, which was not representative of what I saw in the field, and what interview participants reported as their regular experiences. According to my interviews and observations, not only was the almost effortless repurposing of objects and high prices they commanded on TV programs not realistic, but the potentially anti-capitalist ethos existing in real-world flea markets and DIY spaces was also erased on the TV shows.

While there were some real life flea markets where objects commanded high prices which were similar to those on *Flea Market Flip*, such spaces were not typical of flea markets in general. Maisel's (1974) illustration of flea markets from his ethnographic study of those sites showed a diverse array of participants in terms of race, class and gender. In addition, his research demonstrated how the markets were spaces that represented openness, freedom, and community, in which things, at times, were even given away for free or at deep discount because of interpersonal relationships (Maisel, 1974). This is consistent with my observations and the interview data, representing aspects of a pre-capitalist or alternative market ethos, which will be discussed further in the next chapter in all of its complexities.

Flea Market Flip, *American Pickers* and *Storage Wars*, as sources of representation, ignored these potential alternatives to capitalist market ideals and reinforced dominant neoliberal ideologies. Trash and Treasure TV programs also presented a narrow framing of people who participated in secondary markets. Social identity categories tended to be distorted in both their limited selection and stereotypical presentations. This disallowed for an accurate reflection of the composition of secondary markets in all of its economic, social and cultural complexity. This included the ways that different groups accessed informal economies. Additionally, focusing on these arrangements opens up pathways for analyzing the power of RTV as a technique of neoliberal governmentality, in its capacity to reach and influence audiences to create new

subjects and robust markets. These matters will be addressed in the next section and further in subsequent chapters.

Representation and Social Identities: Gender, Race, and Class on Trash and Treasure TV

In contrast with most real-life flea markets, the sites where contestants were shown buying and selling on *Flea Market Flip* were more upscale, such as The Elephant's Trunk in New Milford, Connecticut, The Rose Bowl Flea Market, in Pasadena, California, and The Brooklyn Flea, in Brooklyn, New York. All of these locations were very clean, orderly, safe, and on the program, appeared to be attended by mainly white, middle-class people, with the exception of few middle class people of color who were on the design teams. In general, the design teams were almost exclusively middle-class or bourgeois bohemian,³⁴ who often had jobs in the fashion industry, design, or technology fields.

This does not mean that the individuals on the program were actually economically middle class, or that their incomes placed them in positions that we associate with “middle class American” status, such as having home ownership or retirement savings. The people on *Flea Market Flip* had social and cultural capital bound up in their associations and tastes, which carry and reinforce structural power (Bourdieu, 1984), that allowed them to pass for middle class, while clouding the material salience of the class structure. Their cosmopolitan fashion sense, attractive straight-toothed smiles and educated mannerisms carried symbolic capital that communicated their membership in the middle class in regard to social, cultural and economic capital. As discussed in the last chapter, on *Storage Wars* the class politics played out largely through the cast, with Darrell Sheets and Jarrod presented as stereotypically working class by

³⁴ By this term I am referring to people who embraced and performed counter-cultural, artistic and/or hedonistic practices, yet did so through modes of consumption which included the adoption of “lifestyles” achieved through middle-class, capitalist sensibilities.

lacking sophistication in how they talked and dressed. At the same time, Barry, the collector who was well off after selling his produce distribution business, and Dave Hester, a second-hand store owner and auctioneer, were portrayed as being more educated and, therefore, identifiably middle class. Mike and Frank of *American Pickers* were also very middle-class in their performance in contrast to many of the poor, rural people with whom they interacted. Finally, on both *Storage Wars* and *American Pickers*, the experts called in to assess items also carried the capital associated with being middle-class, with most being middle-aged white men. This was similar to the dynamics of the collector communities I was able to meet, such as those groups who were interested in antiques and sports memorabilia (which are categories featured on *Trash and Treasure TV*).

In terms of gender, the *Trash and Treasure TV* programs analyzed here and others, such as *Pawn Stars*, also tended to feature very few women. They were more masculine in their presentation of “reality.” For instance, *Storage Wars* highlighted values, attitudes and behaviors stereotypically associated with hegemonic masculine practices, such as competition, aggression (at times) and “face off masculinity,” the latter of which means to never reveal a weakness (Bordo, 2008). Up until the most recent seasons, and excluding the spin off, *Storage Wars: New York*, the primary cast of *Storage Wars* has been male with the exception of one female character, Brandi Passante. This was also true of the experts on *Storage Wars*, who were almost all men, which exemplified Rademacher and Kelly’s (2016) argument that the program mediates the crisis of masculinity and labor in contemporary society by highlighting males as authority figures.

American Pickers was very similar. Mike and Frank are the “pickers,” and Danielle is their female assistant who plays a “helping” role. At times, the show reinforced gender

stereotypes. For example, in one instance, Mike and Frank assigned Danielle to clean a jukebox after they had returned from a trip. The episode closed with Danielle playfully polishing an already clean jukebox while she mimicked 1950s burlesque striptease sensuality before the credits ran.³⁵ Danielle is an actual burlesque dancer in real life (Hawks, 2010) but displays intellectual and professional competencies that go far beyond those assigned to her through patriarchal discourses.

However, her representation on the show as a subordinate and a sex object, regardless of claims to agency, brought *American Pickers* into the web of stereotypical TV programming past, present, and future. This contributed to media portrayals of women as passive subjects who should not be taken seriously. During the first season of *American Pickers*, there were very few women on the program with prominent roles other than Danielle, particularly in regard to knowledgeable traders in antiques and collectibles. Out of this small sample, one was named Laurie “The Junk Lady.” She was white woman in her mid to late 40s who bought entire barns and their contents with the intention of selling the objects and the reclaimed wood from the structures. Aside from those exceptions, a small handful of women played relatively minor roles, mainly as sellers liquidating the collections of their deceased husbands and were not given significant camera time.

Overall, the sellers dominantly portrayed on these shows were middle-aged white men who were long-time collectors or hoarders, which was also a significant representation of my interview sample. As opposed to *Storage Wars* and *American Pickers*, *Flea Market Flip* explicitly portrayed feminized labor in its depictions of secondary market practices and DIY projects. These efforts were largely focused on products for the domestic sphere, which has

³⁵ Season 1, episode 5, *Back Breaker*

traditionally been the domain of women. Although this may be a sharp critique, since women are featured as sellers at times and the dynamic is not necessarily the same on all shows, by and large, on Trash and Treasure TV, women are shown to have lesser agency than men, which is not necessarily the case in real life.

Through my research I learned that different categories of vintage and antique items, such as housewares, furniture and clothing, attracted more women. According to sources (such as Mara, a long-time “picker” who sold in Kenny’s shop, experienced and established postcard collector-dealer Lorene, and vintage-store owner Michelle), it was common for women to concentrate on items such as antique furniture, jewelry, vintage clothing, and other “feminine” objects. I saw this in the field when I met Bernadette (a white woman in her mid 60s) and her daughter Katie (a white woman in her mid to late 20s) in their section of long time dealer Oscar’s antique emporium. They were an upscale duo that concentrated on vintage clothing, books, and unusual curios and knick-knacks. The mother-daughter team procured their stock in high volume through their appraisal and estate sale business in New York City, of which the family patriarch was also a part. Corinne, who I met while she was working in Steve’s shop, also focused on vintage clothing. She had a thriving enterprise both online and in the store where she had a section of higher-end women’s clothing from the early 20th century onward. These women, and others, were just as involved, if not more so, than many of the men who were a part of this study. Regardless, Trash and Treasure TV programs on History or A&E, or even TruTV, the networks where the genre originated in the late 2000s, did not often feature items from the subject areas considered more “feminine.”

However, women were also collectors and amateur dealers alongside the baby boomer-aged men I mentioned, such as Lorena, who was interested in collecting from an early age and

started with commemorative plates about Atlantic City, which is where she grew up. While she said that she had never experienced discrimination or vulgar sexism when dealing with men while buying and selling postcards, photographs and ephemera, she did confirm that her gender did play a role in limiting her ability to travel to shows. Although her husband believed in having an equitable marriage, her responsibilities as a traditional mother took up time when she could otherwise have been out treasure hunting. I also found that women engaged in secondary markets by acting as auxiliary agents for their husbands in the collectors' clubs. Through their involvement they often found an interest in some element of collecting, such as Myrtle who began collecting antique "car vases"³⁶ after she married Charles, a long-time collector of antique glass.

With the younger child-free women I spoke to, the dynamics seemed to shift a bit. They were in partnered relationships, but were unencumbered by domestic life and able to attend trade shows and make time to find things of interest. Dana and Jan, both in their late 20s – early 30s and involved in pop culture toys and collectibles were much like Lorena. As mentioned above, she collected objects related to the hometown of her youth, Atlantic City. Dana and Jan became interested in specific toys from their childhood, such as My Little Pony and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.³⁷ Popular culture fan "nerd culture" or "geek culture" are spaces often dominated by men, as represented on the sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*, and on and RTV show *Comic Book Men*, which is similar to *Pawn Stars*, but focused on pop-culture collectibles. In light of these cultural conditions, I asked them if they had ever faced sexism and misogyny. Both women had

³⁶ Popular items, largely in the 1920s France, that were affixed to the dashboards of automobiles to hold flowers.

³⁷ Long-time dealer, Steve, had noted that nostalgia was very important to the secondary market, particularly with antiques and collectibles. In our interview, Oscar, a successful owner of an antique store touched on this too, and said that he was in a very "psychological business." This makes sense, as like Dana, her partner Rich said that what motivated him was that he was able to have all of the toys he did not get to enjoy as a child.

reported that they had experienced some problems, such as the questioning of their credibility as “fans.” However, Jan and Dana said that those instances were extremely rare. Among their communities in New Jersey, they largely felt very welcomed and supported, and that there were other young women involved in the same capacities.³⁸ This shows that collector’s niches of the real world secondary market are much more diverse than portrayed on Trash and Treasure TV.

Other than on *Flea Market Flip*, the Trash and Treasure TV shows I analyzed also included very few people from minority ethnic or racial groups. For instance, throughout the entire first season of *American Pickers* there was one person of color. He was an affluent African-American man with an interest in gas/petroleum related items, such as pumps and advertisement signs. Everything was in mint condition and displayed in a pristine garage dedicated to his collection. Overall, the racial and ethnic diversity on Trash and Treasure TV was limited to that which conformed to and enforced middle-class norms and values. Whereas in the field the sites I observed, there was a strong diversity in terms of gender, race, and class, particularly in the flea markets and second-hand and antique shops. However, it was at the flea markets where I found the broadest range of social groups.

The flea markets I visited were radically different than the representations on TV. There were significant numbers of people of color, immigrants and lower income white people with a

³⁸ Some of the changes in gender relations as a result of the second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s may account for how these women reported how they and others were able to engage in the pop culture collectibles and fan communities. In addition, the influence of third-wave feminism and contemporary liberal sexual and gender-queer politics may be present too, in constituting more inclusive collector communities. Although men are heavily involved in fandom (and the associated secondary markets), these cultures, while rife with issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia, are also fields from which nonnormative performances of gender emerge in the form of cosplay (a portmanteau for “costume play”) among participants. One example is the phenomenon of the “brony,” a subset of the “furry” subculture (people who dress up as Anime characters or cartoon inspired furry animal costumes) that consists of men that enjoy the children’s TV cartoon *My Little Pony*, a program largely marketed toward young girls, and who therefore like to dress up like the characters of derivatives of (Gilbert, 2015). This affects the gender dynamics of who purchases certain fan products.

smaller presence of those who were recognizably from the solid middle class or above. For example, at the Farmingswood Flea Market's open-air section and its building hosting indoor shops, one could find vendors specializing in services claiming to lower or eliminate cable bills and offering cell phone plans that worked on month-to-month payments or by purchasing minutes - two services primarily sought out by low-income people. There were also places to buy used and discounted work uniforms for nurses, janitors, people in the building and culinary fields, and those who held other working-class jobs. At the outdoor tables, I observed people who did not look prosperous picking through and buying used clothes and housewares. Ultimately, this flea market served as a source for everyday goods and services needed by the working classes and poor – the same people who are omitted from being represented on *Trash and Treasure TV*, as they are disposed of in the physical world (Ouellette, 2017).

Yet, there were also dealers there selling antiques and collectibles for people with more money to spend. These objects ran the gamut in price and quality. Antiques dealer Neidermier (a white man in his early to mid 60s, who I came to learn had known many of those I met through my original snowball sample of collector-dealers) was a weekly fixture who sold higher-quality objects that he “picked” at auctions and private residences, as well as things he had dug out of the ground, such as antique bottles. His items were intended for people who were serious collectors, or for those who desired upper-end vintage or antique items to decorate their homes or businesses. One object he had was a 1950s-era automotive testing device designed to run diagnostics on electrical systems. The machine was in original condition and only lightly used. What made it appealing to passersby were its unusual blue color and the “atomic” motif which consisted of artistic renditions of atoms adorning its exterior. It was eventually sold to a business owner who bought it to decorate the reception area of his auto repair shop.

However, in these real-life flea market scenarios, there were not many people who could afford or who had the cultural capital necessary to be able to do what Neidermier had, or what the self-described pickers Larry and Ivan, contestants on *Flea Market Flip* did when they “make treasures into trophies.”³⁹ Additionally, Farmingswood Flea Market was known for its unruliness. Multiple people talked to me about the violence that occasionally happened in disputes over table space. Thomas (Caucasian, early 60s), a “picker,” collector and part-time dealer who had been trading in antiques and collectibles for over thirty years, commented:

[The market has never] been junkier. The guys that clean out the storage units might be the only chance to catch something out there. It wasn't [always] like that. This year in particular ... it's like instead of throwing it in their garbage [they] can go to [Farmingswood]. They get into fist fights over tables at 3 o'clock in the morning, and then put out five tables of [25cent items] and then not even make 10 dollars to pay ... rent.

Thomas' statement illustrates the deterioration of the conditions at the flea market and the violence and poverty that have emerged there that are related to the current state of the economy and its impact on people's everyday lives.

The Country Village Flea Market differed in that it promoted itself as a place to buy vintage and antique objects for the purposes of both style and function. As described in Chapter 3, each building housed a dedicated vendor who operated a different small business that largely sold vintage and antique used and unused objects (collectibles, knick-knacks, clothing and furniture, etc.) in mid-range to low brackets in regard to price and scarcity, along with the occasional more expensive piece. While Farmingswood Flea Market attracted “pickers,” the Country Village Flea Market was primarily a destination for “antiquing” and scouting for unusual objects, and buying higher-quality items. This market was also less transient than

³⁹ season 1, episode 1, *Barb on a Wire*

Farmingswood as it as it only offered 10 tables for rent at daily rather than hourly rates, and the shops were secured through monthly rents by longer term tenants. Although there were regular vendors at Farmingswood, there was also considerable variation week-to-week due as different people came to rent one or more of the hundreds of tables available for the day.

There were also buildings that contained newer used objects, such as furniture or appliances. These items were bought by working-class people who were on a budget and needed things for their own home. They also bought things for their adult children, who had moved out of the home to work or attend college and needed inexpensive things to start their lives. Henry, a dealer mentioned earlier with over 50 years of experience, had two buildings at the Country Village Flea Market, both of which were filled with furniture that he had acquired through making house calls. Some of his inventory included antiques, but most of it consisted of newer used pieces, such as oak dining room sets and hardwood bedroom furniture. Corroborating the views of other informants, he explained that because of changing popular tastes, large pieces such as oak dining room sets or large hardwood bedroom sets were not as desirable today as they were in the past, which made his asking prices very low, and therefore accessible. Like other participants in this study who performed house calls or bid on storage units, he said that those pieces of furniture were important to his bottom line, and that the shift in market conditions had put a dent in his profits, since that stock just sat in his shop, permanently on display.

Henry and others offered a generational explanation for the changing dynamics of the furniture market. This rationale relied on the presumption that many “millennials” did not want big, bulky furniture sets, particularly those who lived in small, urban apartments and frequently moved. These generational and other economic trends that were recognized by participants

included the salient aspects of race, class, and gender, and will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

These aspects of the research will be discussed as informed by the representative composition of Trash and Treasure TV programs and the ethnographic data of this study. In terms of the shows addressed here, *Flea Market Flip* narrowly presented people, places and things in ways that did not reflect the poverty and class struggles of those who actually frequented these secondary market spaces. In this, the form of “diversity” shown on TV portrayals of the sites on *Flea Market Flip* was limited to younger, stylish, city dwellers, while the poor and economically disenfranchised were absent. In addition to having unbalanced class and gender representations, *American Pickers* and *Storage Wars* were also very racially homogenous in terms of the primary cast, invited experts, and those in supporting semi-scripted “roles” on the show. This will be covered further in the next chapter, particularly in relation to the ways that race, class, and gender exist in the real-life world of secondary markets.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the three Trash and Treasure TV programs analyzed for this study, *American Pickers*, *Storage Wars*, and *Flea Market Flip*. This was done in light of the theories discussed in chapters 2 and 3, along with additional literature and insights gleaned from my interviews and field observations. I have argued that Trash and Treasure TV is a technology of subjectification that has the capacity to show people how to buy and sell objects on the secondary market, within a framework informed by and composed through the performance of contemporary capitalism. The consistent cultural and social messages and presentations of these shows contributed to a cultivation of media subjectivity which is active, yet not outside or immune to structures of power (Gerbner, 1997; Hall, 1980; Kitzinger, 2009).

Trash and Treasure TV has the capacity to shape the *perceptions* of viewers within the cultural and social frameworks provided by the discursive power and affects of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism. Among these perceptions are specific models and representations of how to perform secondary markets according to neoliberal logics, and those of the new political economy. Within this were portrayals of social class, race and gender which often either masked or reified real-life inequalities that were created and/or exacerbated under neoliberal regimes. However, as noted earlier, there are limits to the power of Trash and Treasure TV to reach and create subjects. This will be covered in the following chapter as I discuss how people engage in secondary market practices in relation to labor, leisure, consumption, financial stability or productivity, and other aspects of market activity.

Chapter 5

Treasure Hunting at the Jersey Shore: The Hierarchy and Distribution of Objects and Market

Power

Well the main thing, the fun, the best most fun is the thrill of the hunt, is going and finding it. I love getting into the old house and rooting through the stuff and see what I can discover in there. The same thing with collecting the bottles going out digging them up, ya know? There's a chance you can find something real good every time you go out, sort of like hitting the lottery! - Colonel Mark, project interviewee, auctioneer, collector, dealer with nearly 40 years of experience in the field, and Trash and Treasure TV viewer

In high school I was dating a girl who brought me to my first auction. She says that she's going to go over to [an] auction house, so I said, "Oh, can I go?" She goes, "What do you want to go for?" I says, "You never know." We go over and sit there at an auction. Auctions always seem to me like whenever we would see them broadcast that there was a lot of energy, and it was cool. It being antiques: "What treasure am I going to find?" That's what it seemed like. It seemed like a treasure hunt. - Alex, project interviewee, long-time "picker," collector, and an avid watcher of *American Pickers*

Thus far, this dissertation has established how Trash and Treasure TV can be a technology of governmentality and social control and demonstrated some of the ways that viewers have engaged with the genre in terms of audience readings and media influence. I explored these phenomena through the incorporation of data from interviews and observation that illustrated the economic structure and social relations that compose the secondary market scene along the Jersey Shore. This research revealed the importance of flea markets, auctions, and second-hand stores as sites of exchange where people circulated material objects and money. It also explained the potential and limitations of Trash and Treasure TV as a strategy of governance. However, we can only understand the significance of these shows through a closer examination of the real-life dynamics of secondary markets.

Opening this chapter, I explain the broader economic arrangement and touch on matters of labor, profit and power within those processes. This includes how different tiers of participants performed and co-constructed the secondary market in the area of New Jersey at the center of this study known as the Jersey Shore. Specifically, I will discuss how top-level dealers

sold in volume and traded in the highest-end objects. They also fed less affluent vendors who traded on a smaller scale or sold lower-quality items that they eventually passed on to individual consumers, or occasionally to other sellers. After that section, I will move toward further fleshing out the ways that social identities, such as economic class, and changes in generational populations, were relevant to the workings of the secondary market at the Jersey Shore. I will do this by explaining what participants had characterized to me as a serious downturn in the antiques market. This dip in the trade involved larger issues. These include the multiple economic recessions that have occurred since 2001, shifts in taste that have come with changes in the consumer market and a related culture of disposability that has influenced people's relationships with objects and each other. The final section will detail how economic and affective conditions shape the performance of the local secondary market, and draw conclusions about the reach and power of Trash and Treasure TV in its circulation and subjectification.

The Distribution of People, Objects, and Money

As discussed in earlier chapters, the people I interviewed bought and sold objects on the secondary market economy at the Jersey Shore. These exchanges took place at private residences in pre-arranged meetings, or spontaneously at auctions, flea markets, estate sales, yard sales, second hand stores, and collector's trade shows. The trade shows attended by those I had met were focused on particular interests in antiques and collectibles, such as antique glass, postcards and ephemera, comic books and toys, records and pop culture memorabilia, coins and stamps. Participants also conducted transactions on eBay, Craig's List, and increasingly on mobile "apps" such as letgo.com and Instagram⁴⁰ (the use of secondary market digital platforms is

⁴⁰ letgo.com is an app for mobile phones dedicated specifically to buying and selling objects. People take photos of their used goods and set a price. Then browsers searching a particular geographic area can buy a given object through the application.

detailed in the next chapter). Many of the deals that were made within these physical and virtual sites involved individuals selling items in small quantities to consumers who were not buying wholesale. Those who bought and sold in the most volume and in the highest-end objects acquired their stock by performing what are referred to as “house calls” and by attending auctions.

These actors wielded substantial power over less established competitors with little experience, such as individuals who were potentially inspired by *Trash and Treasure TV*. They also held an advantage over those who may have had a history of trading on the secondary market, but did not possess as many resources. Operating at these upper levels of the market (buying and selling high-priced objects and/or in large volume) required dealers to keep large amounts of cash on hand. They needed access to such sums of money so they would always be prepared to take in-the-moment, on-the-spot risks, such as in an auction setting, where outcomes can be unpredictable. A similar situation involved buying the contents of entire rooms and even homes that may have contained only a few objects of value once a more thorough assessment had been conducted. A significant amount of economic capital is required to make that type of investment. This financial and practical risk-taking creates a barrier to entry for most everyday people.

That barrier has been exacerbated by the influx of new participants entering the market who were inspired by the TV shows. For instance, as noted in the last chapter, informants who had frequented storage unit auctions for years reported that they witnessed an increase in participants after the debut of the show *Storage Wars*. This illustrated the effect these shows had on the public. One interviewee, Steve, who had been attending storage auctions for approximately 20 years, said that with the rising popularity of these TV shows, he noticed that

the average amount of people in attendance at the auctions he regularly attended rose from 5 – 15 participants per day to 70 – 100 per day. He added that the newcomers could not compete with established traders. This is not only due to a knowledge deficit, but also a lack of capital. Having fewer resources meant that newer participants could not sustain the losses that came with the mistakes they made while adjusting to the learning curve.

This steady stream of newcomers largely consisted of inexperienced people who would spend their resources until exhaustion, and eventually, if not rapidly, exit the market. Although according to Anthony, another long-term auction participant, there was no shortage of new bidders and emphasized that they “just ke[pt] comin’” and over time, “ruined the business” for him. By “ruining the business,” Anthony was referring to the resulting uptick in competition that dramatically drove up the prices of units. Regarding these effects, he explained how “people are really not in this business take a thousand, two thousand dollars and roll the dice.” However, the popularity of programs such as *Storage Wars* and *Auction Hunters* and their emphasis on the potential for quick profit “bought a lot of people in, so the rooms that [people] were paying a hundred, two hundred dollars for [in the past] were now fifteen hundred dollars.”

Eventually, like those new buyers that lacked staying power, Anthony stopped buying and selling because he felt that it was too much of a risk. At the time of the interview, Anthony had not “bought a room in six to seven months,” when he “used to buy eight to ten rooms every week.” To him, it was not worth investing time and money into bidding on units since “real rooms,” those full of valuable antiques or collectibles, only came up two to three times per year. With the increased number of people bidding, a single unit of that quality was now commanding upwards of five thousand to six thousand dollars. Hence, the rise in auction participants brought on by the TV shows was not only economically disappointing for most newcomers, but also

harmed long-term auction bidders such as Anthony, who could no longer compete due to the inflated costs of rooms.

This dynamic illuminates the limitations of the televisual dispositif in terms of Trash and Treasure TV's power to create entrepreneurial subjects and invigorate markets. In fact, reminiscent of practices in investment capitalism, the new participants had their labor and money rapidly siphoned away, and once completely drained of their resources, they were disposed of along with the worthless items that were sent to the flea markets and the municipal dumps.⁴¹ Instead of creating solutions for the problems people struggled with after the Great Recession, such as finding options for employment, the efforts of those who attempted to enter the market were thwarted. Moreover, as evidenced by Anthony's exodus, the influx of bidders disrupted the already-existing order. This complicated how techniques of governmentality have been theorized, and in turn, demonstrated how their power to organize society could have adverse outcomes.

Additionally, Anthony asserted that the educational aspect of Trash and Treasure TV "taught people what to rob out of the rooms," as it brought information about antiques, collectibles and other valuable items to a broader audience, particularly the owners and managers of storage unit facilities. This increased the difficulty of turning a profit for long-term bidders, since knowledge about what was and was not valuable (once held only by experienced bidders) was now made common by the TV shows. Since buyers commonly do not know what is in the unit they are bidding on until it is opened in front of them, those with access to the lockers have the chance to unscrupulously take an object that a bidder would have won if it had not been stolen by an insider prior to the auction. Much like the way that Trash and Treasure TV glossed

⁴¹ For instance, Bain Capital, an investment firm founded by one-time U.S. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, has often purchased struggling companies, extracted all of their value, and filed them for bankruptcy (Kosman, 2017).

over the labor involved in the process and cost of disposing unwanted items from a unit won at an auction *and* the stories of those people whose property is being sold off (both mentioned in earlier chapters), this is another layer of “reality” that programs such as *Storage Wars* and *Auction Hunters* had regularly omitted. This phenomenon was also evidence of Trash and Treasure TV’s disruptive potential, beyond the increased number of legitimate participants, which further revealed the limits of the televisual dispositif.

After abandoning the storage unit auctions, Anthony focused his efforts on “house calls.” This was a practice performed by Mike and Frank from *American Pickers*, and all of the larger-scale dealers in my sample. This group included auctioneer “Colonel Mark,” antique store owners Steve and Kenny, and flea market salesman Henry, who had a used furniture shop that consisted of two buildings at the Country Village Flea Market. Working through word-of-mouth communication and peer-to-peer recommendations, these dealers visited homes to buy specific objects, the contents of entire rooms, or even everything in a house. Sellers were people who were moving, downsizing their lifestyles, liquidating their own possessions due to a personal financial crisis, clearing out those things that once belonged to a deceased relative such as a parent, or merely seeking to sell one or more objects for any number of reasons. Buying everything in a room or home allowed dealers to acquire a range of objects for their stock at a low cost.

However, according to those I spoke with, most of houses they visited largely contained newer, mass produced furniture and housewares that were of limited value in regard to antiques, collectibles, or other high-value items (such as new professional-grade musical instruments and equipment, expensive electronics, firearms, luxury clothing, jewelry or boutique fashion accessories). For instance, auctioneer Colonel Mark, who made house calls for approximately 30

years had noted that “the average estate ... if [the owners] weren’t collectors or anything is maybe only worth \$2,000.” His quote referred to the physical objects contained within the home, not to the homes themselves, additional properties, automobiles, or other select items that would comprise a total “estate.” Many times, for the informants, “house calls” were actually “house cleanouts,” as there were few things of value that the dealer had paid for or been paid to take. This meant that most of the things acquired in house calls were low value items in need of disposal, much like the unwanted items that come with storage units.

The most common and profitable mode of getting rid of these items was through “bottom feeders,” a term used to denote people who are hired by dealers and paid to dispose of excess merchandise. The bottom feeders then took whatever they believed had some value to the flea market, antique shops, or individual dealers or collectors who they thought would be interested and sold those objects to pay for the fees at the municipal dump, where the remaining items would be brought. Any other money that was generated beyond those expenses was their profit. Illustrating the economic hierarchy of the local secondary market, many “bottom feeders” were poor and lower class working people. Some of those I met, based on visual markers such as rotting or missing teeth (a condition associated with extreme dental neglect and/or drug use, such as that of a “crack head” or heroin addict), appeared to have lived lives of struggle with poverty and substance abuse.

During the period that I conducted observation at the Farmingsood flea market, one group of bottom feeders that met the description above set up their wares in the same place every week. They sold what they had acquired in “clean outs.” These are the disposal ends of “house calls” when there few objects of actual value left in the home. However, more affluent individuals also built relationships with bottom feeders. For instance, Oscar, a successful shop owner, had several

bottom feeders he worked with who would go to flea markets, yard sales, estate sales and auctions to find stock. They would scour the sites and receive compensation for the objects and their efforts when they returned to his store. This practice was not restricted to those who operate businesses and possess the most capital, such as Oscar, Steve, or Anthony. Collector and amateur dealer, Thomas, who bought and sold to fund his collection, had built a rapport with the bottom feeders at Farmingswood who performed house clean outs. He gained a reputation for his love for old photographs and postcards, and willingness to pay cash for on-the-spot "finds."

Often, the bottom feeders Thomas knew went directly to his home where he engaged with them in what he called "porch picking." In our interview, he discussed his dealings, when he recalled:

I found out that they used to call me 'Beer Guy Thom.' They would drop a banana box on my porch at the end of the day, I'd give them \$20 and they'd go get their beer. That's changed ... now that they know I am making a little money at it when they come they stay and look at everything. They get a little more money but I still win.

This quote exemplified the way that stereotypes of lower class people may have encouraged the reproduction of power inherent within the capitalist system at the level of the local secondary market. It is possible that some of the money made by bottom feeders did not go toward alcohol. It could have been that some money made on the porch may have gone toward buying beer (or not), while the rest of their profit was dedicated toward etching out a meager existence.

Additionally, his insistence on having "won" in the end signaled the presence of a spirit of individualism and competition in which there are "winners" and "losers." Success and failure under extreme competition was often portrayed on Trash and Treasure TV programs such as *Storage Wars* as being determined by an individual's entrepreneurial capacities alone. The other aspects that affect success on the secondary market (such as education, investment capital, and

the financial security and leisure time needed to develop expertise) were not depicted. This example shows how in real life, outcomes of “winning and losing” fell along class lines.

Defined more broadly by other people in the sample, the term “bottom feeder” did not necessarily only apply to those who occupied the lowest tiers of the socioeconomic hierarchy. For instance, when talking with Country Village Flea Market vendors Jeff and Paula about the term and its associations, they looked at each other in recognition, and Jeff said “we use the term too, and we are them sometimes.” They had bought and sold valuable objects, but largely traded in everyday items with nostalgic or kitsch value, such as Pyrex dishes from the 1950s and 1960s (some being very rare), vintage aprons and kitchen appliances, or costume jewelry. Although these items were of higher quality than the “junk” sold by the bottom feeders at Farmingswood, they largely fell into the lower-end category of the things exchanged, particularly when referring to old, used, “vintage,” or “antique” objects that commanded high prices. There were many others like Jeff and Paula, people who not associated with the classist stereotypes bound up in the term “bottom feeder.” Many, if not all of my participants and those I observed, scoured the “bottom” for objects to resell, and did not suffer from poverty and the corresponding pathologies such as substance abuse that often accompany living under poor conditions.

However, boundaries were drawn as distinguished by one’s socioeconomic position and the extent to which their reliance on bottom feeding was a means of subsistence. Amateur dealer-collectors, such as those who traded antiques and collectibles for what is largely expendable income and owners of successful stores all utilized bottom feeding as merely one of their avenues for acquiring or unloading items. This was in addition to their primary means of generating income. Jeff and Paula, for example, were semi-retired, and used their participation bottom feeding in the secondary market to supplement their finances and manage with

emergencies, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Participants such as Thomas and those further up the chain (Oscar, Steve, and Anthony) utilized bottom feeders for sourcing stock to sell in order to supplement their collection and/or generate profits. The Farmingswood bottom feeders were comparable to salvagers who scavenged the landscape for scraps in a constant hustle to render as much refuse into cold, hard cash as possible. Such is the lower end of the class hierarchy on the secondary market, and in the greater social order, as these arrangements do not emerge in a vacuum.

The next section will discuss the local secondary market in regard to larger contexts, namely the economic downturns of the early 2000s and demographic shifts in New Jersey's population that have impacted the value and circulation of objects. Following that will be a section that focuses in detail on how people used the local secondary markets, and how economics and affect were factors in identifying the limits of the interpellative and subjectifying power of the RTV dispositif.

“The Downturn”: Recessions, Generations, and Disposability

According to long-time buyers and sellers, the current downturn in the value of antiques (mentioned in Chapter 4) is not just a short-term slump. The most cynical interviewee, Oscar, saw the overall antiques trade as having been in such poor health that he declared it to be “dead.” Other long-term dealers felt similarly. Citing unnamed online sources combined with his observations in the field, Colonel Mark believed the “antique business” and “hobby” would be completely gone in 10 to 20 years. Kenny, who had been buying and selling antiques and collectibles for approximately 40 years and owned two successful shops had noticed the trend early on, well before the Great Recession. He noted that it corresponded with the early downward spin in the economy following 9/11:

...it started around 9/11. I don't know if it was a coincidence, or if it had something to do with it, but if you go back into the 80s and 90s, it was probably the best the antique business has ever been. Every time you turned around you said "it just can't keep getting better," and stuff just kept going up, and up, and up, and up. And ...you can sell [something] the minute you got it. And right about 2001, whether it was a gradual thing coming up and nobody saw it coming, but business just started falling. Then, month after month, and year after year, it just got worse. All of the sudden, people were in the position, big time dealers, who bought this tiger maple highboy at an auction at Sotheby's in 1997 for \$150,000 and ... they are scrambling to get 50,000 for it. Now if you read the *Maine Antiques Digest*, which is, in my opinion, the Bible of the antiques business you can see things that sold in 1986, 1989, 1994, 2001, are now selling for a fraction of what they were selling at auction back then.

Kenny's observation was not one of mere coincidence. Within the 12 months after the attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. spun into a recession, saw a brief period of recovery, and then began to show signs of a slowdown (Doward, 2002). Efforts to jumpstart the economy between 2001 and 2007 were not as successful as proponents had predicted (Aron-Dine, Kogan, & Stone, 2008). The expansion that did occur was weaker than during comparable business cycles over time and mainly related to corporate growth (Aron-Dine, Kogan, & Stone, 2008) as opposed to increased consumer spending. These conditions certainly could have had an impact on the higher-end antiques market.

Although New Jersey's economy was somewhat insulated due to fiscal inertia, entrenched industry and the state's proximity to multiple metropolitan areas, the state had also experienced periods of job loss and stagnation, with the Great Recession being the longest and most impactful (Hughes & Seneca, 2013). Along with economic rationales, participants reported two explanations for the downturn in the antiques market. The first posited the issue as generational, and had at its core the assertion that "millennials" were not interested in antiques. An important factor here is that those who were the most adamant about this theory were baby boomers - people mostly in their 50s and 60s at the time of the interviews. This then began to make sense as another potential factor within the economic milieu. It coincided with a trend

experienced in New Jersey since the year 2000, in which the state's age demographic began to shift from one that was dominated by baby boomers to one that became more heavily centered on millennials (Hughes & Seneca, 2013). This suggests that tastes had changed with the societal make up, which had diverted spending patterns into areas other than antiques, particularly mid-century modern objects, industrial items, and pop culture toys and collectibles.

A second and related reason for the shifts in the secondary market as elucidated by long-time established members of the antiques and collectibles community pivoted on disposability. Participants argued that the mass-production of the mid 20th century had created a "throw-away" culture among younger generations, in particular, "millennials." In this narrative they used things until they were broken, obsolete, or unwanted, and then relegated them to a landfill or recycling center, only to then buy a replacement that would have the same life cycle. This subjective orientation was characterized by interviewees as one that lacked a desire to fix or refurbish old items, accumulate possessions or build collections. This included family heirlooms or other valuable objects acquired through inheritance or other transfers of generational wealth. Both explanations and their correlations with one another will be discussed the following sections.

"Millennials" and the Local Market: Taste and Class

Four participants whose primary source of income came from their antique businesses, all baby boomers, had each acknowledged that tastes had changed with the new population of consumers. Preferences had shifted away from old antiques and toward European, mid-century modern designed furniture, stark industrial aesthetics, and other items, such as vintage clothing and assorted objects with 20th century nostalgic value. The latter classification included old technology and pop culture collectibles.

Home décor as a category was particularly significant, as furniture sets for bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms had once been staple commodities for dealers who sourced these pieces from house cleanouts for very small initial investments and yielded high returns. As tastes and need had morphed, some dealers understood that they had to respond by shifting their behaviors. Steve, a long-time trader on the secondary market who owned a popular shop acknowledged this, saying “guys like myself have to change their buying habits.” This is something he actively tried to do, by stocking more mid-century modern home fashions, pop-culture collectibles, rock and roll memorabilia, and expanding his vinyl record section.

This change of tastes noted by participants was apparent to me by the prevalence of these items in the shops and flea markets that I had visited. In one Jersey Shore town, there was an entire store dedicated to the mid-century modern aesthetic that was right around the corner from a larger antique “emporium” (where I observed and recruited participants) that also sold pieces from that category. I met individuals who sold from these categories, such as Lamont, a younger dealer in his late 30s who used Instagram to sell mid-century modern furniture, home décor, and other objects from that period. Another vendor, Bruce, who was in his early 30s, scoured the flea markets to acquire stock, which also consisted of mid-century pieces. Trash and Treasure TV has portrayed this shift as a larger trend beyond New Jersey. For instance, objects in mid-century modern styles and those possessing an industrial aesthetic were often “upcycled” (the process of repurposing, recycling, or restoring objects for resale) on *Flea Market Flip*.

Although money had been diverted from the formal antiques market to trade in mid-century modern and industrial design, it had also gone into the pop-culture collectibles and memorabilia market, which long-time dealer, Oscar, said can be “for the very wealthy.” This is because some of these objects have commanded extremely high prices. In our conversation,

Oscar referenced objects related to the popular Pokémon card game as being very expensive. This was an accurate statement. For example, in 2016, a single card, the “Pikachu Illustrator” fetched \$54,970 at auction (Whitten, 2016). Even though none of the pop culture collectors I met had items of this order, such prices were not an anomaly, as coveted objects across the collectible categories have the potential to be highly valued. In my sample, five of the people interviewed who were aged 30 and under were in the pop-culture collectibles market. Four out of the five were in paired couples. One couple, Jan and Pete, had gotten married shortly after our conversation. They were the producers of a long running and popular web series referred to by their fans as “the *American Pickers* of toys and collectibles.”

On their program, they are shown driving throughout the state of New Jersey and scouring toy stores, trade shows, second hand shops, flea markets, yard sales and other sites to buy objects for their collection. The difference between them and TV portrayals on *American Pickers* is that Pete and Jan are primarily collectors who rarely part with anything. Therefore, the premise of reselling is not a part of their show. With a middle-class budget to fund their program and hobby, they had a very large collection that they had to pare down after marrying and moving into their new home. This decision was made due to a lack of storage space and because they wanted to offset the cost of their wedding. Additionally, their objects were higher-value, since they preferred their collectibles “mint-in-box” (which means in top condition and still in the original packaging). They have worked to find bargains and expressed that it was important to pay “fair” prices. To them such gestures signified acts of good faith meant to create and promote the close-knit community spirit that was established among the toy and collectible enthusiasts in their extended network.

At the same time, there are those in the pop culture collectables market who did not privilege the objects that were in the most pristine condition. Couple Rich and Dana, who introduced me to Pete and Jan, were the operators of a toy and collectibles shop in the Country Village Flea Market. They corroborated Jan and Pete's portrayal of how people interested in pop-culture toys and collectibles tended to relate to one another as friends or associates, and kept front and center their needs as fellow humans. Rich and Dana teamed up and combed the flea markets, swap meets, yard sales, and cans of garbage to acquire things for their collections and their shop. Their philosophy was that they wanted to have something in their store for every price bracket. Rich explained that this was not just about being able to cater to a wide variety of consumers. He specifically noted that parents who did not have a lot of money should not have to spend excessively on toys (which in better condition would be a collector's item, and therefore priced higher) that their child may not take care of. In addition, while condition was important, both he and Dana were not preoccupied with mint-in-box items for their own accumulation.

Notably, their financial situation was different than Pete and Jan's. Rich and Dana were positioned as more working class than middle class. Additionally, Dana explicitly discussed her childhood coming from a poor background and how that influenced her to become a picker:

When I was little ... I was still embarrassed [by having second-hand clothes, toys, and things]... but I grew up in poverty. I always thought my mom. I didn't know she didn't resell. She just brought it home and decorated our house with it. So I didn't see the value in the resale process until I got older, and I realized, 'oh my, gosh! I can sell this stuff? I can... make money?'

Their class status and comments suggested that there could have been a correlation between their social position, taste preferences, and perspectives on objects that many others might have considered to be garbage (Bourdieu, 1984). Dana and Rich, in juxtaposition to Pete and Jan (who almost exclusively collected mint-condition objects), exemplified the range of social classes of the people who participated in the local pop-culture collectibles secondary market.

As shown in this section, the demographic shifts in the population had moved taste culture away from the antiques market and traditional staples, such as large oak dining room and bedroom sets, and toward mid-century modern aesthetics and the pop culture collectibles that were nostalgic to younger generations. This meant that collecting as hobby and the antiques market were not in a process of death, but one of transformation. In this state of change, the interest in some categories or means of accumulation was dying along with the older generations who collected in specific subject areas (e.g. stamp collecting and coins). However, people still fashioned their spaces with old things, or built collections in ways that were underpinned by affection for the objects and the communities that desired them.

Some participants noted that trends over time had been cyclical, and that the categories that have lost collectors will eventually regain them. Regardless, the emergence of consumer markets composed of younger generations had occurred within the context of mass production and consumerism, which were always-already in their influence on material culture. The next section will discuss the cultural practices of disposability encouraged by what has been described as the “throw-away society.” These social virtues will be connected to the larger trends of the general downturn in particular subject areas and categories of the antiques market, and the corresponding generational shifts in tastes.

Consumption and the “Throw-Away Society”

The second explanation given by long-term collectors and dealers for the downturn in the antiques market is the cultural practice of disposability. Multiple participants commented on the impact that the mass production of inexpensive objects, intended for replacement at the end of their “lifespan,” had on the development of a “throw-away society.” Oscar felt strongly about this development and its impact on the secondary market, particularly in regard to antiques:

... living in a historical neighborhood I always was amazed at the craftsmanship and the workmanship. You know I used to custom make furniture, and when I used to touch a piece of wood, and see how these guys - you know they have a saying - "those were the days when men were steel and tools were wood." You know how they did it with hand tools was amazing, so I had a great appreciation for things from that period. Now, since the late 60s and early 70s everything is disposable. That's one of the things we're finding as antique dealers. We go out looking for stuff, forgetting that the generation that's out there that's 40 and 50 years old - the stuff they were buying was made during that period when they started making disposable crap. So they don't have really anything that's worth anything, it's all garbage - that's 50 years already!

Here, Oscar pointed out how long disposable objects have been present on the consumer market.

To him, the integration of these items into the lives of consumers had shaped people's relationships with the various things they used in everyday life that in the past were not necessarily understood as "disposable." Although he named Generation Xers (those born between 1965 and 1981),⁴² Oscar saw even younger generations as most affected by the cultural practices of disposability. On this matter he declared, "They want nothing. Most of the young kids today, especially the Millennials, collect nothing."⁴³

Oscar's expert perspective was one laden with cynicism in regard to what younger generations do or do not see as valuable. Yet, his assertion that younger people do not collect was not completely true. As Steve noted, it is just that "a small percentage of young people are interested in the *old* antiques," and vendors like him had to change their buying habits if they wanted to engage younger market segments. This is because "people that [grew] up in the computer age [are] now maybe in their 20s or early 30s, [and are] collecting video game stuff, and Pac Man and things from their childhood." Other data gathered through my interviews supported Steve's statement, including comments made by vendors Rich and Dana, their friend

⁴² <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/03/here-is-when-each-generation-begins-and-ends-according-to-facts/359589/>

⁴³ Millennials are those born between 1982 and 2004.

Hank (a young veteran of the secondary market) and collectors Jan and Pete. However, what Oscar, Colonel Mark, and others who complained about the changing tastes of millennials were concerned with was a perception that younger people lacked the desire to keep the things that were being left behind by previous generations who were dying off.

Kenny blatantly said that he had seen “things which may have been in [a] family for 200 years that this generation [didn’t] want ... The heirs to whoever said ‘I don’t want this old crap’ and you look and say, ‘this isn’t old crap, its old, but it’s not crap.’” Colonel Mark’s tone was softer, and offered a sociocultural assessment of why younger generations may not have wanted to collect antiques and other objects:

... It’s the lifestyle of the kids. Ya know, they don’t go and get a job anymore in General Motors and they’re there their whole life. Maybe they work here for two years, three years over here, and they’re not working in the same locale. They might get shipped across the country, moving a lot. Kids aren’t driving much anymore. They want microunits now, these small units, and they’re minimalists, ya know, they want to travel and look at the world. They don’t want to be caretaker of the stuff, but they want to see it. They have an interest in looking at it, but they want to look at it in museums.

Oscar also connected the downturn in the antiques trade and aspects of the secondary market to larger social trends related to job security and frequent moves. He made a similar argument about why young people did not want to accumulate things:

Nothing is stable anymore. Everything is transient. You get on a job, and you don’t go on with the idea that you are going to stay there until you retire like our parents and grandparents who were on the job for forty or fifty years. Today you’re lucky if you get four years out of a job until it downsizes, moves, or merges ... Now, we have six apartments above the store. I never see a moving truck, ever! They buy Ikea and abandon it. They just leave it! We end up throwing it out! It’s cheaper than hiring a moving truck!

His response toward those he understood as the “Millennials” was based on his perception of the lifestyles of contemporary young people. This view was formed through what he saw as a negative change in social and cultural conditions that he thought had occurred through material

culture. For example, over time, Oscar saw things such as sterling silverware sets that were produced by designing houses such as Tiffany and ornate silver candlesticks made in Russia sent to the recycling smelter.

Without explicitly expressing it, these explanations implicated global capitalism in these shifts in the local secondary market and larger antiques trade. The industrial manufacture of goods using inexpensive labor had made everyday things affordable enough to replace rather than repair them once they have worn out. In addition, the neoliberal arrangement privileged flexibility. This, as pointed out by Oscar and Colonel Mark, implored subjects to accept the demands placed upon them to be increasingly mobile. The material culture of disposable consumption combined with the economic recession and changes in taste had lowered demand, and consequently, the value of objects in many categories of the antiques market. These circumstances had made it more permissible to dispose of unnecessary things. These unwanted objects included those that did not fit into the practical needs or aesthetic tastes of younger generations of secondary market consumers. There is little demand for high-end flatware and silver candlesticks due to a lack of need and a change in taste. Having little worth, people discard these objects, along with, for example, broken toasters, obsolete technology such as VCRs, and furniture from IKEA.

As Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini (2012) have reminded us, “garbage” is not an objective thing, but a subjective category. In the context discussed here, unwanted objects were the equivalent of refuse. “Worth” was contingent on how much money an item can command on the open market, or that item was destined for the landfill. People are also subject to such rendering under neoliberal or control society rationales. This occurs when these mentalities (that underpin social relations) allow people to be considered as disposable as trash.

Those who are not creating value as productive human capital and are unable to adapt to the new political economy as it unfolds lose their worth until they are classified as garbage and essentially disposed of. This mode of governance is what cultural critic Henry Giroux has called a “biopolitics of disposability,” a Foucauldian concept that media scholar Laurie Ouellette (2017) has applied to the analysis of reality television programs she called “dispossession TV.” By this she meant a broad category of programs focused on “recessionary boom businesses,” such as the “predatory lending, repossession, and foreclosure industries.” *Storage Wars* and *Pawn Stars* are two Trash and Treasure TV programs that could be counted among them. Additionally, in my field observations I saw those who may have fit into the categories of people considered “disposable,” which will be discussed in the next section.

As I have shown above, within a post-recession context, demographic shifts had a strong impact on the local secondary market by diverting interest and money away from the trade of traditional antiques, and toward pop-culture collectibles and mid-century vintage decor. Moreover, the greater economic arrangement encouraged people to downscale their lifestyles by owning fewer possessions and living in smaller spaces. These factors, along with cultural rationales of disposability shaped perspectives on the value of what were once desirable objects, and the “worth” of people who participate in constituting our market economy. In the final section of this chapter, I will illustrate in greater detail how local secondary markets are performed under the cultural and socioeconomic conditions discussed thus far.

Economy and Affect: Performing the Local Secondary Market

Many people I spoke with commented on the significance of socioeconomic and cultural phenomena related to the recessions of the early 2000s. For instance, Kenny, the owner of two large and successful antique shops observed that when the Great Recession hit, people sold

things based on a perception that they were in financial jeopardy or on the verge of it. He was skeptical that the Great Recession had a devastating impact on the economy or people's lives in general, and thought it was overblown in the media. However, he still saw this trend among people who felt that they were on the verge of financial peril. On this he commented:

I do think in some respect that the recession, if you want to call it that, got some people nervous. They thought "we're gonna run out of money, we're gonna lose our house, my jobs gonna get lost" and they sold whatever it may be, whether it was an antique or a car. Oh we've got that storage unit? Get rid of it. You know? And I think what happened is that it scared people that it's the end of the world, and that they're going to be waiting in line for a slice of bread for three hours. You know? And I think what happened was, well, it's a chain reaction they get nervous and somebody else went into foreclosure, and they look and say oh my God my mortgage is \$1400 a month and if I lose my job what are we gonna do? But you know, I think it just scared people into doing what they didn't need to do.

Regardless of his views on the economic downturn, Kenny noted that people sold their possessions when they felt in financial danger. They also did so as a way to make their post-retirement years more comfortable, since children often did not want their parents' things. The phenomenon of younger generations having little interest in inheriting their parents' or grandparents' prized objects (no matter how valuable in terms of money or sentiment) was mentioned in multiple interviews, and was explained in terms of generational differences. Contemporary young people are living much more transient lifestyles than previous generations, due in no small part to economic conditions demanding that they "flexibly" change jobs and geographically relocate often, typically into tiny apartments that cannot accommodate numerous personal effects.

However, Kenny's perspective on the Great Recession was not shared by everyone and my interviews revealed diverse perspectives. Oscar, a serious, intense, but good natured man who owned a very profitable shop on the Jersey Shore described poverty trends that he had been seeing over the recent years. He noted that there were many living in the area that had difficulty

keeping their heads above water. In our interview, he said, “people are selling their personal goods just to survive. I mean, people are selling things just to buy food ... and I see [this] because I walk around the flea markets and I talk to all [kinds of people].” While interviewees had differing ideas about why people were selling their objects, there was a common belief that people were selling much more since the Great Recession. Anthony, a higher-level dealer mentioned earlier, thought it was possible that his house cleanout business had picked up momentum over time due to people needing money. I also met Evelyn, a middle-aged white woman selling knick-knacks, Christmas and Halloween decorations, books, and children’s toys that she and her husband Vijay acquired while cleaning out homes that he sold through his real estate business. She said that they had more opportunities due to the downturn and the corresponding upswing in home foreclosures, along with the voluntary and involuntary scaling down in people’s lifestyles.

The tepid economic climate regarding wages, employment opportunities, and social welfare assistance for the working class has also prompted people to become secondary market entrepreneurs as an alternative to finding work in the formal marketplace. Lower middle class people depended on these sites to survive day-to-day, particularly in terms of paying the rent or mortgage, or at the very least, to supplement their incomes. Given the whittling down of access to pensions and the diminishment of the social safety net that have occurred since the 1980s, this was especially the case for older people, such as those who were at or approaching retirement age. For instance, Glenn, a dealer in his early 60s, decided to work full time in his business selling pop culture memorabilia and used records after his job at a factory became unstable following the Great Recession. He sold at flea markets, rock-and-roll collectibles shows and through platforms such as eBay and Amazon. His wife, who was unable to work due to health

issues, packed and shipped their online orders. It was with her help that they were able to keep up with sales as their enterprise expanded. In another example, vendors Jeff and Paula - retirees who lived on a fixed income - found that their business helped them substantially when they had to pay a very expensive and unexpected debt. In their situation, their electrical provider had been billing them inaccurately, charging them monthly less than was owed. When the utility company informed them of the actual amount due, their vintage shop at the flea market helped keep their household afloat.

I also encountered younger people who used the secondary market as a means of generating an income. Despite both being white and college educated, Matt and Amy were in their early thirties, under-employed and among the working poor at the Jersey Shore. As relatively new vendors, they had been buying and selling for a little over six months at the time of our interview. During my conversation with Matt at Farmingswood Flea Market, we sat in his and Amy's dilapidated recreational vehicle surrounded by piles of used and broken toys, old knick-knacks, and boxes of random objects. The entire back of the vehicle was filled with 40 old bicycles. Some of them were complete and in acceptable condition, while others were missing parts and rusty. They told me that they were going to rehabilitate and resell the bikes, and that they had plans to open a small used bicycle shop at the Country Village Flea Market, where many of the participants in this study bought and sold.

Prior to vending at flea markets, they had used the secondary market to sell homemade jewelry that Amy made. However, it was Matt who wanted to pursue working at the flea market full time, as he saw value in objects that are often written off as mere garbage. In our discussion, he raised the instructional capacities of RTV and explained that *Storage Wars* could teach people what they could sell on the secondary market, particularly in terms of lower end objects. He

noted that the TV character “Barry,” who is dubbed on the show as “The Collector,” was known for “kicking [less valuable] things over and saying that ‘it’s all junk.’” Illustrating how one man's trash is another man's treasure, Matt explained:

Everything he’s kicking over is *my* merchandise. I’m watching him kick over 10 dollars, five dollars, and see how like the other guy is there with his son, and he’s like ‘here’s five dollars, here’s five dollars.’ You need to know. You don’t want the gold to slip through your fingers, but you need to understand the value of the other stuff or it doesn’t work.

Matt likened his practice of buying and selling lower-end objects to those of media mogul Ted Turner, who he admired for recognizing the potential and therefore the value of “garbage.” He explained that Turner would purchase failing radio stations, ultra high-frequency TV broadcasters, and professional wrestling leagues, and rehabilitate those businesses to make them profitable.

Matt’s sourcing strategy for his flea market business entailed browsing sections dominated by the “bottom feeders” who were employed to perform house cleanouts. Then he located individual pieces and boxed items that piqued his interest. After that he would point at full tables and declare to the vendor that he was willing to buy all of the things on and/or around them for a lump sum. On the day of our interview, he paid \$30 for several tables of things that were “what [the bottom feeders] bought last week and didn’t sell.” Since the vendors would have had to pay to dispose of the objects, or as Matt pointed out “rent more tables or a storage unit,” they normally accepted his offers, as they had done that day. He appreciated his opportunities to buy things for “pennies on the dollar,” and insisted that by purchasing that way, it was possible to sell things for .50 cents or \$1.00 and “no matter what, you are going to make your money back.” Demonstrating that there is a market for everything and that not all buyers are concerned with making huge profits (in contrast to the kinds of buyers shown on TV), Matt summed up his

perspective by saying that the term “garbage” just meant that the objects were “undervalued,” and they were merely an “unsorted resource.”

Amy told me that she reluctantly agreed to work at the flea market full time, which was evident in her tone and demeanor, even as she tried to be supportive of Matt. He believed these items could sell for very low prices and still allow him to generate profits, and she chose to remain hopeful that his business model would be successful. For William, a Caucasian man in his late 40s, hope was nearly all he had left. After losing his job due to diabetes-related health conditions, he began selling his personal possessions at the flea market as a way to supplement his meager monthly Social Security/disability benefits. When we discussed the TV shows, William said that he was influenced by them, and used to look for deals on objects while he was at the flea market to sell at his own table, but stopped doing that when he realized that it was not lucrative enough. By the time I had met him, it was several years after his diagnosis and he was attempting to get rid of the last of his personal property in order to raise funds to move to Florida. William had hoped to take advantage of the lower cost of living in that state and live with his aging mother to care for her and save money on his day-to-day expenses. In our conversation, it became clear that if it were not for his family support system, his quality of life would further diminish under the current economic conditions.

These accounts, along with the markers of poverty that I personally witnessed in my field work among flea market participants, highlighted the fact that secondary markets were not only ways to try to make a weekly living but, for many, ways to literally *survive*. In New Jersey over the past decade or so, the suburban homeless populations were relegated to living in encampments located in wooded areas, or concentrated in more urban locations such as in the town of Asbury Park. That made the intensity of the regional poverty relatively invisible. I saw

people buying used cans and dented boxes of food, used underwear and well worn shoes, or other castoff goods that are unwanted by most people but essential for the daily survival of America's growing numbers of poor. William and others I met and observed represented the “disposable” classes of people who have been cast off as “garbage” into the informal flea-market economy along with the objects that surround them.

This was the aspect of the secondary markets that was not shown on the Trash and Treasure TV shows, but cannot be ignored, particularly as people are expected to become increasingly self reliant in the neoliberal economic landscape. Although people across the spectrum of social identities were affected by the economy and used the secondary market for daily survival and a main source of consumption, it was clear from visual observation that there were many people of minoritized racial and ethnic groups that frequented the Farmingswood and Scotlandville flea markets.⁴⁴ Because the participation of minoritized and lower income people in the antiques business was low, my main contact with people of color was at the flea markets, where people bought and sold objects that more middle class individuals might identify as garbage.

Martin, a Latino in his mid 40s who sold at Farmingswood, was one of the bigger dealers who catered to working class and poor immigrant and minority population. He procured his stock from storage unit auctions where he tried to win lockers that contained business supplies

⁴⁴ Scotlandville is a flea market I had frequented over time, but visited once while conducting research. This market was much larger than Farmingswood and the Country Village and attracted a large cross-section of people that included working-class and poor people. Many of these people from the lower-working classes were vendors and patrons. During my observation, I saw many families who had set up tables to sell their personal things (mostly mothers with their children).

and equipment or antiques and collectibles, which were lucrative categories. He was a regular fixture at Farmingswood. His black converted jitney-style bus was packed with boxes and loose items and parked behind his tables in the same aisle and space always in the same aisle and space. Martin's spot normally encompassed six to ten tables, covered in merchandise that ranged from stacks of paper, bundles of pens, piles of notebooks, boxes of post-it notes, paperclips and rubber bands from defunct companies of all types, to used clothes, shoes, and housewares, such as small appliances, cutlery, dishware, and drinking glasses. When he would acquire a locker that included more valuable items he would place those for sale too. At the time of our interview he had a vintage jacket from an outlaw motorcycle club. Such objects commanded high prices. But, unlike other entrepreneurs, he did not sell the rest to other vendors, donate it to a charitable organization for a tax break, or pay someone to take it to a dump. He took those down-market objects, in his words, "junk and clothes," and put it out "for the poor people," such as "the Haitians" who limited their spending to 50 cents or \$1.00 per item.

While discussing his buying practices, I asked Martin if the economy had any influence on his business. He replied "of course," and referred to storage units he had acquired containing a previous owner's clothes, shoes, and housewares. He continued: "lots of people are losing their shit, and there's lots to go around. I can buy a 40 foot storage locker for five dollars!" According to other informants, competition for units with antiques and collectibles was high, which drove the prices up. The types of lower-value units that Martin bought for his lower-income customers were abundant, although less desirable to those searching for high-ticket items, which made them an affordable source for acquiring merchandise.

This exchange with Martin illuminated a business practice that was not shown on RTV programs such as *Storage Wars*. He did not place high importance on finding "treasures" for

collectors and their expendable incomes. Rather, value was placed on winning bids for storage units that were filled with basic goods to be sold to ordinary people who could not afford to pay full price for everyday items. These experiences were a far cry from those that were mostly shown on Trash and Treasure TV. On the programs, pickers were predominantly collectors and dealers who were largely white, middle class, baby boomers – a demographic that benefited from a robust post-war economy that had provided opportunities for economic stability and the acquisition of a middle class lifestyle that did not require incurring overwhelming debt. My research revealed that while this latter group was present and active in secondary markets, many participants were those of the lower working classes and the poor who were not interested in antiques and collectibles. These people composed market segments in the broader economy that were left out of the Trash and TV narrative and were therefore further out of the range of RTV's interpellative power.

Importantly, the performance of the market was not entirely informed by competitive entrepreneurialism and the desire for profit. At the most basic level, informal secondary markets allowed for flexibility in how goods and services were exchanged that the formal sector does not. Individuals were able to negotiate prices without being governed by a policy determining if, and/or how business can be conducted. Frequently, participants reported interactions in which they sold an item for a lower price because of how strongly the buyer felt about the object, specifically in terms of their mutual appreciation for the subject matter, content, aesthetics, or another quality. This was common among the various collector communities represented in the sample which ranged from those who appreciated old antiques (glass, postcards, etc.) to those who accumulated contemporary popular culture collectibles (comic-books and rock and roll memorabilia).

In my interview with Rich and Dana, they discussed a well-known member of the pop-culture collectibles community who had a hoard of toys and memorabilia on his property. Reportedly he had so many items that they spilled out of his house and were scattered around the surrounding area. Having the opportunity to “pick” through his amassment was something many people wanted to do but never had the opportunity. Eventually, Rich and Dana were invited to his home. Regarding that visit, Rich said that they “would pick a hundred things, and he would just, say in that hundred things there were four things that he cared about enough to put a price on.” Because they shared a passion for the same pop culture categories, the rest of what they selected was given to them free of charge. This manner of relating to one another was occasionally shown on *Trash and Treasure TV*, and Rich and Dana compared their experience to an episode of *American Pickers*. However, on RTV such interactions are folded into the business practices that are meant to build strong relationships for the purpose of establishing ties for future dealings, as opposed to a pure love for the objects.

At times, connections between people on the secondary market were made through the objects and did not involve a mutual interest in collecting areas, but other affective bonds instead. Michael, Country Village Flea Market vendor and social media manager, described an interaction he had with a customer who walked into his shop one day to make a purchase:

I had a guy come in, a rough looking biker guy, sorta grumpy. He’s looking for a gift for his daughter, and he happened to pick up this little bottle of perfume that I actually found in the corner of a couch that I trash picked. I actually had a dream the night before that there was a diamond ring in the couch. There was no diamond ring but there was this bottle of perfume ... He asked me to open up the bottle. I opened it up and he has tears in his face. He says “oh my god, that’s the smell of my grandmother whose been dead since I’ve been a kid.” Again, they stopped making this perfume in 1961. So I’m basically hugging this biker guy in here with tears, both of us. He’s like “how much do you want for it?” I’m like, “dude, just take it.” He’s like “aren’t you here to sell.” I’m like “no, I am a karma guy.” Like, he was meant to have that.

In another story, a woman shopping in his store found a lunchbox that caught her eye. Upon further inspection, she found a piece of tape with the name of her childhood sweetheart written on it and attached inside. She revealed that they dated through high school, and then he was drafted and killed in the Vietnam War. After an emotional moment, the shopper offered Michael \$1,000 for the lunchbox. He turned her down and then gave her the item for free. Both of Michael's accounts show how money could be considered secondary to the human relationships at work in the performance of the market.

Other participants also deviated from the profit-oriented motivations most prominent on Trash and Treasure TV. For instance, at Farmingswood I met dealers Lou and Fran, a middle-aged couple who had played supporting roles on a short-lived RTV program on TruTV. They facilitated "estate sales," operated an antiques and collectibles "showroom" and occasionally sold at flea markets.⁴⁵ As serious traders on the secondary market, they not only had "flea-market grade" items (those less valuable), but also higher-end objects, some with provenance. For example, the day I met them, they had an early 20th century Chinese ornamental jade bowl that they claimed to be from the estate of someone from the Modell family (relatives of the sports magnate Art Modell).

One of Lou and Fran's flea selling techniques I observed at the flea market included progressively dropping the prices on objects each hour by a certain percentage before they departed. After taking 25%, then 50% and 75% off, they announced that everything left on their tables was available to be taken for free. Lou noted that on one hand, this served the purpose invigorating sales, and lessened the amount of unsold stock they needed to transport back home. Although on the other hand, giving things away for free allowed shoppers without money to have

⁴⁵ After someone dies, estate companies appraise, price, and sell objects on behalf of the deceased person's family. Often, this happens at the deceased's home.

the objects they desired. Since they had not been to Farmingswood prior, and had discussed not returning, this was not driven purely by business imperatives. Lou and Fran truly enjoyed seeing people excited when getting something they wanted without having to pay.

Participants also reported that they had benefited from the abandonment of objects. For instance, pop-culture collector and dealer Rich recalled a time when he procured a BMX bicycle he wanted that was in good condition that a vendor left at a flea market. These practices are in direct contradiction with neoliberal capitalist priorities as they were presented on *Trash and Treasure TV* and throughout culture and society. RTV programs about the secondary market largely encouraged profiting from objects rather than giving them away. Outside of a few examples from *Storage Wars*, the shows also did not focus on the circulation of “disposable” everyday items (such as kitchenware, toys, and even bicycles) that the formal market desires to produce and distribute as mass-consumed commodities. The entrenched norms and values behind giving things away and the recycling and reuse of objects are also the foundation for a stage that can be constructed for the performance of alternative economies. Such conditions demonstrated the limits to the power of the televisual dispositif, as it is already at odds with an established informal secondary-market culture. At the same time, these cultural phenomena justified the televisual dispositif as necessary because of the social unruliness of secondary markets.

However, the televisual dispositif may not be a suitable strategy of governmentality for producing subjects to perform markets in the post-Recession economy. Beyond the skepticism about the “realism” of *Trash and Treasure TV*, RTV assumed a particular subject for interpellation. These ideal subjects were those that could relate to and develop middle-class sensibilities about labor and the material culture of consumption. Many people I encountered in my fieldwork did not fit this audience profile. These conditions limited the range and power of

the televisual dispositif in its circulation of Trash and Treasure TV and ability to form audiences, particularly among those who are more concerned with survival than attempting to trade in antiques and collectibles. These groups included people such as William, or those of the large immigrant population served by Martin. In this, we can see how theories of governmentality were complicated by the economic conditions of the post-recession environment, as the era of neoliberalism has appeared to have eclipsed while we moved into a new age of austerity and sociopolitical organization. This will be elaborated upon in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

In this chapter we discussed the hierarchy of sellers, buyers, and the objects they circulated in the secondary markets of Central New Jersey, specifically at the Jersey Shore. The ethnographic details provided in this chapter of daily life in the secondary market “junk” scene illustrated very different realities than those depicted in the Trash and Treasure TV genre, where “pickers” and “dealers” are mainly white, middle class males who make a good living discovering “treasure” from “trash.” What the Trash and Treasure TV subgenre does not show is the way that social class and level of economic stability organized the secondary market, as those with the most resources could absorb the most risk and made the most money. Because of this, labor hierarchies existed, much like in the formal sector. This ran contrary to the portrayals of the classic entrepreneur on Trash and Treasure TV, who is in complete control of his own destiny.

Although there is a structural element to secondary markets that is derivative of the formal capitalist system and relationships are formed on economic premises, the people who comprise the communities who buy and sell in these sites also have social bonds that run deeper than the commercial exchanges they enact with one another. This was particularly evident among collector networks that have forged friendships beyond the common interest in a category of

objects. Affective ties also emerged between unacquainted buyers and sellers, such as in Michael's accounts. He turned down considerable sums of money due to connections made with customers that pivoted on nostalgia and shared understandings of the human experience as they were attached to objects in his shop. While Mike and Frank of *American Pickers* have made connections with people on their show, their expressed focus on forging ties was for the purpose of making present or future deals. This created the appearance that they are merely adding people to their Rolodex and not building heartfelt relationships that went beyond the profit motive.

Moreover, this chapter addressed the downturn in the antiques and collectibles market. This dip in the trade impacted many areas of merchandise due to the effect of various economic recessions on people's buying power, changes in the consumer market as younger generations become dominant drivers of the economy and an intensifying culture of disposability. From there I addressed the ways that gender, race and class were at work in the constitution of secondary markets, in terms of social relations and market performance. Finally, this chapter attempted to illuminate the desperation and poverty of many people who participate in the secondary markets, a glaring matter that Trash and Treasure TV has ignored. While it was clear that the status of the antiques trade overall and in New Jersey was changing due to economic and demographic shifts affecting consumer choices and taste culture, this has not happened in a sociocultural vacuum. Historical and contemporary inequalities were a part of how the market was ordered and performed.

Chapter 6

Into the Dustbin: Conclusions, Online Markets, Future Research, and Historical Considerations

This dissertation theorized Trash and Treasure TV (a term I have coined) as a part of the RTV televisual dispositif that works to direct people toward performing secondary markets according to mentalities associated with neoliberalism and the social arrangements of control societies (Bratich, 2006, 2007, 2009; Deleuze, 1995; Foucault, 1997; Hay, 2010; Jenkins, 2015; Ouellette, 2017 Ouellette & Hay, 2008). On the programs I analyzed, these shows taught people how to “pick” in peer-to-peer settings (*American Pickers*), buy and sell at flea markets (*Flea Market Flip*), or bid at auctions (*Storage Wars*). The cast members provided direct instruction and modeled practices that encouraged individualistic entrepreneurialism and competition (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Hay, 2010). In this, they imparted lessons in cognitive and affective labor related to tasks such as seeking out objects, bargaining in the purchase or sale of items, determining authenticity, and identifying new consumers and markets (Berardi, 2009; Hardt, 1999; Wissinger, 2007). Through its depiction of market competitiveness and the flexibility of labor practices and conditions, Trash and Treasure TV programs also encouraged forms of cooperation reminiscent of contemporary employment conditions (Bratich, 2009).

Throughout these shows, aesthetic guidance (Bennett, 2011) was given on how to select and/or create marketable items that fell within the boundaries of taste cultures, such as “shabby chic,” industrial design, and mid-century modern styles for secondary market consumption. Most central was the profit motive. This was most prominently featured on programs across the Trash and Treasure subgenre during segments when the expenditures and anticipated gains of the cast members or contestants are tallied. The results were then used to determine the “winners” and “losers.” As a function of the RTV televisual dispositif, Trash and Treasure TV reinforced and

justified discourses of power and transmitted affects meant to influence and stimulate viewers to join the secondary market. In their subjectification, people were called upon to regulate their conduct and feelings according to the desires and needs of dominant institutions (Berardi, 2009; Coté, 2011; Deleuze, 1995, 1997, 2006; Foucault, 1990, 1997).

Trash and Treasure TV's reach extended into multiple areas of society and culture. For instance, the subgenre made an intervention into the issues of unemployment and underemployment by presenting alternative ways to make money. It also addressed the crisis of masculinity by modeling aggressive, competitive "male" breadwinning techniques. Additionally, it was concerned with the economic health of the state, as the small enterprises started by those inspired by RTV would ideally grow, formalize, and pay taxes. At the same time, it was aimed at invigorating the private sector through the creation of new markets in terms of secondary-market consumerism, and as a result of new business-to-business transactions generated through the costs associated with conducting commercial exchanges (such as paying for shipping objects through private carriers, rent, and other expenses).

Trash and Treasure TV also provided solutions for rectifying the excesses of consumer capitalism by managing the "waste" generated through production and consumption at the individual and social levels. Overall, it had the capacity to train people how to cooperate and compete in the brave new political economy, which included skills in the appropriation of objects and style. I argue that by coordinating and limiting the ethics and affective dimensions of secondary markets, these shows could close off potential avenues leading toward alternative economic relationships based on communitarian egalitarianism (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015). As a result, people's productive power would continue to be informed and redirected by capitalism, specifically in the spirit of neoliberalism and the new political economy, which

values self-reliance, individualism, and the accumulation of profit (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015).

In researching these programs and their circulation among secondary market participants, I first executed a textual analysis of the respective first seasons of *American Pickers*, *Storage Wars*, and *Flea Market Flip*. Then I observed people buying and selling at flea markets, antique stores, collectors' club meetings and a pawn shop. Additionally, I conducted interviews with 44 people who had regularly participated in secondary market sites and were familiar with the specific shows featured in this study. The data and insights gathered through those efforts composed the chapters of this dissertation. The related findings and contributions made to media studies, among other areas, will be summarized in the next section. Following that, there will be a discussion of how the participants performed the secondary market using digital technologies, and the potential that such online activities have to serve as site for future research. This chapter will then close with some perspectives on how neoliberalism, RTV, and governmentality can be viewed through a historical lens.

Conclusions: Summary of the Research Findings and Contributions

In Chapters 1 and 2, I introduced Trash and Treasure TV and situated it historically, socially, and culturally as a media product that emerged in the wake of the Great Recession, at the exact moment when people needed ideas for how to cope with their deteriorating economic reality. This was done, in part, by elaborating on how scholars over time have theorized on the ways that popular culture and media have operated as technologies of governance. The literature review included the critiques of media industries and the production of mass culture that began in the early 20th century (Barber, 1995, 2007; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006), the modes of analyses concerned with representation and social power that surfaced from the post-war period

(Fiske, 1992; Hall 1980, 1981, 1982), and finally those theorizations from the early 21st century that argued how media was a pedagogical tool that intervened in reality for audiences to internalize the models, lessons, norms and values embedded in the programming (Bratich, 2006, 2007, 2009; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Sender, 2012; Weber 2009).

Additionally, I explained where the genre began, stylistically, culturally, and socially, by tracing the lineage of Trash and Treasure TV back to the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*, which debuted in 1979. During that time, the U.K. experienced an economic downturn as the U.S. had when Trash and Treasure TV surfaced. However, there is an important distinction to be made between *Antiques Roadshow* and the Trash and Treasure TV shows. While the format of *Antiques Roadshow* included appraisals, arranging and depicting actual exchanges was not a part of the program. Beyond assessing the authenticity and determining the monetary worth of objects, the actual behaviors of buying and selling were central features of Trash and Treasure TV. British audiences of the late 1970s *Antiques Roadshow* were encouraged to dig through their basements, attics, crawlspaces, and closets for heirlooms, keepsakes, and other coveted objects in order to learn about their background and value. The message was that despite the lack of jobs and stagnant wages, there might be hidden economic opportunities existing right under one's nose. In contrast, Trash and Treasure TV viewers have been prompted to look outward toward flea markets, storage units, and other people's homes, outbuildings, and garages for things to sell on the secondary market.

It is from this point that I have argued that at its foundation, RTV is a mode of "governmentality" (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). As such, the subgenre of Trash and Treasure TV is a part of a televisual dispositif that provides "techniques of the self" (Foucault, 1988) against which people are to model their values and behaviors, and learn the necessary skills required to

survive or even thrive in the contemporary economic environment. As neoliberal mentalities and organizational forms have continued to shape social relationships and determine the commensurate networked and hierarchical arrangements of power, people have been called upon to take on additional burdens once managed by the government (Brown, 2003; Ferguson, 2007; Rose, 1996, 1999). In lieu of public job-creation initiatives, vocational training, or other assistance services provided by the diminishing welfare state, Trash and Treasure TV can bring audiences inspiration and ideas for generating income through site-specific “how-to” manuals and emotional stimulation associated with the “treasure hunt.”

In this, RTV programs of this subgenre acted as a Foucauldian technology of governance as they supply audiences with the appropriate ways to shape their own subjectivities through ethical frameworks and techne designed for engaging in secondary markets. These included values such as entrepreneurialism, individualism, and competition. These priorities informed the application of skills such as conducting appraisals, setting prices, or mastering the management of affect and emotion. Possessing proficiency in these practices is an advantage over others when making a deal at a flea market, bidding on a locker at a storage unit auction, or negotiating in a private setting. These shows also modeled the construction of formal businesses from informal practices, such as how Mike and Frank’s Antique Archaeology business operated, which consisted of two brick-and-mortar stores and an ecommerce site.

At the same time, Trash and Treasure TV can be viewed through a Deleuzian lens. To Deleuze, *dispositifs* seek to harness and orient people’s affects and productive power as preferred by the elites in particular places at different historical moments. Similar to my conceptualization of Trash and Treasure TV, Jenkins (2015) has theorized that *American Pickers* encouraged the production of what he called “enterprise-subjects” who roamed the open landscape seeking

objects to buy and sell. However, I argue that on *American Pickers* and the other programs there was a particular type of economic desire portrayed, which is that of the “formal entrepreneur.” In other words, the RTV televisual dispositif had two orders that operated through Trash and Treasure TV. As Jenkins (2015) has also pointed out, the first order is in the presentation of successful secondary market business models and the transmission of affective stimulation meant to direct people’s desires toward buying, selling, and fetishizing antiques, collectibles, and other old and/or used objects. The second order was intended to formalize these practices, which Jenkins never specifically indicates.

As dispositifs are designed to work under neoliberal state-capitalism, this intervention is necessary due to the unruliness of real-life informal trade between individuals at private homes, flea markets, yard sales, and other sites. As examples of unruliness, oftentimes people did not pay taxes on income from their small enterprises, as they are not registered with the Internal Revenue Service (I.R.S.). Also, rather than exchanging money, many traded, bartered, and even gave items away. During these interactions, taxes are not paid. In fact, concerns about taxation were mentioned by several interviewees. For instance, Glenn, a pop-culture and rock-and-roll collectibles dealer, was very careful about how large his small business grew so he could avoid reporting his income to the I.R.S. Martin, a flea market vendor who sold to the poor immigrant population at Farmingswood mentioned that he tried to keep from leaving a paper trail that could alert “the tax man.” The shifting role of the state under neoliberalism is not an indicator if its complete absence (Lazzarato, 2015). In Deleuzian control societies, as with Foucauldian governmentality, governance is diffused throughout the body politic, although the state is still a prominent organizational institution and requires resources to govern.

Trash and Treasure TV's potential to inspire viewers to act through the imparting of information and the transmission of affect can organize social relations and modulate our feelings and emotions. As a technology of subjectification, the subgenre's role as a part of the televisual dispositif is to regulate power and desire and guide the performance of secondary markets in physical spaces. Through discourses of power and the modeling of affects, Trash and Treasure TV is meant to provide audiences with the appropriate ways to conduct themselves within neoliberal mentalities, which are the norms and values of the new political economy. This, in turn, would defensively block and redirect people's desire and productive power away from alternative ways of organizing economic systems and the relationships, spaces, and practices that compose them (St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015).

Based on the theoretical-historical framework above, I investigated Trash and Treasure TV through a textual analysis and the ethnographic methods described in Chapter 3. I found that the programs I analyzed (the respective first seasons of *American Pickers*, *Flea Market Flip*, and *Storage Wars*) did promote a neoliberal approach to the modeling and instruction of secondary market practices. The formation of relationships and the exchanges as presented were primarily entrepreneurial and mainly concerned with generating profits. In addition, all three shows largely depicted those working in the secondary market as white and middle-class, in striking contrast to the actual racial, class and gender dynamics existing in the real world secondary market scenes I observed. On *American Pickers* and *Storage Wars*, the casts were composed of almost all men who are cisgendered and presented as heterosexual. The array of subjects on *Flea Market Flip* was more diverse in regard to gender, race, and sexuality. There were more people of color, women, and non-normative gender performances, potentially indicating characters with non-normative sexual orientations. This is likely because *Flea Market Flip* was on HGTV, and the

audience was largely composed of women (Broadway World TV News Desk, 2015). It is also more focused on “feminine” practices such as art and design. However, on all three of the programs the poor and lower working classes were largely absent, with few exceptions.

From the ethnographic data, I found that Trash and Treasure TV acted as a source of representation and intervention and was at work in the construction and performance of markets. All of the interviewees approached the programs with caution and positioned them as entertainment products, yet found use and/or value in some of the information that they contained. Those who had extensive experience in the secondary market were more critical of Trash and Treasure TV than those who were less practiced, particularly with finding and appraising the types of objects featured on the programs. Sometimes increased knowledge and experience correlated with age, as many of the older participants possessed a wealth of wisdom after having traded for many years. In other cases, proficiency was determined by the frequency of their activity, or the extent of their immersion within collector communities and their corresponding markets.

Regardless, there was an overall skepticism about Trash and Treasure TV based on knowledge of media production. Although, interviewees reported that they were inspired by it and found some of the information useful. Many had also observed upticks in participants at their preferred sites after particular programs debuted and gained popularity. Additionally, some had been involved in interactions during which it was evident that the other party had been influenced by the shows. They also noted an influx of goods. The latter was explained as a result of economic anxieties and necessity (increases in people selling their possessions as a precaution or to survive in the new economy), changes in styles and consumer trends (that have come as

new generations in New Jersey replace the previous in the composition of market segments), and a potential increase in storage unit defaults and home foreclosures.

However, the majority of the objects that were streaming into the market were those that younger generations of buyers did not have any interest in. Dealers noted that younger people did not collect, use, or care to inherit the types of objects that used to command high prices, particularly old antiques and certain styles of furniture. Many of these items sold for less money than in the past. The remainder was sent to the flea market, and then whatever was left went to a landfill. This was believed to be driven by lifestyle constraints brought about by contemporary economic arrangements (lower-paying jobs, living in smaller accommodations, and frequent moves due to changes in employment). Interviewees also cited a culture of disposability that has surfaced with mass production and consumption. These phenomena were not addressed on *Trash and Treasure TV*. However, these conditions impacted how the local secondary market was performed by those who occupied the hierarchies and networks that composed it.

Thinking more specifically about my findings, this project is a historical geography of RTV that uses New Jersey as a stage on which to engage issues of media culture, governance, social class, precarity, and material culture in the 21st century. As such, my research has contributed to a range of areas in media studies, in particular, RTV studies. In the past, RTV audience research concentrated on how “fans” read and used what was presented on their favorite programs, and often neglected to address matters of class (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Sender, 2012; Skeggs & Wood, 2012). My methodological approach more resembled those of media anthropologists Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) and Purnima Mankaker (1999), in that I ventured out and into the field to interview and observe people as they were buying and selling on the secondary market. This afforded me opportunities to interact with people beyond those in

my initial snowball sample who were very experienced traders and almost entirely white, male, middle-aged, and from the lower-middle classes and above.

Although very critical of the programs, the group that was produced in the snowball sample could relate to them. This is because the shows were an RTV depiction of what they had been doing in real life. They also saw some educational value in them. To various extents, others among those I interviewed who did not fit that demographic profile had similar perceptions of Trash and Treasure TV. Despite the differences within that pool of participants, they were the types of subjects that neoliberal rationales have assumed would engage with and potentially embrace RTV in ways that viewers have been theorized to do when responding to techniques of media governmentality.

At the flea markets, I met and observed those who were not a part of the idealized audiences of Trash and Treasure TV. These people were of the poor and working classes, and many of whom were from immigrant and minority groups who used the flea market for day-to-day existence or even to survive. They also did not have any connections to the more upscale collector's markets which would have made the programs relatable and/or potential sources of information for engaging in secondary market activity. For instance, I spoke with Ralston, a black West Indian man in his 50s who bought "lots" (large bundles) of items at auctions all over central and southern New Jersey. He then sold whatever people would buy from him. The goods on his table were lower-end items, mostly assorted kitchenware, nuts, bolts, brackets and some small toys. When I asked him if he collected anything as a hobby, he bluntly said "no" and questioned the true value of the objects featured on Trash and Treasure TV. He saw those things on the programs as merely destined for a shelf, rather than being of use, and thought that was

“stupid.” He also saw little value in *American Pickers* and no reason to fetishize antiques and collectibles.

To Ralston, “things” were not sacred to him. He did not care about collecting or accumulating, and elaborated by saying that “a wine glass is just a wine glass. I’ll use it until it breaks.” Although he wanted to make money, the entrepreneurial lessons and models of how to resell to upscale markets were not of interest to him. This is because he purchased things for his everyday use rather than to sell or refurbish, and in his flea-market enterprise, he catered to poor and working class market segments by providing them with similar items. These varied relationships to Trash and Treasure TV among participants who constitute the local secondary market demonstrated how media *circulated* for the purposes of keeping or capturing the attention of potential audiences that were already formulated or have yet to be.

This is important in its relevance to governmentality studies, particularly pertaining to RTV, in that my research highlighted the limitations of Trash and Treasure TV in its reach and influence. As noted above, theorizations of governmentality have assumed a normative subject with the cultural and social capital necessary for competing in the neoliberal marketplace. The limited recovery from the 2007 - 2008 global financial crisis known as the Great Recession (the worst downturn since the Great Depression) has complicated these presumptions about audiences (Carnevale, Jayasundra, & Gulish, 2016; Curran & Speciale, 2018). In addition, people have been immigrating to the U.S., and are expected to account for 88% of population growth through 2065 (Lopez & Bialik, 2017). In the case of New Jersey, the recovery from the downturn was still lagging in 2017 (Cheney & Friedman, 2017), and the immigrant population was growing, particularly due to flows of people from Latin America and Asia (Petenko, 2017; Wu, 2012). The economic and demographic conditions of the U.S. and in New Jersey, and the predictions of the

future, have called into question the efficacy of RTV as a technique of neoliberal governmentality.

Finally, my research has contributed to the respective areas of media archaeology and production studies. In regard to the former, this project was concerned with old objects often considered waste, garbage, and refuse, in terms of their significance for understanding cultures and societies in their historical and contemporary contexts. The data generated from my textual analysis of Trash and Treasure TV and the ethnographic methods brought to light how objects featured on the programs were excavated and used, and what people did with the things they found in real-life secondary markets. This archaeological approach intersected with the field of material culture studies, as the depictions on Trash and Treasure TV illuminated how the discourses and practices related to the way that things (including those items classified as “trash”) were rendered into sociocultural narratives.

From the data, I discovered that on the TV shows entrepreneurial practices were primary in the circulation of objects, while historical, cultural, and social value were secondary. In the local secondary markets, entrepreneurialism was a feature. However, it did not primarily determine the relationships between participants, as business rationales were not exclusively behind all of the decisions people made in their exchanges. Important here, is that neoliberal entrepreneurial values also did not determine how people understood and used the things that they found while hunting for treasure or shopping for everyday items. On *Flea Market Flip*, old objects were combined to make aesthetically marketable products for middle-class consumers. Creativity was deployed for commercial purposes. In the real-life secondary markets I frequented, items were used to create art for art’s sake. For example, I saw old paintings appropriated for other artistic purposes and junk sculptures constructed from parts of different

mannequins, various random industrial objects and fashion accessories. These works were not produced for the purpose of satisfying a particular market segment and generating profits, but for the sake of art itself.

Media archaeology did not just provide a lens through which to analyze the objects seen on Trash and Treasure TV and in the local flea markets as they related to art. It also allowed me to identify some differences in how the story of the emergence of modernity in the U.S. has been told on the shows, versus what can be observed in secondary markets. The TV programs featured certain types of objects, primarily those that the cast members preferred and could be used to create the most excitement. Monetary value was central and the information given about the objects amounted to trivia at best. On the shows, the social and cultural history of the U.S. was portrayed as one of industrial production and mass consumption alone, and did not directly address matters of overproduction and hyperconsumption and their environmental and social consequences (such as islands of plastic floating in the oceans, the creation of consumer debt, the entrenchment of precarious labor conditions, etc.). These repercussions were visible in real life spaces of exchange. This was evidenced by the vast amounts of objects and people that had been relegated to the flea markets and other secondary market sites before their ultimate disposal due to the “worthlessness” of these products (and those interested in buying them) to the consumer and labor market.

Finally, this project has contributed to the area of production studies, primarily through illustrating the ways in which the Trash and Treasure TV milieu was expanded through the creation of digital content by secondary market participants. For instance, as mentioned above, young pop-culture collectibles enthusiasts Jan and Pete had their own web-based series that chronicled their travels around New Jersey’s pop culture collectibles shops, second-hand stores,

flea markets and other sites in search of the objects of their desire. Their fans have called their online show “the *American Pickers* of toys and collectibles.” Although unlike Mike and Frank, Jan and Pete did not resell what they had found. Other participants also created online content that closely resembled Trash and Treasure TV. One interviewee, Alvin posted his finds on YouTube with narration about how much he had paid and what his expected returns were after resale. These examples demonstrated the emergence of a chain of cultural and technical production that extended the reach of media culture (Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009). At the same time, this content provided viewers/users with on-the-ground, “real-world” perspectives of buying and selling on secondary markets. The next section will further illustrate the secondary market as it is performed online and indicate directions for future research.

The Online Secondary Market and Future Research Directions

With the emergence of digital communication technologies, secondary markets had moved more noticeably to the Internet and World Wide Web towards the end of my research period. Participants in this study bought and sold objects through online auction sites (eBay), mobile applications (letgo), and social networking platforms (Facebook and Instagram). Prior to this, the larger network of collectors connected through major regional antique trade shows and snail-mail periodicals such as *Antique Week* and *Antique and Auction News*. These newsletters, and those focused on more specialized subject areas currently have a web presence. This allows people to easily learn about antiques and collectibles, their values, and collector events in places far from their local area. Additionally, social media has brought people together around their objects of interest and provided a platform for the development of immediate relationships at a distance. This includes the local “pickers” Facebook group I recruited subjects from and lurked

in (Jersey Pickers – Antiques and Collectibles), among many groups (or pages) that exist on Facebook and Instagram.

These social networking groups allow people to communicate information regarding object identification, pricing, scarcity and background, arrange peer-to-peer sales, or merely show off new additions to their collections. Therefore, online trading has made the exchange of information, goods, and services (such as antique restoration) easier than it had been in the past, and widened the availability of objects in places where they had previously been scarce. This has had an impact on prices across geographically dispersed markets. According to John, a collector and amateur dealer who had traded on the secondary market for well over 50 years, the Internet has regulated prices that were once inflated due to local supply and demand conditions and had created a false sense of scarcity within regional markets. This is because platforms such as eBay have unified markets and created the conditions for multiple “rare” objects of similar condition to be up for auction everywhere at the same time without geographical barriers. Prices then adjust if they drop relative to demand due to the increase in the supply. This makes some objects more affordable while whittling down a dealer’s profit margin.

Dealers are also able to purposefully increase the scarcity of some items online to maximize their revenue. This has occurred particularly with objects that are inexpensive relative to those on the higher-end with broad appeal, as opposed to those things that were strongly desired by a small niche of collectors familiar with the market. For example, Alvin, a collector mentioned above, had been active for nearly 30 years and cultivated a strong presence online as a dealer across various platforms. At one time, he had used his eBay storefront to sell small bundles of vintage Polynesian-themed cocktail stirrers from the 1960s in limited quantities and spread out over time. This marketing technique presented buyers with the impression that what

they were purchasing was in short supply and worth the price they were paying for a “valuable” object. In fact, Alvin had bought an abundance of these items for a very low price and had plenty in reserve to sell to the next person who clicked on the “buy it now” link. After exhausting his posted supply, he would merely wait for a period and then release the next batch.

Dealers have also learned how to use online platforms to manage risk. Lamont, a vendor I met in an antique store, took pictures of objects that people wanted him to sell on their behalf. He then posted them on his Instagram page with a price and asked people to reply if they were interested. If the object sold, Lamont would purchase it from the client and deliver it to the buyer. If he was not able to generate any attention, he would not make the exchange with the object’s original owner. This eliminated the potential for taking a loss when buying on speculation. Although Lamont used social networking for commercial purposes, these sites, particularly Facebook’s social media groups, were spaces where people gathered and communicated. Many of the groups were inspired by the culture of these programs, and possibly, at least in part, by *Trash and Treasure TV*. For example, the Facebook group from where I drew participants had the word “pickers” in its name (“Jersey Pickers – Antiques and Collectibles”), a term popularized by the show *American Pickers*.

As mentioned above, online platforms were also utilized by people to document and distribute their participation in buying and selling on the secondary market for collecting or turning a profit. For instance, Alvin took videos of his finds and posted them on his YouTube page. In these posts, he would lay out all everything he had bought after returning from the auctions and flea markets. Then he would tell the audience how much money he spent and what he anticipated making by when he sold the items through his online eBay storefront. Also, Jan and Pete, participants noted earlier in this chapter, had a YouTube show about their adventures

finding pop culture toys and collectibles that their fans compared to *American Pickers*. While researching the media culture of online secondary markets, I found that making videos as some of those I had met while conducting this study was very popular.

A cursory search after typing in the words “pickers” and “antiques” into the YouTube search engine (without the quotation marks) yielded 15,400 results. The first two pages were related to the show *American Pickers*. Following those entries there were countless videos of amateurs and “semi-professionals” that talked about antiques and collectibles, and appeared to emulate Trash and Treasure TV. Studying the secondary markets and their representation online can lead toward revelations pertaining to the potential for creating alternative markets through digital technology, and in regard to the instructional power of social media video sharing sites, including the role of mimesis in the creation of videos and their part in the processes of subjectification.

People have also used social networking sites after they had gone into default on their storage unit payments, which resulted in the auctioning off of their possessions. In a post on the “Jersey Shore Buy Sell Trade” Facebook page, a family appealed to the group members to help them find the contents of their storage unit that had gone to auction. The author of the post noted that the winning bidder was a frequent buyer of storage units and was hoping to find “him.” The locker contained “sentimental items” such as the author’s son’s “crib cards ... newborn bracelets [, and] pictures.” The child’s documentation, namely his “birth certificates” and “ssc” (Social Security card) were also lost. Closing the post, the author emotionally wrote of their dilemma, “this is bothering me so bad I wish I could find the guy. I can’t believe I lost all my son’s toys, clothes, everything. I would give anything to find this guy and make a deal.”

By providing a platform for affective interaction among users, online secondary market spaces have the potential to encourage relationships that are disruptive to the preferred outcomes of elites. In this, they open up opportunities for developing alternative markets that encourage trade practices less concerned with individual profit and aimed at social justice (Wolfson, 2011; St. Martin & Gibson-Graham, 2015). Although without philosophical praxis, the potential of digital communication tools to aid in social change will likely never reach full realization, and in many ways, may just play into the interests of those who hold political and economic power (Wolfson, 2011). Such outcomes have been seen since the 2016 Presidential campaign that brought Donald Trump into the White House in the political fragmentation of the U.S. electorate on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook (two sites with great potential for fostering social change).

Long after President Trump's victory these conditions continued to leave the country paralyzed in a state of anger, anxiety, and confusion. The inevitability of the subsumption of communication technologies to capitalism in the absence of alternative praxis is also apparent in social media and web platforms that host online auctions. As people use these sites, the owners profit from the use of their infrastructure. In addition, the algorithms and interfaces encourage forms of connectivity and subjectivity that reinforce contemporary market relationships. These designs are intended to invisibly and efficiently extract and exploit data that is freely given, and consequently, reap great profits and reproduce the existing socio-global order. The final section will contain some closing thoughts on Trash and Treasure TV, neoliberalism and media dispositifs from a historical perspective.

Historical Considerations on Neoliberalism and Media Governance

The moment of Trash and Treasure TV's emergence, at the time of the worst economic crisis in the U.S. since the Great Depression, is gradually becoming a part of history.

Neoliberalism's ascendance since the post-war period has seen its decline since the Great Recession, as people have become increasingly attracted to forms of populism and nationalism that reject the flexibility of labor and finance - the key features of the type of economic globalization that moved jobs in manufacturing and other sectors to the developing world. This frustration with neoliberalism's effect on labor has been expressed around the world with such developments as the rejection of the European Union by the United Kingdom that resulted in "Brexit." Similar sentiments and rising levels of protest have surfaced in countries such as Russia, Hungary, France, Poland, Austria, and India where right-wing, authoritarian, and populist candidates and policies have been coming to prominence and power in their respective political systems (The Economist, 2016).

In the U.S., this frustration and anger was seen in the 2016 election, in which former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (associated with the free trade policies of her husband, former President Bill Clinton) lost to real estate tycoon and reality television star Donald Trump (who portrayed himself as anti-free trade and in favor of helping the working people who had been left behind by it). Hillary Clinton was associated with "establishment" politics, particularly the neoliberal global policies of her husband's administration, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the private banks (e.g. Goldman Sachs) that were blamed in part for the Great Recession. Donald Trump approached the race portraying himself as an outsider and maverick. He vowed to "make America great again" through protectionism and strongman tactics, as opposed to conventional politicians who were bound by their existing entanglements and stifled by "political correctness."

With Donald Trump's Presidency and the popularity of right-leaning populist movements around the world, neoliberalism, as it has existed since the 1970s, may diminish in the specific aspects of its transnationalism. However, since these reactions are rooted in free-market capitalism, any mutations within the contemporary political economy will be superficial and the foundational characteristics of neoliberalism will be retained, namely, responsabilization, labor flexibility, and the limited role of the state as a friendly facilitator of private arrangements. These priorities fit well within the political culture of the U.S., with its values and myths of the "rugged individualism" of Manifest Destiny and the "Wild West," that are complimented by the anti-statist tendencies inherited from the rebellion of the colonial period and the history that led up to the Civil War.

These foundations of U.S. cultural and social psychology provide the deep frameworks for economic libertarianism. The form of neoliberalism the U.S. has had from the 1970s through the early 2000s can be seen as moving further rightward culturally, and may be unrecognizable in the future. However, it will likely retain its "bare market" features while incorporating greater sovereign and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995). This would still necessitate instruction from the media apparatus on how people are to operate within its parameters. Trash and Treasure TV and the forms of neoliberal rationales from which it had emerged may soon be swept into the dustbin of history, but the deployment of televisual dispositifs to train and influence conduct for economic subjectification will not fade into obscurity or irrelevance.

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