Buy It Now

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Published by Duke University Press

White, Michele.
Buy It Now: Lessons from eBay.

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eBay Boys Will Be Lesbians

VIEWING “LESBIAN” AND “LESBIAN INTEREST”

VINTAGE PHOTOGRAPHY LISTINGS

Some eBay vintage photography sellers address heterosexual male buyers but list mass-produced erotic images of women as “lesbian” and “lesbian interest” in the “Collectibles > Photographic Images > Antique (Pre-1940)” and “Collectibles > Postcards > Real Photo” categories. They offer images of women undressing, wearing lingerie, and engaging in erotic play and pictures of “bush sisters” with visible pubic hair. For instance, an image of a seated woman who is nude except for a drape across her groin is titled “1950’s NUDE 6” X 8” REAL PHOTO LESBIAN INTEREST” (figure 12). Sellers of vernacular photography also employ the terms “lesbian” and “lesbian interest” when presenting items to lesbian viewers and consumers. These images, many of which seem more collaboratively produced by the subjects and photographer, are of women standing or sitting close together, acting in lively ways that bring their bodies into contact, being butch, wearing military or sports uniforms, or wearing suits and other forms of masculine drag. photogurl offers a vintage photograph that is dominated by a snowy foreground and a large snow-covered tree. The two women in the image, with their arms loosely around each other, may be a small part of the composition, but photogurl titles the photograph “Women HUGGING in the SNOW Lesbian Int *1930s* Photo” (figure 13).

Sellers use the terms “lesbian” and “lesbian interest” to describe images that are of note to lesbians; photographic documentation of lesbian pasts;
women performing varied kinds of masculinity; queer readings of photographs that confuse stable categories, desires, and subject positions; political positions that enhance lesbian communities; erotic images of women together; and promiscuity—even when only one person is depicted. Through this conflicted usage, sellers make male buyers of images of nude women seem less straight and reconceptualize sexuality and eroticism outside of the straight/gay binary. This also occurs in sellers’ gay and gay interest listings for underwear, swimwear, and vintage photography, which trouble the position of heterosexual men. In all of these cases, the political interests of sellers differ from eBay’s gendered and heterosexual organizational logic and the normative forms of sexual citizenship eBay promotes. The lesbian interest and gay
interest search terms are also economically productive in the photography and real photo categories. They remake generic images of people and families into personal accounts and collectible objects. In these categories, the kinds of identities eBay is promoting achieve the lowest sale prices.

“Straight” men who engage with lesbian and lesbian interest listings by pointing, selecting, pleasurably viewing, and buying indicate they have lesbian interests, become associated with the political aspects of these listings, and are positioned as lesbians. Their gendered identities, which I consider later in the chapter, are sometimes articulated in listings, About Me sites, and member IDs. Individuals who sign in to eBay and use the site’s search options to track lesbian listings, or who have included the term “lesbian” as one of their “Favorite Searches,” broadcast these interests to people looking at their screens. Searches for the term “lesbian” also deliver lesbian interest

listings. For individuals searching for mass-produced erotica, the vernacular images of women engaged in varied life activities produce a narrative and visual disturbance in the search results and some men’s fantastical construction of what “lesbian” means. These images must be read or skimmed over to find the desired materials. When engaged by this diverse grouping of images and texts, men cannot just pleasurably view the “girl-on-girl” action photographs that were originally directed at them. Men view versions of lesbians that were not coded or designed for them and are situated within and in front of the pictures in subject positions that are different from the ones they anticipated. In doing this, men support the economic and ideological values of gender and sexuality positions that are far from their own. Their unexpected situation encourages a rethinking of the ways binary gender and stable sexualities are articulated by theories of viewing. The construction of men with lesbian interests and portrayal of women performing masculinities promote continued examinations of how gender, sex, and sexuality are identified.

Lesbian interest listings are designed by individual sellers and appear within the photographic images category, as well as in other eBay categories. Hierarchical categories, such as collectibles or photographic images, are produced by eBay, and individuals must accept this system to reach the widest market. Lesbian and gay interest listings are an intervention into the system. They function as consumer critiques of the structuring aspects of the eBay system and the positions produced by the company. Viewers see gay and lesbian listings and read about gay and lesbian interests whenever they look at eBay. Listings for gay interest vintage photographs usually depict men and are directed at gay men, but lesbian interest listings are directed toward divergent audiences. This is different from eBay’s standard address. In chapter 3, I interrogated how eBay makes binary gender and heterosexual unions an implicit part of the site through its articulation of gendered consumers, representations of engagements and marriages, and the apocryphal and often repeated origin story about Pierre Omidyar starting the site as a sort of love token so his fiancée, Pam Wesley, could trade Pez dispensers. Sellers of lesbian interest photography challenge eBay’s organizational logic and binary gender positions by intervening in the normative reading of images and buyers’ and sellers’ desires. For example, their images of “mock” weddings disorder the marriage scripts, rituals, and mandates for femininity that are conveyed in eBay’s advertisements and sellers’ wedding-dress listings. Because of these sellers’ practices and the highlighted performances of women
in listed images, the photographs no longer seem to deliver unmediated engagements with women.

The work of feminist film theorists, including Laura Mulvey’s consideration of gendered forms of viewing, assists me in reflecting on how male buyers are enabled to view erotic images of women. I extend my use of feminist film theory, employed in *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship*, to understand how individuals are structured and even produced by Internet settings. It may appear as if applying theories of viewing, which describe how movies and larger cinematic institutions, mechanical projection, the space of the theater, and identification construct spectators, is antithetical to theorizing individuals’ “active” Internet use. However, Internet and new media studies is forwarded when there are methods to interrogate the ways traditional subjects are reproduced and developed in Internet settings, as well as how people are provided with options and establish forms of resistance. After all, a great deal of computer use occurs while individuals are fixed in chairs and provided with distinct messages about who they are, how they should look, and the ways they should engage.

Feminist film theories productively critique how women are represented and the kinds of bodies that are expected to engage, but they also describe stable subjects, binary gender, and heterosexual desires. These methods are useful when combined with literature that theorizes how media forms can facilitate shifting subject positions. For instance, Chris Straayer provides tactics for considering the heteronormative positions and queer desires that are rendered by lesbian and lesbian interest listings. Research by Alisa Solomon and Sue-Ellen Case, which describes how butch and camp performances disturb the seemingly natural relationship between masculinity and men, offers ways to think about the position of male lesbian interest viewers who engage with images of butch women and women in men’s attire. I will tend to refer to these women as “butches” because it is difficult to fully distinguish people’s identities in photographs, and women in men’s attire are performing as butches in some way. The complicated combinations of identities, images, and selling strategies included under the lesbian search term also demonstrate the ambiguities of erotica images. According to the pornography research of Avis Lewallen, “Visual images alone—even of naked women in obviously provocative poses—cannot be relied upon” to unambiguously center male viewers and male titillation. Lesbian interest sellers’ titles and readings of images highlight how narrative breakdowns occur even when
mainstream erotica depicts women together and emphasizes heterosexual male desire. The analysis of images and viewing positions, which I propose in this chapter, may thus be useful in considering Internet-based image archives and porn sites, as well as more general interfaces and practices.

**Articulating Lesbians through eBay Photography**

Sellers who use the terms “lesbian” and “lesbian interest” in the titles and texts of their listings code images, direct potential buyers to specific aspects of images, obtain better prices (since both mass-produced lesbian erotica and vernacular images of women together tend to garner higher prices than related material), acknowledge lesbian collectors, indicate that lesbian individuals and relationships have been photographically portrayed, and queer the past by describing same-sex duos and groups as lesbians. While the price range for this material is vast, erotic images of women engaged with other women tend to sell for more than 25 U.S. dollars and can garner upward of $100. An immense array of materials is listed under the term “lesbian,” but albums with some convincing lesbian content tend to sell for more than $150; individual images, for more than $20. Depending on the content, period, and photographer, they can sell for much more. The prices of photographs of women in drag have been decreasing—a change in the market that occurred before the economic downturn—but these listed items usually sell for more than $9, and it is not unusual for them to sell for more than $40. Images of white heterosexual couples and families, by contrast, tend to sell for only a few dollars.

Sellers use the lesbian interest search term to address divergent consumers, including heterosexual men who are interested in images of women engaging in erotic encounters, women who are searching for documentation of lesbian pasts, and people who read images queerly. Gay interest listings are designed to perform in similar political and economic ways, but sellers tend to address only gay men, despite the likelihood that queer women and men are also interested in these materials. While searching for erotic images of women together, heterosexual men are also directed toward narratives about lesbian community and empowerment. In this way, the organizational logic and search functions of the eBay site fail. In a similar manner, such search engines as Yahoo! and Google offer unexpected combinations of sites and subjects. In the case of eBay and in some other instances, these breakdowns help to unravel traditional viewing structures and stable identity positions. The
normative viewer is framed and addressed as someone else. Feminist media studies, including film theory, and conceptions of configuring the user assist in theorizing when the viewer is addressed and produced according to traditional conceptions of bodies and rights and when and how these positions may be transformed or fail.

Vernacular lesbian interest sellers produce conceptions of collecting in listings, About Me sites, and board posts and form an eBay community that can share ancestors, histories, and objects. In this manner, part of the lesbian interest brand community, which is situated on the site and ideologically dismissed by eBay, can imagine a shared past. The histories that are supposedly embedded in vintage photographs, like the memories associated with wedding dresses, circulate on the site and are imagined to be saved rather than lost. However, sellers’ gay and lesbian interest listings pose a GLBTQ eBay community and alternative readings of images that are distinctly different from the normative system eBay produces. As traditional images of engagements, weddings, families, and babies circulate on the site and support eBay’s rendering of its members, sellers of gay and lesbian interest vintage photography are actively rereading similar images and undermining eBay’s family history. Some of the standard images on eBay will be “flipped”—purchased and then sold for more money—by sellers who recognize that images of same-sex groups touching and otherwise engaged can garner higher prices when described as “gay interest” or “lesbian interest” and attached to appealing readings. When sellers flip these images, they point to a certain mutability of erotics and identities. The varied individuals who engage with lesbian interest listings may intensify this fluidity.

The seller auntjennysbox and her lesbian Aunt Jenny propose a history that diverges from photography’s ordinary production of the normative family. Photographs, according to Shawn Michelle Smith, are understood as methods of maintaining family histories and recording family genealogies. Yet Jenny constitutes a lesbian-friendly family archive from “everyone she knew.” The seller, whose name is a reference to her aunt’s boxed collection of photographs, provides a history of lesbians and collecting, emphasizes women’s sexuality (since the term “box” is used to describe women’s genitals), suggests the queer possibilities of documenting and storing, and may make some viewers humorously ponder the possibilities that the photographs were stored inside Jenny. The seller’s aunt loved to “sit down and go through her photos of all the people she met and loved” and “tell about how she met the people, where they were from and a bit about them.” While
“being gay was greatly frowned upon” during much of Jenny’s life, she insisted on being “open and honest with everyone and tried very hard to get others to be proud of who they were.” Through these narratives, consumers are offered the chance to audaciously repeat Jenny’s processes of collecting and archiving. auntjennysbox thanks them for “purchasing these photos and giving them a good home” and supporting and widening community history. Yet, auntjennysbox and other sellers, such as pelicancan and unclecrickey, all sell single photographs or small lots of photographs rather than maintain the existent archive.

The narratives about visibility and lesbian communities provided by sellers like auntjennysbox are different from the depictions of sexuality that appear in mass-produced lesbian erotica. Producers of mass-market lesbian erotica pose women so viewers can easily look at them. These women are performing and available for the male viewer, even when they are purportedly engaged with each other. For instance in jochen.baeuerle’s listing titled “AFFECTIONATE NUDE GIRLS Vintage 10s RPPC Lesbian Int,” an erotically engaged female couple poses so that their bodies and attention are directed toward the viewer (figure 14).¹⁰ jochen.baeuerle describes the image as “Lesbian Int,” but the listing includes no text that explains how the mass-produced image is engaged with lesbian interests or community.

The production and location of politically useful images of lesbian sexuality, according to Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich’s consideration of filmic portrayals, must be “reconciled with the objectification” of women and how the “continued existence of pornography still clouds the depiction of [lesbian] sexuality.”¹¹ Heterosexual men’s interest in women erotically engaging with women is a problem for producers who are trying to render positive images of sexuality for lesbian communities. In these cases, men are alternative viewers who successfully reconfigure images to be useful for their own desires. Some images can engage different subjects. According to Linda Williams, who studies shifting addresses and forms of identification in porn films, it is easy to “identify with diverse subject positions and desire diverse objects” when viewing pornography.¹² Whatever the current gender and desiring position of the viewer, mass-produced and vernacular lesbian interest listings present bodies to the viewer, offer structured images that were produced to be looked at, and address the individual and consumer.

Becker and her colleagues’ concerns about the ways pornography appropriates and performs lesbianism may be particularly apt in instances where
eBay sellers use the term “lesbian” to describe images of individual nude women. In such cases, the term “lesbian” cannot draw connections between particular aspects of images and a community of women loving women or women engaging in erotic play with other women. Sellers who use the term “lesbian” to indicate erotic depictions of individual women suggest erotic potentials and desires that are not visually conveyed in images but may still be part of viewers’ interests and habits. In such cases, images and listings act as a lure for unfulfilled desires that can be imaginatively staged by viewers with the assistance of these representations. Unfortunately, the disparate roles and desires of the portrayed women can be elided through such readings. Since lesbians are still too often marked as having a non-normative or even deviant sexuality, the term “lesbian” is regrettably used to indicate that these women, and perhaps all lesbians, are risqué and sexually available to the gaze and physical encounters.

Sellers of lesbian and lesbian interest photographs do not necessarily imagine listings as part of a lesbian past or continuum in which women had
and continue to have erotic relationships with women without needing to address men. Fouraker describes a “collection of 1950s era nude images that were found in an elderly lady’s attic” and uses the term “lesbian interest,” but evacuates lesbian and queer collecting strategies and desires by noting the images “evidently belonged to her late husband.” The seller antique_samblue employs the term “lesbian,” describes views of the posed woman as “a Busty Blond woman with her pig tails,” “a view of her with big smile hands on hips nice ass shot,” and “a view of her with pouty lips large boobs blanket over privates,” and then discusses men’s ability to find “risqué” photographs like the ones offered for sale. Lesbian is also associated with depictions of “busty girls wrestling wearing panties” and “busty lesbian girlfriends with a super rear view.” In such instances, lesbianism is rendered as a form of eroticism that engages male viewers, configures images, and objectifies women.

Sellers’ portrayals of women as a set of erotic and evaluated parts are troubling. Yet sellers also disturb men’s heteronormative position when they correlate men’s desires to lesbian viewing positions. Nobodysa lists an image from a “group of vintage nudes, risque and erotic photographs” that depicts a “Lovely scene between two women in french lingerie” under the lesbian interest search term. By using the term “lesbian interest,” nobodysa indicates a women’s erotic sphere and that such images can also positively engage women’s desires. “Discovering” and being able to voyeuristically watch women renders a different erotic and identity position from being addressed as a lesbian. Of course, lesbians can also occupy delighted positions as invisible viewers. Men’s empowered position and ability to immediately access numerous images of women that have been designed for their pleasure are disrupted by the kinds of images eBay sellers include under the lesbian interest search term. For example, pixidiom’s vernacular image of a fully dressed playful woman pretending to kick another clothed woman’s bottom, which presents a different desiring structure from the mass-produced erotica images, is entitled “1940, GAY VINTAGE LESBIAN, GAL, KICK, SEXY, ASS, REAR-END FUN.” The seller uses the title as a lure and thereby disrupts viewers’ expectations and desires. The seller promises a depiction of erotic anal play but delivers no such content.

Searching for lesbian and lesbian interest listings on eBay also generates vernacular images of women having fun, being butch, and wearing men’s suits. For instance, the seller mr.philippines offers a “Turn of the Century” image of a dressed “Filipina girl” who looks like a lesbian because her hair is
“combed upward and cut short” and “her posture is unfeminine.”

Individual sellers may articulate essentialist notions of who lesbians are, what they look like, and the actions and sexualities that frame their lives in ways that are similar to gay interest listings. However, the disparate images and readings included under lesbian interest make this structure less likely to articulate essentialist ideas than the gay interest search term, where wearing dapper clothing or being in the military is associated with being gay. When using the lesbian interest search term eBay buyers, including men, see images that are of lesbian interest. A relationship is thereby established between their desires and lesbian interests and identities. This occurs when browsing listings using the “risqué” subcategory in “Photographic Images > Antique (Pre-1940),” searching under the term “nude” or “lesbian,” or saving the “lesbian” search term and receiving emailed information about auctions. Narratives about lesbian interests reposition male viewers, configuring their use of the site and identity in different ways than male privilege would suggest. Male viewers are presented with a much wider array of lesbian images than many of them probably requested. These sellers thus foil eBay’s promise that buyers can easily “get it on eBay.”

Viewing Lesbian Interest

Sellers offer diverse images, render varied desires, and list different forms of representations under the lesbian and lesbian interest search terms. For instance, thedragonsmoon lists “VINTAGE RISQUE SEXY FETISH NUDE LESBIAN ART PHOTO” with a depiction of a woman clad in bra, panties, and stockings tying up another woman. thedragonsmoon also presents the similarly entitled “VINTAGE RISQUE 1918 LESBIAN DYKES AT COLLEGE PHOTO.” However, this image depicts two fully clothed butch women in caps, high-necked shirts, jodhpurs, and sturdy boots. In thedragonsmoon’s vernacular college photo, the use of the term “risqué” may indicate the women’s unconventional dress and potential erotic engagement. In a similar manner to pixidiom’s “REAR-END FUN” listing, the title lures erotica collectors to the listing. However, there is no depicted nudity or show of flesh. The college photo, with its portrayal of two women touching and dressed in similar masculine attire, is visually analogous to listings of vernacular photographs that are described as portraying lesbian pasts. By using similar titles to describe
these disparate images, thedragonsmoon connects diverse forms of image production, suggests all viewers have lesbian interests, and highlights sensual content.

The “Vintage Two Nude Women Grooming Photo, Lesbian Interest” listing by tomscoolcollectibles addresses male viewers and queers traditional forms of male desire (figure 15).\(^2\) Without its lesbian interest indication, the grooming photo articulates fairly traditional forms of looking. The image encourages a male gaze and structures women as the object of this empowered view—as such arrangements have been described in feminist film theory. For Mulvey, the women portrayed in traditional film “are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”\(^2\) When identification is produced along gender lines, and I consider sexuality and identification later in this chapter, then men are associated with the empowered

15. tomscoolcollectibles, “Vintage Two Nude Women Grooming Photo, Lesbian Interest,” eBay, 4 April 2006
protagonist and the camera view. Mulvey has also described how gendered identification and “pleasure in looking” is “split between an active/male and passive/female” and dismissed the possibility that female viewers can identify with the empowered male character. There is no active male character for viewers to identify with in most erotic lesbian interest images. However, the depictions still pose a difference between an active and empowered camera gaze, which is associated in psychoanalytic film theory and popular readings with a male position, and a representational sphere that only women occupy. Women’s position as the object of the gaze, or to-be-looked-at-ness, is intensified in images like the grooming photo because no men occupy the representational field, and they therefore cannot be looked at.

The viewer’s gaze is encouraged in the grooming photograph by the diagonal that runs across these women’s bodies and through the right edge of the shawl. The contrast between the light bodies and dark triangles of background encourages viewers to look at the women’s nude forms. It also conceals most of the details of the women’s space and continues cultural investments in looking at women as generic types rather than as situated individuals with their own histories and roles. This positioning of women is related to the kinds of images that are displayed in museums and other cultural venues. Representations of women in these settings, states the art historian Carol Duncan, offer little variety. They are “simply female bodies or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy—those ever-present ‘Women’ or ‘Seated Women’ or ‘Reclining Nudes.’” Some of the vernacular lesbian interest listings include names and detailed information about the women portrayed, which is desirable information that buyers often request when it is not provided, but most of the images of nudes do not provide any information about the identity of the women or the location depicted. On the rare occasions that sellers provide details, they usually give the woman’s stage name and thus further situate the depicted woman within an economy of visual availability, although this information may also establish her skill and history.

The grooming photograph emphasizes viewing. The women’s interlocked bodies render an angled oval frame, which validates the desire to gaze at them. The “V” of the fringed scarf forms an arrow and points viewers towards the women's nude bodies. These framing elements highlight the tilted back and orgasmic face of the woman in the foreground and emphasize that her body, like those depicted in jochen.baeuerle’s listing, is directed at viewers rather than at the other participant. The grooming photograph establishes a
series of differences between male and female, active and passive, and subject and object. At the same time, the depiction of a claustrophobic women’s boudoir, with varied urns and jugs and compression and entwining of the bodies, correlate women to closeness. Mary Ann Doane has shown in her feminist film theory how intimate, passive, and undesirable viewing positions are all associated with women. In the photograph, the women’s intermeshed position, stasis, and relationship to the culturally devalued feminine activities of grooming and beautification are compositionally contrasted with the place viewers occupy. Viewers are at a distance and seemingly able to move through the image if desired. Such an articulation of difference between women—or, at least, these women—and viewers renders onlookers male and heterosexual. If viewing and identification happen along gender lines, and there are other ways viewers become engaged with images, then the photograph situates women close to their bodies and as the static object of the gaze or forces them to reject the depicted feminine interests and choose to establish a distance from women’s spaces.

There are many indications that men buy items listed as lesbian and lesbian interest, including images like the grooming photograph. Information about buyers can be obtained by reviewing feedback for such items and was available by examining closed listings before eBay elided the identity of buyers because of problems with fraud. A buyer using the ID douglasclemens, or “Douglas,” bought the grooming image. The information on douglasclemens’s About Me site includes an image and other information that identifies him as a man. His self-description and list of past purchases also reveal that douglasclemens collects and sells related material, including what he describes as “early erotica.” Many of these male buyers, as indicated in feedback profiles, purchase hundreds of mass-produced erotica images. A lot of erotica buyers set up their feedback profiles so they do not provide any information about purchases and, like other sellers, do not give indications about their identity in blogs, About Me, My World, and other parts of the site. However, my study of About Me sites and closed lesbian and lesbian interest listings for mass-produced erotica shows that visible buyers—and therefore, presumably, most buyers—are men.

cash5al, who bought the photograph “HAIR DO, 2 NUDES=LESBIAN? REAL PHOTO 50’S NICE NO RESEV,” which depicts two women in high heels touching each other, bending over so that their breasts are emphasized, and twisting their hips and knees to enact classic glamour girl poses, identifies
as “Alan.” He is “a photographer,” “collector of vintage photos, postcards,” and “cameras” and lives with his “wife and family.” Another buyer of items listed as “lesbian” uses the ID herrlast, the first part of which designates a man in German and thereby seems to self-identify as a man. darrins, who offers such items as “Vintage Lesbian Int Photo Pretty Pin Up Girls Outside,” provides a depiction of “Darrin Himself in House of Photo Albums.” Other buyers and sellers of mass-produced erotica also choose men’s names for their user IDs, present images of themselves, and specify their full names on varied parts of the site. In doing this, they connect the term “lesbian” to male viewers.

Men purchase mass-produced lesbian and lesbian interest erotica listings. However, eBay’s viewing and listing processes challenge the larger homosocial aspects of men’s viewing and buying of erotica. According to Duncan, “The ability of pornography to give its users a feeling of superior male status depends on its being owned or controlled by men and forbidden to, shunned by, or hidden from, women. In other words, in certain situations a female gaze can pollute pornography.” The “lesbian look,” which Karen Hollinger identifies as being shared among women in her analysis of spectatorship, can challenge the “exclusive male prerogative to control the filmic gaze and reconfigures this gaze so that it reflects a new female relation to desire.” As suggested by these theories, the grooming image cannot remain in a male sphere when it is accompanied by the term “lesbian interest” and when women are gazing at and through the representation. If Duncan’s argument is correct, the very visibility of men’s viewing and buying may challenge their claim to this erotic terrain and these erotic bodies.

Erotica viewing and collecting may be associated with empowered masculinity, but there is also a cultural tendency to relate close viewing and consumerism, which are necessary aspects of using eBay, to femininity and frivolity. The Internet erotica buyer is feminized by the closeness of the screen (although listed erotica photographs may articulate a distant position), overly involved forms of identification that accompany computer and Internet use, indication on Slashdot and other programmer forums that men engage with erotica only when they cannot meet women, enormous number of photographs of naked women that many of these eBay members purchase, and desire to bring objects closer by buying them. As described in the introduction, sellers use varied strategies to make it seem as if the only way to know about an object is by buying it. The multiform desires that accompany col-
lecting, the related feminization of interests in shopping and décor, and the boundlessness of collectors who want to own more, as Camille argues, trouble conceptions of heterosexuality and its dyadic logic.34

Women are rendered “the prototypical consumer,” but “the same over-presence that ties her to the image” also situates her, according to the media studies scholar Lynn Joyrich, “as both the subject and the object of consumerism.”35 Women are thereby positioned as the exemplary consumer citizen. In lesbian interest listings, women are the subject of listings and addressed as consumers. Men are also positioned as subjects and objects of lesbian interest listings, and their position as distant viewers is further compromised because they are incorporated into narratives. For instance, swampman deploys the shifting pronoun “me” in his listing titled “Duo of busty nude lesbian girls tie me up” and in so doing incorporates the viewer into the narrative.36 He makes it seem as if the viewer is asking to be tied up and is on display. This production of closeness and a virtual position within the image produces a different engagement from that of the distant male subject, which has been coded as ideal by varied cultural practices and critical theories. For the film theorist Christian Metz, a clear distinction between subject and object and distance are necessary aspects of empowered film spectatorship.37 Jay David Bolter, a new media studies scholar, identifies intellectual and emotional “distancing” as important aspects of reading and viewing.38 Nevertheless, with lesbian and lesbian interest listings, men are addressed as lesbians, placed within the depicted scenarios, and ascent to this position by buying. Men’s intimate consumer position is intensified by the close-up images in eBay listings.

eBay’s lesbian and lesbian interest viewers may note the traditional addresses of images, but they cannot fully occupy the articulated position. Straayer offers methods for considering alternative and shifting subject positions. She considers E. Ann Kaplan’s and other feminists’ psychoanalytically informed considerations of the male gaze, which describe how the male viewer is acknowledged and his position is privileged.39 Straayer argues that these theories need “to be combined with the equally pertinent question ‘Is the gaze heterosexual?’”40 The gaze produced by representations cannot remain solely heterosexual when buyers, including male heterosexual buyers, engage with listings such as “Vintage Two Nude Women Grooming Photo, Lesbian Interest” and its search-articulated relationship to myriad lesbian interests, viewing positions, and desires. The heterosexual man with lesbian interests has a less straight and empowered position. His interests place him too close to the screen and these women’s bodies, which now represent...
his body, so he is looked at and offered up to the gaze rather than distantly gazing.

Lesbians may “exercise an active gaze at women in the text,” writes Straayer, but lesbians’ “experience as women watching women nevertheless may quickly expand to include the feeling of being watched.” Straayer challenges assumptions that identification always happens along gender lines while acknowledging the ways women are encouraged to perform as objects. On eBay, the representations of passive women and encouragement for women to self-identify as objects are compromised by eBay’s construction of the active gaze and inspecting glance of the consumer. Watching is a key aspect of eBay, and buyers and sellers patrol listings and feedback histories for information about other people’s buying habits and reliability. Being watched and surveilled is also a feature of Internet settings with information about such things as individuals’ buying habits, posting times, logins, attributes, and preferences available or even streamed to other members.

**Lesbian Interests in Butches, Femmes, and Women in Drag**

Lesbian art historians at the Barnard Feminist Art and Art History Conference have responded to feminist critiques of how women are objectified in paintings and other visual works. They deploy a spectatorial position that is based on sexual desire as well as gender and describe their delight in depictions of women’s breasts. They also recognize the ways such images structure gender positions. Given this active lesbian look, women cannot be scripted solely as the object of the gaze. The photographer Elizabeth Stephens describes her childhood interest in images of pin-up girls as humiliating and exciting. She “wanted them to aim their dewy eyes” at her, rather than only looking at them, and to “be held and caressed like the virgin tools that they lavished their attention on.” However, Stephens also expresses some concern about coveting the accompanying “masculine space with its prerogatives and entitlements to look and possess, even if only in fantasy.” Stephens adopts the shifting views that such images can facilitate and imagines these representations, and the women who enact these parts, to be looking back at her. These lesbian gazes, and women who pleasurably, performatively, and visibly view representations of women, can prevent men from fully owning erotic images of women and articulating homosocial male spaces.

Like lesbian gazes, which can help to destabilize men’s possession of erotic images of women, images of butches and women in masculine drag challenge
men’s possession of masculinity. Butch masculinity includes bravado po-
tures; the presentation of strength, toughness, and a lack of emotion; wearing 
men’s clothing; conveying men’s anatomy; and relationships with feminine 
women. Due to such features, butch masculinity threatens the correlation 
between masculine/male and feminine/female that ordinarily articulates the 
power and rights of heterosexual men. According to Mabel Maney, a writer 
of lesbian pulp fiction, women “do masculinity so much better than men.”
Joan Nestle, a writer and co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, de-
scribes butch-femme as a “lesbian-specific way of deconstructing gender.” 
Solomon highlights the political importance of such identity positions. She 
defines butchness as the “refusal to play a part in the heterosexist binary” and 
as “the most dangerous queer image.”

When images of butches and women in drag are incorporated into wed-
ding representations, they contest eBay’s reliance on engagements and wed-
dings as markers of traditional gender and sexuality roles. Weddings are a 
successful way for eBay to emphasize its community orientation, the array of 
goods that are consumed at such events, and how things can be purchased on 
eBay. Drag weddings problematize the consumer aspects of weddings and the 
relationship between high-end goods and the sanctity of the event. The par-
participants in drag weddings deploy props and unexpected things. On the back 
of an image, a bride in a drag wedding describes her “Bouquet of soup bunch 
and shower of string beans” and “Veil and court train of lace curtains.” 
Brides also wear mops and other incongruous fabric to stand in for veils and 

The self-presentations in drag images are different from those in tradi-
tional bridal photographs and eBay wedding-dress listings, in which women 
enact and model normative roles. Since slenderness is a central concern for 
women who are getting married, bridal photographs provide a record of 
women’s weight at the time of the event. These images are then used as the 
standard by which women’s bodies are judged throughout their lives. How-
ever, drag weddings propose alternative roles, schemas for body size, and 
forms of comportment. Butches in mock weddings present in oversize and 
tight shirts, suit coats, and pants. In a photo postcard titled “RPPC Cross-
dressing Women Mock Wedding Lesbian Interest,” one butch woman shoves 
her hand in her pants pocket. She thereby emphasizes her bulging stomach 
and the straining fabric across her midsection. The bride in bb1913’s auction 
is so cocooned in curtain fabric that no assessment of her body is possible. 
One of the women in dv33’s “Vintage 1920’s photo / Funny Girlfriends Mock
Wedding” is likewise swathed in tulle. Campy presentations of string-bean bouquets, window-curtain dresses, poorly fitting suits, and prosthetic moustaches challenge the values and rituals of weddings, as well as eBay’s deployment of these events. Individuals are incorporated into these critiques when the depicted women look out at the photographer/viewer and smile, laugh, and otherwise communicate their amused relationship to the wedding and the associated gender and sexuality roles.

**Butch and Femme Camping**

Theorists and GLBTQ scholars have debated whether butches deploy camp. However, the photographic listings on eBay provide visual histories of butch and femme camping. According to Case, camp “both articulates the lives of homosexuals through the obtuse tone of irony and inscribes their oppression with the same device.” When camp eradicates the power and authority of heteronormative realism, it can be a particularly productive way to produce and read photographic images. Without such interventions, photography and its representations of gender norms are too often read as unmediated traces of the real. Camp can remind viewers that performances are an aspect of photographic production, and thus these images construct and frame culture. Roland Barthes describes individuals producing an identity and posing when confronted by the structuring processes of the camera. According to David Bergman, camp means to “pose,” and “drag performance” is essential to camp. A version of this camping is depicted in pixidiom’s “1915, vintage original photo, lesbian wedding ceremony,” in which a group of women perform a mock wedding. The rolled eyes and excessive prosthetic moustache of one tuxedo-clad woman highlight the constructed aspects of gender, sexual positions, and family. Equally disruptive to the idea that photography delivers the real is the depicted low ceiling, which underscores the staged aspects of images.

Case employs Joan Riviere’s theories about how some powerful women use feminine masquerade to make their position less threatening to men. For Case, “The butch is the lesbian woman who proudly displays the possession of the penis, while the femme takes on the compensatory masquerade of womanliness.” The femme is an important part of this performance. She “foregrounds her masquerade by playing to a butch, another woman in a role.” Femmes therefore emphasize that femininity is produced rather than natural. The “butch exhibits her penis to a woman who is playing the role of
compensatory castration. This raises the question of ‘penis, penis, who’s got the penis,’” because there is no referent. Instead, the fictions of penis and castration are “ironized” and “camped up.” Butches and femmes destabilize presumptions about masculine power by enacting camp forms of the male look, gaze, and genitals. Through these strategies, the attributes and related rights of heterosexual men are challenged.

These forms of camping and women’s resistance to playing to the penis occur in mosonz’s “Vintage Photo Women in Drag Pipes, Canes Lesbian Int” (figure 16). Instead of playing to men, three women in suits pose for the camera and assert their possession of space with a tilt of the head, outspread legs, and thrust of the hips. Their performance references men’s similar postures. The butches’ pale faces, necks, and hands emphasize the canes that they gesture with in front of and near their crotches. The photographic contrast between extremely light and medium tones emphasizes their possession of phallic canes and the relationship between masculine power and the presumption of the penis/phallus. In a similar manner, one of the butches

in “Vintage 1920’s photo / Funny Girlfriends Mock Wedding” holds her top hat directly over her crotch so it projects outward like an erection. Butches make these genital gestures but do not maintain a permanent penis/phal-lus for themselves. Their performances, like other forms of camp that Jack Babuscio theorizes, show how “sex roles” are superficial and a “matter of style” rather than natural qualities. These women use canes and top hats to produce sex roles, genitals, cultural conventions, and fashion statements.

The butches’ overt gestures with canes and top hats rather than flesh should remind viewers that presumptions about genitals and other sex traits are better described as cultural genitals, as gender and sexuality studies research by Anne Fausto-Sterling and by Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna indicates. Genitals are usually culturally presumed and rendered rather than physically verified. Judith Gerson reviews Kessler and McKenna’s work and asserts, “Because we do not routinely see or know each other’s genitalia, in practice gender attribution actually depends on cultural genitals—easily observed symbols such as dress, facial structure, voice, and hair that act as surrogates for anatomical genitals.” Judith Butler does not use the term “cultural genitals” in her feminist and queer theorizations but describes how the “contours of the body” are rendered as the “ground or surface upon which gender significations are inscribed.” The performances of butches and women in men’s clothing show how genders, as well as the contours of the body, are produced. These butches construct penises through their spread legs, positioning of canes, and clothing in a much more emphatic way than their social decisions about hair length, which is tucked under hats and more difficult to read, evokes vaginas and labia.

Conclusion: Cultural Performances and Consumer Critiques of Gender

Reminders of the cultural performance of gender appear in houseofmirth’s “Lesbian” album page with three photographs (figure 17). The page represents two women wearing suits and ties, with their hair piled high on top of their heads. Cigars wryly project from their mouths. In two of the images, a woman laughs about this drag play, her body and head tipped back in amusement. In the third image, the women’s performance of masculinity is accompanied by a white phallic column that punctuates their dark suits and hair and calls further attention to their cigars, which clearly are not just cigars because they help produce other meanings for men and women. These images
function in a manner similar to Judith Halberstam’s research on female masculinities and provide “a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity.”66 Bravado poses and references to phallic ties, cigars, and columns associate these women with masculinity and foreground the ways masculinity is produced. These women may not have penises, but they provide performances and critiques of the phallus. Their performances of gender and sexuality are different from the representations of erotic availability and sexual engagement discussed earlier in this chapter. Butches and women in masculine drag may always provide a challenge to binary gender and to cultural presumptions that a natural relationship exists between men, masculinity, and power. While focusing on men’s performances of women, Butler argues that drag “reveals the imitative structure of gender”—that gender is not based on some authentic, natural, and sexed body.67 In a similar manner, the diverse images grouped under the lesbian interest search term highlight the imitative structure of gender.

Butchness is an even more dangerous queer image when butches are ad-
dressed as consumers, who control some production processes and forms of cultural taste, and their images undermine men’s expectations about being able to locate and own erotic photographs of naked women. According to research by Case and by Laura Harris and Liz Crocker, femmes are a key part of such destabilizations. Femmes can highlight the performative aspects of femininity, women’s engagement with an opposite that is not an opposite, the mythos of natural gender roles, and the ways women’s performances of masculinity are more appealing than men’s performances. The actions of femmes and butches and their resistance to being fully situated inside binary gender can emphasize an equally disruptive series of excesses and resistances in women’s presentations as visually and erotically available. The women posing in erotica images seem bored, their pleasures appear faked, their flesh is oddly arranged, and the spontaneous scenarios look set up. When these problems are foregrounded, it is more difficult for viewers and buyers to believe that they are engaging with ready and available women. In these cases, vintage photographs do not do justice to the genre, normative gender, or sexuality conventions.

Relating masculinity to women encourages viewers to look more carefully at other gender representations. As I have previously suggested, photography is believed to provide an unmediated view of the real, to indicate the truth of situations, and to deliver material bodies, but it often does not convey enough visual information for viewers to classify. When eBay sellers list photographs of butch women and people in drag, buyers are encouraged to attend to the relationship between bits of portrayed face, hair, and body shape and performed and “real” gender. They are taught to apply this examination to other images. After all, these images are more valuable than similar representations of men. Sellers’ indications about butch women and drag performances lead to occasional doubts about other identifications. This threatens the structures and organizational logic of how sellers classify images and the ways eBay is organized.

The problems with articulating unique individuals and a set of aspects that distinguish women from men are unintentionally emphasized in the doubling of stance, haircuts, and outfits in darrins’s “Vintage Photo Two Girls w/ Butch Haircuts.” Some sellers acknowledge such difficulties in reading. surpapier is “not sure if it is a man or a woman. The features are feminine but the subject is wearing men’s clothing. Maybe it’s an effeminate man or a woman in men’s clothing. Perhaps this is a Crossdresser or a Transvestite.” Another image, offered by slingwing, is of women “striking a dapper man-type pose”
but there are “light pen marks on the photo on the sides of the ladies’ heads as if with an after thought they or someone was wanting to show they were really ladies with long hair - not men.”72 In each of these readings, the seller uses hairstyles rather than supposedly stable anatomical attributes to determine individuals’ sex. Not surprisingly, such cues also leave sellers confused. There is no stable transhistorical relationship between hair length and gender. Subcultural hairstyles have often been blamed for gender and sex confusion.

Sellers often highlight their difficulties in identifying by using question marks, shifting pronouns, and conflicting terms. klchance offers a “portrait of a boyish girl or a girlish boy, in fur, scarves and lipstick. Definitely ahead of his/her time.”73 hooks_lady lists a “Portrait Great Detail-- Lady or Man?” She “bought this years ago,” believing “it to be a man in drag-- something in the look, the stance and the hands/gloves” but “still can’t say for sure!”74 photoguyred’s “Lesbian Antique Real Photograph Kissing” includes the proviso, “Lesbian (?) two girls (?) kissing! On a boat with Teens type bathing suits. The more colorfully dressed person on left is of indeterminate gender as far as I can judge. Returnable if you can prove other than my title.”75 These moments of failed identification, with the need for constant contextualizing question and exclamation marks, suggest that clothes make the man and woman, but that the genitals and shapes beneath these clothes can be complicated. Some of eBay’s butches may be boys. I use the terms “women” and “men” to describe the people depicted in lesbian and lesbian interest listings, but my identifications are also likely to be incorrect in some instances.

There are economic, political, and erotic reasons to read these images differently. Although darrins offers “Vintage Lesbian Int Photo Woman as Man,” aspects of the photograph as it is represented in the listing do not convey that this is a woman self-presenting as a man.76 Without darrins’s title, this depiction of a person wearing such culturally gendered items as a suit and boater would probably be identified as a man. The articulation of gender and sex by darrins encourages the viewer to attend to the details of this figure’s masculine performance, which include a crushed suit, a half-tucked-in pocket flap, and a jacket that seems too long. However, these features could also indicate that the suit is a prop or point to the individual’s class, ability to obtain a tailored suit, and grooming skills. thewritersden claims to be able to read cultural genitals and binary sex when offering “EDWARDIAN LADIES DRESSED AS MEN LESBIAN INT OLD PHOTO.”77 Some of the faces portrayed in these listings may be round, which sellers often mention when identifying butches
and women in drag, but there is not, and cannot be, any reliable evidence of
the individuals’ binary sex.

Even if “proof” by genital check is possible in some circumstances, such
information cannot be gleaned from vintage photographs. Visual exami-
nations can still elide surgical interventions and chromosomal and hor-
monal characteristics. Feminist science studies scholars have demonstrated
how medical and scientific professionals produce sexed attributes, binaries,
and other aspects of individuals that are presumed to be natural. In these
images, individuals are “dressed as men,” and such performances ordinarily
produce gender. Nevertheless, cultural genitals are cyclically remade in these
listings because sellers’ titles and individuals’ clothing and performances pro-
duce contrary indications about gender and sex. Such formations, reconfigu-
ations, and critiques of cultural genitals suggest that individuals’ readings of
cultural genitals in Internet avatars and profiles should also be interrogated.
These sites flicker between being produced texts, pointing to material bodies,
and existing as sexed selves.

Photographs and digital images, whether uploaded to eBay or to Face-
book, are supposed to function as proof. However, the readings in this chap-
ter demonstrate how difficult it is to articulate gender presentations, genitals,
and sex. Because of the unclear attributions in some lesbian interest listings,
viewers and consumers cannot desire a clearly gendered body, expect to con-
trol the depicted women, or establish a stable relationship to lesbian and les-
bian interest listings, including mass-produced erotica. Lesbian and lesbian
interest listings, particularly those that render butch subjects and subjects
in drag, highlight the queer political uses for eBay that work along with its
construction of a heteronormative world and organizational logic. Lesbian
interest listings appear on eBay where numerous people view them next to
representations of heterosexual couples, babies, landscapes, and other photo-
graphic genres. In situating the images in this terrain, sellers offer a consumer
critique of eBay’s focus on traditional engagements and marriages and nor-
mative gender and sexuality positions. In some cases, sellers’ listings implode
the very possibility of an organizational logic that is based on dyadic and
knowable gender. The conflicted group of photographs that are listed under
the lesbian and lesbian interest search terms position viewers and consumers
so that the functioning of cultural genitals and the related malfunctioning of
eBay’s categories and logic are difficult to ignore.