



Buy It Now: Lessons from eBay. By Michele White. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 317 pp. ISBN: 9780822352402.

Michele White's *Buy It Now: Lessons from eBay* is made timelier by Facebook's recent landmark decision to accommodate more fluid gender identification by giving users the option of 50 new gender identifiers for their profiles. This move could serve as an example to more inflexible sites, such as eBay, the hugely popular virtual auction. Indeed, the primary lesson that White wants us to take away from her book is that online forums, like eBay and Craigslist, operate according to certain organizational logics that configure and regulate the user in a manner consistent with the values of the sites' executives and this can prove limiting for some members. Meg Whitman, who was the president and chief executive officer of eBay from 1998–2008, is a Republican and is very active in American politics. She was the national finance co-chair for Mitt Romney's 2008 presidential primary campaign, co-chaired John McCain's presidential bid in 2008, and ran for governor of California in 2009. White's central argument—that the White, heteronormative experience of eBay's executives has led to a site that marginalizes and disempowers minorities—gives particular attention to gay, lesbian, and African-American identities. Heteronormativity is reinforced by the design of the site, which requires members to identify their gender from the limited options of male and female, and also with policies and content that promote conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, celebrate heterosexual weddings and family, and relegate “gay or lesbian interest” listings to the adults-only portion of the website. Moreover, White argues that while eBay claims to prohibit the sale of offensive items and ban derogatory language, the site sustains racism and excludes a critical understanding of African-American history and structural inequality by allowing Black Americana for auction.

White has written about Internet spectatorship before (2006), and has underscored how the ostensibly benign practices we engage in online encourage powerful assumptions about self and society. Her current work applies the theoretical models she has previously developed to shed light on the implications of eBay's technology and representations.

The book opens with a critical consideration of the eBay brand, the writing on virtual communities, and a critical look at the member ritual of attending eBay conferences. This builds up to the book's main contention that eBay's conservatism and corporate logic are active in the site's settings and that they help reproduce dominant and subordinate positions. The book is devoted to a close, critical analysis of eBay, and this makes the final chapter's shift to the moral regulation of women's sexual behaviour on Craigslist feel like a bit of a departure. One wonders if part of the difficulty stems from the challenges of writing fluidly about Internet settings. White's narrative is not unlike an overdone Web page: informative but a little busy.

White makes convincing use of the literature on collecting to inform her analysis of eBay's auction culture and brand community. This is one of the book's real strengths, and White offers a comprehensive treatment of the subject that not only draws on collecting scholarship but also weaves in critical Internet studies; theories of branding, feminism, gender, and sexuality studies; film studies; and postcolonial and African-American studies. White gives back to these areas of inquiry a nuanced understanding of the distinguishing features that mediate online collecting, identity, and community.

The discussion of attempts to subvert eBay's heteronormativity is compelling. Gay men use listings that are ostensibly selling underwear and swimsuits to model their "bulge" and transform the site into a place of exhibitionism, voyeurism, and cruising, thereby undermining the order and regulation of the site. White's reading of the politics of viewing lesbian interest photography is insightful and makes cogent use of feminist film studies.

Buy It Now offers an enriched sense of virtual communities. The book has skillfully and deliberately broken away from many early studies of the Internet, which insistently sought to characterize it as a place of unfettered emancipation. While White is able to critically locate some empowerment in users' negotiation of gay interest listings, eBay's Black Americana category offers no such potential; "sellers have not collaboratively developed forms of critical resistance" (p. 168). Instead, racist language and "reprehensible depictions of African-Americans" (p. 168) are presented. Moreover, White's attention to eBay's exploitation of virtual-community and brand-community membership to encourage users to work for free is revealing, and complements Sarah Banet-Weiser's recent book, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012). White's work demonstrates the point underscored by historians of consumerism—such as Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunt—consumption is indeed a moral and political act (in Brückweh, 2011, p. 12). The book provides a valuable addition to a more critical understanding of the relationship between corporate power, brands, and new media with the co-option of virtual social communities. It also contributes to an almost ethnographic account of how normative identity is inscribed and sustained in the parameters of membership.

Roland Barthes (1973) has underscored leisure and consumerism as every day practices we typically embark on uncritically that can entrench and reproduce dominant myths and values. In drawing our attention to how eBay's user configuration does just that, White advocates for more meaningful inclusivity. She asks that eBay (and Craigslist) be consistent with their rhetoric: equitable and genuinely welcoming.

References

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