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Published in 2006 by
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
270 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square
Milton Park, Abingdon
Oxon OX14 4RN

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Routledge is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-415-97435-6 (Hardcover) 0-415-97436-4 (Softcover)
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-415-97435-6 (Hardcover) 978-0-415-97436-3 (Softcover)
Library of Congress Card Number 2005029547

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Everyday eBay : culture, collecting, and desire / edited by Ken Hillis, Michael Petit, and Nathan Epley.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-97435-6 (hardback : alk. paper) -- ISBN 0-415-97436-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. eBay (Firm) 2. Internet auctions. I. Hillis, Ken. II. Petit, Michael, 1956- III. Epley, Nathan, 1968-

HF5478.E84 2006

381'.177--dc22

2005029547

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<http://www.routledge-ny.com>

eVeryDay eBay

Culture, Collecting,
and Desire

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

Routledge is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

- ❑ **Reading eBay**
- ❑ Hidden Stores, Subjective Stories, and a People's History of the Archive

- ❑ ZOE TRODD

On my final day at one of Cambridge University's all-women colleges, I rummaged through a hallway cabinet outside my room. Full of old papers, knick-knacks, and photographs, the cabinet had a storied past: in 1938, the then-occupant of my room departed suddenly under mysterious circumstances, and college authorities placed her belongings in the cabinet, where they remained undisturbed for the next half-century. Now I, who had dressed like Virginia Woolf for my college interview and lived in Sylvia Plath's room in my freshman year, sought in the cabinet more fragments of instant female ancestry. Deep in this cabinet of curiosities, I found a photograph of a young woman reading. Seemingly unaware of the photographer, she held a book, her face bent toward its pages. I kept the image.

INSTANT ANCESTRY AND EBAY'S ANTECEDENTS

The photograph was to be the first in a large collection: years later I discovered eBay, our latter-day cabinet of curiosities, and dozens of *cartes-de-visite* (CDVs) from 1840 to 1900, all of women holding or reading books. The first cheap, mass-produced photograph, with portrait studios located in the premises of hairdressers, butchers, and dentists, CDVs took the form of an individual bearer's photographic portrait mounted on sturdy cardboard stock (Figure 5.1).¹ Exchanged between people, CDVs were mementos of the giver; they were produced to be collected in albums and were also referred to as "album portraits." Collecting these images in albums was so widespread a practice that by 1866 Edward L. Wilson observed in the fall issue of the *Philadelphia Photographer*, "Everyone is surfeited with [the CDV] ... everybody has exchanged with everybody."²



Figure 5.1 *Carte-de-visite* vintage photograph of girls holding books.
Courtesy of Zoe Trodd.

As I rummaged through eBay's categories, the site reminded me of these album collections but also of the Renaissance *Wunderkammern*. eBay called to mind Thomas Platter's 1599 itemization of Walter Cope's cabinet: "a Madonna made of feathers, a chain made of monkey teeth, stone shears, a back-scratcher ... an apartment stuffed with queer foreign objects in every corner."³ eBay describes its "collectibles" category in similar terms: "Mickey Mouse and Tinkerbell items ... a vintage Star Wars lunchbox ... Napoleon Dynamite button or a Popeye bobble head ... rare and one of a kind candle holders ... Pez Dispensers, Keychains, and Promo Glasses."⁴ eBay offers a mélange of "anything that is strange," as a 1625 letter by Tradescant the Elder described the *Wunderkammer*, that "world of wonders in one cabinet shut."⁵

What Francis Bacon called "the shuffle of things" again passes through a "goodly huge cabinet," arranged and rearranged like a kaleidoscopic encyclopedia by eBay buyers with their Sort By and Customize Display options. Purchased items ship out like Renaissance collectors' New World curios, gathered for their *Wunderkammern*.⁶

Over time the Renaissance *Wunderkammer* evolved into the eighteenth-century American cabinet of curiosities; the nineteenth-century art studio and trompe l'oeil tradition; the dime museum with its freaks, waxworks, and relics; and, in the case of P. T. Barnum, *people* as curiosities. One of Barnum's pamphlets describes a woman as the "greatest natural and national curiosity in the world ... [the] most astonishing and interesting curiosity."⁷ Nineteenth-century freak shows often included such pamphlets chronicling the subjects' life stories: people became cabinet curiosities, and curious stories were central to the cabinet. Then, in the late nineteenth century, the *carte-de-visite* composite card, which sometimes featured up to a thousand tiny faces on one card, was advertised as a "photographic curiosity." *Cartes-de-visite* of people with unusual physical features were popular by the 1860s, and collectors made annotated albums in which they placed images of Renaissance artworks alongside those of celebrities, relatives, and natural wonders—creating in the form of the photo album their own personal cabinets of curiosities.

The fluid, chaotic cabinet of curiosities resurfaces as eBay, where one seller promises, "I have a little of everything." The *Wunderkammer*, the cabinet of curiosities, and my Cambridge cabinet seem to have new life online. Like all collectors who practice what Hayden White calls a "feverish rummaging of the past,"⁸ I rummaged once again—in eBay's virtual "cabinet of curiosities." I found a listing for a CDV image about which the seller asked, "Wouldn't she make a great instant ancestor?" A different seller described the woman reader in a photograph as "a nice instant ancestor," and a third suggested of yet another image, "Recognize this as an image of your own past." eBay sellers of such images frequently invoke the instant ancestry of eBay collecting, as though suggesting we might make someone else's history our own and give these images the new context of our own stories, and seek the imagined identity and community *also* sought by nineteenth-century women readers photographed holding books.

To recollect these images on eBay fulfils the prophecy of one writer, who wrote of CDVs in 1862, "If a box or two ... were to be sealed up and buried deep in the ground, to be dug up two or three centuries hence, what a prize they would be to the fortunate finder."⁹ eBay's fortunate finders need not possess a fortune: just as the CDV was the everyperson's nineteenth-century

portrait, so it can be the everyperson's collectible today. And just as the CDV could be a form of people's self-history, its twenty-first-century historians in the form of eBay sellers sustain its roots in people's history. As an online form of people's history, eBay remediates this popular form of earlier history making—one without a paper trail that challenged not only the nineteenth century's newly professionalizing historians with their focus on documents and disinterest in objects, but also its museum movement, and faith in the importance of classification and order within society and the archive. eBay's archive itself echoes the nineteenth-century CDVs of women with books included in its vast listings for auction. These images, initially collected into albums, were motley archives telling tales and narrating people's history, *themselves* exploring the storying of women, their stored yet story-like interior lives.

Allan Sekula argues that archives are “torn between narration and categorization, between chronology and inventory.”¹⁰ The story of the United States is equally “torn and between,” and eBay-the-archive continues the saga. Archives “constitute a territory of images,”¹¹ and in eBay and its CDV listings we encounter the transient archive as a social as well as a physical place, and see women's history made and unmade by the archive and the auction house. eBay allows for a revisiting of gendered nineteenth-century tensions between objects and subjects, objective histories and subjective stories, archives and narratives, production and consumption. The site indicates how hidden stores or images may become stories, how the “I” enters eBay's sellers’ “stores” to make “stories”—stories that narrate the individual “I” of the collectible little women in these images, consumed as art objects and storied as subjects by cameras, CDV albums, and eBay photographic thumbnails.

Much like my Cambridge rummaging, eBay's visitors repeat, if only virtually, nineteenth-century tours that exhumed relics from old family garrets. Yet it also reverses that era's tendency to bury unwanted history deep in its national cabinet. In 1863 Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of burying war photographs in the recesses of a cabinet as one would the “mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented,” the scenes “strewed with rags and wrecks” best archived, then forgotten.¹² eBay, however, unearths the fragments buried in the recesses of nineteenth-century America's cabinet; history appears where storied object meets seller's narrative, and where, as the eBay bulletin board “Collectible? or junk? Not sure what this is!” posits, story turns junk into collectible. Sekula further suggests that archives “maintain a hidden connection between knowledge and power,” that they should be “read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced, or made invisible by the machineries of profit and progress.”¹³ To examine eBay listings

for CDVs of women readers is to read the archive from below, to encounter a people's history, a suppressed counter-memory, disjectia without a paper trail once deemed unworthy of the museum.

THE DIN OF SMALL VOICES

In the ebb and flow of eBay's memory machine, a people's history emerges: of the people and by the people, for the internet “era vibrat[es] with the din of small voices.”¹⁴ Part of a popular tradition maintained by “bards and story-tellers and minstrels ... soothsayers and priests,” eBay sellers are the opposite of certain “historians of the [nineteenth] century who found some special magic in the word ‘scientific.’”¹⁵ As unofficial historians, eBay sellers provide open-ended history, literary background on the books the women hold, and visual analyses (“there's a lot going on in this image,” claims one seller). Anyone with internet access and a potentially collectible item can be a popular historian on eBay: one seller spots a note on the back of an image “that says S. Shattuck, 19 Central St., Lowell,” and explains, “I looked him up and found the following,” then invites other eBayers to contribute further information. eBay's bulletin boards for the “collectibles” community frequently contain requests from individuals seeking help identifying an item or its era, and many replies. The “Official Collectibles ‘What IS it????’ Thread,” active since June 2002, even echoes Barnum's 1860s series “What is it?” similarly offering, unlike the museum, possibilities without definitive answers.

In 1847 Honoré de Balzac claimed that “the joy of buying bric-a-brac is a secondary delight: in the give-and-take of barter lies the joy of joys.”¹⁶ eBay's online forms of give-and-take and communal search for information make any histories mounted on the site less official than subjective and locate historical value in the eye of the individual. After speculating about a CDV, one seller adds, “Who knows? Buy it for what you think.” Another concludes, “[B]ut you make up your own mind as to what this photo is all about.” A third emphasizes, “This is only my opinion.” Another states, “I'll call this Preacher Woman. I'll put my best guess forward, I would say ... a female minister or perhaps a travelling preacher maybe with a sideshow ... she has left clues ... if I were on CSI or something like that I'd say she was a faith healer ... it is a great image with tremendous potential.” A popular historian reading “clues,” referencing a tradition of popular detection that runs from Sherlock Holmes to *CSI*, the seller nonetheless concludes with an appeal to the open, fluid zone of potentiality.

Sellers develop plots around the women in these images, such as this Preacher Woman narrative.¹⁷ They seek stories in the open books and the empty containers that often figure in the images too. One seller even imagines that an urn holds a “dear, departed loved one and [the figure] is in mourning.” Sellers variously imagine the women to be “lively” or “austere,” and give the images titles (“Her Favorite Book”), thereby echoing Paul Auster’s description of a junk collector who sifts the city’s “inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things . . . from the chipped to the smashed, from the dented to the squashed,” and then “give[s] them names.”¹⁸ Sellers speculate as to whether the women might be sisters, or remark upon a “show of family closeness and affection.” Making the histories of these nineteenth-century women readers their own, sellers speculate about the women’s hidden stories: “[T]he way she seems to be resting her arm on her stomach, maybe she is pregnant,” notes one. “The girl has an ‘experienced’ look which may indicate that she is an actress,” says another, or a different seller comments that she “looks like she travelled some so may have been an actress.”

eBay’s CDV sellers imagine and give new meanings to the lives of these long-deceased women beyond the moment of pose: “I’m sure their mother dressed them alike a lot,” says one seller of a CDV featuring two sisters. “You might think she grew up a spinster and the other one had 10 kids but I think the girl with glasses probably was more confident and happy with a great disposition,” says another of two girls. At times sellers also imagine the moment of the photograph, rendering its production a drama complete with dialect: “[I]t’s like the photographer just said ‘you two just pretend like you wuz havin a conversation,’” writes one seller. Others point out unusual postures that might suggest a familiar relationship with the photographer, and one speculates that a woman’s “wonderfully expressive face” shows “trepidation about the photo process.” Yet another writes, “I’m not certain what her body language says. Maybe, I hate this stupid hat!”

History adds value to the collectible, stories help these items sell, and sellers consequently give the listed objects their own stories across time. Their descriptions include accounts of how and where they discovered the images: “found in attic of farm estate,” for example. Sellers trace the passage from then to now, offering what Walter Benjamin calls “the testimony to the history which [the work of art] has experienced,” without which “the aura” of the work of art “withers.”¹⁹ One describes the “edge-wear and soil” on an image (figure 1; as mentioned in note 1, this and all subsequent cited figures are available at www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~trodd/eBay/), adding that “someone along the way drew marks through the women’s faces,” encapsulating the storied status of both the CDV and the subjects it depicts.

The marks on the faces in this image might suggest age lines, traces of a lived life, as well as the photograph’s own damaging passage through time. At times sellers even offer their own family history for sale: one image “is of a distant relative and his wife,” another is “special for family reasons.” Many sellers have acquired the images through years of Civil War reenacting, collecting them as souvenirs of a history they *made* their own through active and collective repetition of stories. They offer what Carl Becker calls the “impressions and images, out of which [Mr. Everyman] somehow manages . . . to fashion a history, a patterned picture” that might not be “complete or completely true” but is relevant to “his idea of himself.”²⁰ The commodity fetish for unstoried objects without paper trails becomes memory collection via souvenirs and storied relics, an ephemeral bric-a-brac collage of “impressions and images,” stored and storied.

The narrativizing of objects is important in the context of online auctions. Narrative and stories counter the inability of viewers to touch the items for sale, and some sellers take pains to imitate the experience of a nonvirtual auction, describing, for example, the “bit of paper” that “adheres to the back from a time when the tintype was in its original cardboard frame.” The site itself uses the click-to-enlarge device, which emulates the action of physically lifting an image closer, and sellers often photograph CDVs with their fingers visible at the edges, inserting an image of physicality much like the women readers with fingers tightly wedged between book pages (see figure 2). The women’s physical contact with the books in the images is notable: even when tables are nearby for the book to rest upon, they still reach out to touch them, and one seller observes about an 1866 image that a girl’s fingers are so insistently resting upon the page that “I suspect she’s blind and reading Braille” (see figure 3; the United States actually adopted Braille later in the nineteenth century). As with the book in the image, sellers’ gestures toward tactility work to insert material traces of history into the archive. Observing the physical connection between a woman and her book, one seller suggests this is the entryway to her story: “I wonder why she has her thumb in the book. I like it when these tell stories.”

READING A WOMAN READING

The stories the sellers tell about the images have the same function as the books within the CDVs they sell: they introduce *narrative* into the archive. Burying their faces in books, the women readers are curious in the *other* sense of the word. The women readers often sit in front of cabinets (figure 4), and out of eBay’s latter-day cabinet of curiosities emerge curious women

readers who seek knowledge alongside their curious historians. Telling the story of one 1860s CDV, a seller comments about its four young women readers, “I found them to be curious.” Here we see how these women readers resisted the dominant strain of nineteenth-century collecting culture organized by taxonomy, typology, and the archivist-curator who sought to classify and rationalize. Within these CDV images, it is the book that symbolizes the individual and storied life—the narratable self renarrated by eBay sellers today. The nineteenth-century physiognomical and art-historical search for truth revealed by external forms, and the Victorian attempt to read and classify the body, pushed interior life to the background. But the presence of books in collectible CDV images reclaims the secret histories dismissed by the dominant collecting impulse. The CDV women used the book lodged within the photograph to challenge the politics of collecting and surveillance and the nineteenth-century parlor and archive. The images are, as one eBay seller points out, a “social statement being made.”

The *specific* books these women hold restore their history beyond the parlor: African American women hold books about abolition, postbellum women hold medical books to indicate their role as nurses during the Civil War, and women read suffragette volumes together. In one image a woman reader holds a whip, and its seller notes of the whip “that she appears to be using it to point to a passage in the book.” For this seller, the woman might be a church worker, the book “a Bible, indicating the verse of ‘spare the rod, spoil the child.’” Often the women’s postures suggest the unreadable nature of closed books in the images—the women resist readability when the books are unreadable too (figure 5). Some women, photographed with men, stare at their books while the men look at them, and so invert the “ways of seeing” described by John Berger: “Men look at women,” and “women watch themselves being looked at” and turn themselves “into an object . . . a sight.”²¹ In these CDVs women make their faces unreadable, averting their gaze toward the pages of the books they read: one seller describes “a photo of a lady who appears to be lost in thought with a book and her little dog, with a bow around its neck, looks at the camera.” This seller adds, “I like this photo because so often the subject is looking into the camera, but here, she is reading.”

Other CDV women readers insist on the presence of ongoing stories, events in time: in many images the only blur is that of the pages as they turn, or, if photographed with a man, a woman often holds a book at the same angle as his fob-watch, or places it against her body at the same place as the watch, suggesting a life in time. Again suggesting the presence of a living story, one image positions two girls with books on either side of a third girl

in white, seated and surrounded by flowers. As its seller points out, she is as pale as death, might *be* dead were it not that she is seated upright without obvious rigor mortis (figure 6). Bookless, storyless, hers is a kind of social death, while the standing girls hold their books at the same angle and wear the same dress. They’re connected readers, part of a living community.

The blur of moving pages even appears in images where a solitary woman is interrupted in her reading and looks up from the book. Though interrupted, her story persists (figure 7). As one seller says of an image, “It looks for all the world like the photographer interrupted her reading and she responded by putting her book down but marking the page with her finger.” In another image an interrupted reader stands directly above a stuffed dog. A second, bookless woman in the image faces to the left, mirrored by the right-facing dog that parallels her in a storyless state while the interrupted reader resists object status through the book (figure 8). This tradition of interrupted reading extends from the famous Gabriel Metsu painting of a woman being interrupted in her reading to a 1999 photograph by Joel Peter Witkin called *Interrupted Reading*, where a woman reader fragments into separate body parts as her reading is interrupted (figures 9 and 10). She keeps a finger between the pages of her book, as do most of the nineteenth-century interrupted CDV women readers, in resistance to the fragmentation of self through the interrupting, objectifying, classifying eye. Often posed next to small statue heads that sit, disembodied, at the same angle as their own heads, the CDV women readers on eBay have books to make them whole. The book stands for the *whole* story of the individual, as opposed to the story of *holes* and separated, cataloged parts (figure 11). Surrounded by empty vessels (urns, teapots, and boxes), women touch and hold the book, an open zone, and *whole* story.

As Benjamin points out, “[C]ollecting is a primal phenomenon of study: the student collects knowledge.”²² Though collected, the women readers are also collectors themselves—as the principal consumers of novels in this period, they are also consumers in these images, even while consumed as curious art objects. Collected within albums that had botanically themed surrounds, the women often hold their books beneath vases of flowers, or hanging vines, so that nature seems to explode from within the books’ covers, spilling out like the loose pages of several books in other images (figure 12). In so doing they challenge—like the imaginative fiction of Victorian culture—the confined spaces of parlor, national archive, legible female body, and natural history museum. In one 1870s CDV, a woman holding a book also looks through binoculars, metaphorically connecting the book to the outside world. She is likely a bird-watcher and therefore a reader, gazer,

and collector of bird sightings (figure 13). Using a taxonomical text, she inverts the usual dynamic of woman-as-collectible within dominant systems of classification. The object of her gaze lies beyond the photograph's edge, and the contents of her book remain invisible to the viewer. The book is a full but open potentiality of meaning, her mind a hidden store.

This woman is connected to the world via her reading, and in numerous other images women connect to one another *physically* through their books: groups of women touch one another and a book, sometimes with eyes connecting on the book's open pages. If only one woman touches the book, she tends to put her other hand on her friend's shoulder, so connecting her friend to the book via her intermediary body (figures 14–16). If several women in one image each hold a book, the *books* often touch each other, overlapping slightly on the table. The book, then, is a symbol of imagined community and a portal to an interactive realm: in one CDV a group of twelve women face in different directions, entirely disconnected as they wind yarn, knit, and play instruments. The sole connection is between two women in the background who gaze together at a book (figure 17).

In 1857 Lady Elizabeth Eastlake wrote of photography as a “new form of communication ... which now happily fills up the space between [people].”²³ Photography, like the novel before it, was a precursor to virtual communities of the internet and the eBay community that relies on this technology. Siegfried Kracauer writes that “photography tends to suggest endlessness” and probes into “an inexhaustible universe,”²⁴ and the book within the photograph within the eBay listing connects the women readers to that universe: it's a symbol like that of the key hanging on the blank wall in Nicolaes Maes's *An Old Woman Dozing over a Book* (1655), where the woman reader dreams herself into the inexhaustible universe of the imagination (figure 18).²⁵

DYNAMIC DEBRIS AND HISTORY'S DUSTBIN

The concepts of inexhaustibility and renewability recur in discussions of photography, the archive, the auction, and eBay. Countering a static, taxonomized, and hierarchical archive with the model of narrative and story, CDVs of women with books are part of a tradition of biodegradable or replenishing history; this is echoed in form by eBay, a site of recovery, reinterpretation, and exchange. “If it isn't on eBay it doesn't exist,” the slogan goes, echoing a nineteenth-century *Punch* parody of CDV albums: if your image is “not in the book it's because you're not wanted.”²⁶ In exchanging the CDVs of women reading, eBay buyers and sellers give

space to those whose real stories purportedly didn't “exist” because they weren't “wanted” as part of the Victorian national archive. A 2004 eBay TV ad asks, “What if nothing was ever forgotten? What if nothing was ever lost?” The “collectibles” section of eBay is a kind of archeological dig where forgotten and lost things are re-membered and re-collected. eBay inscribes the opposite impulse to that of Michael Landy, the installation artist who in 2001 destroyed all his possessions after making a full inventory; the eBay collector is instead like Charles Baudelaire's man who in 1860 “collects and catalogs everything the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken ... collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic.”²⁷

During the nineteenth century, CDVs were understood as biodegradable history. “How long are card pictures to be the rage?” asked one critic in 1862. “In a few months or years at the most, our good patrons will have their albums full of dirty and yellow and faded pictures. Will they replace them with new ones?”²⁸ Even the albums were shifting narratives, with a first page inviting each viewer to add her or his own image after viewing, and so replenish the collection. As symbols of the inner lives of women, the books in the CDVs, like eBay, are archives of used and storied fragments. Collected into the parlor and taxonomized by late Victorian society, women found their stories consigned as fragments of what Leon Trotsky would later call the “dustbin of history,” or what Benjamin would imagine as “aborted and broken-down matter.”²⁹ eBay buyers who re-collect these stories *as* fragments adapt Henry Ford's famous statement, so that history becomes not bunk but *junk*; a collection of castoffs and a storehouse of relics become, on eBay, the auction house too.³⁰

While the Victorian home was an archive of women as art objects and consumable goods, eBay and the internet bring the archive and auction into the home. The auction site breaks the boundaries that the CDV women also sought to transcend through reading and shatters the walls of the museum and the archive. Indeed, not the museum but rather the auction house creates the potential for an antitotalizing and biodegradable history. “My wish is that ... my Curiosities ... shall not be consigned to the cold tomb of a museum, and subjected to the stupid glance of the passer-by; but I require that they shall all be dispersed under the hammer of the Auctioneer, so that the pleasure which the acquiring of each one of them has given me shall be given again, in each case, to some inheritor,” wrote Edmond de Goncourt in his 1896 will.³¹ eBay wields this auctioneer's hammer and, with its different systems of archiving items (by price, date, and seller), even

puts some auctioneer's tools in the hands of those bidding. And, while some sellers photograph their images alongside measuring sticks to indicate size, so echoing the rigid classification systems of the late nineteenth-century archive, many compare the image instead to miscellaneous objects: "Dimensions, approximately a little bigger than [*sic*] a pack of cigarettes," writes one seller about a CDV listed for auction.

eBay's renewable history has deep associations with the nineteenth-century women featured in the many CDVs listed on the site. In 1835 Lydia Maria Child favored "gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing is lost.... Nothing should be thrown away so long as it is possible to make any use of it," and in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, set in the 1870s and 1880s, Ma's scrap bag regenerates objects so that nothing is lost.³² We also see this aesthetic in Louisa May Alcott's *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag* anthologies, the March girls' quilt sewing in *Little Women*, Catherine Sloper's "morsel of fancy-work" at the end of Henry James's *Washington Square*, and Sethe's patchwork wedding dress and Sixo's friend of whom he says, "The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (set in the late nineteenth century).³³ Scraps and junk are redeemed through story, and given new meanings and use values, just as the chaos of collectible items for sale on eBay is storied by these item's sellers and the fragments of women's stories are redeemed by the books depicted in CDVs. eBay's 2005 "One of a Kind Scrapbook Design Contest" continues the tradition: the winner and four of the five finalists were women who made stories out of scraps bought on eBay.³⁴

Junk becomes a counterhistory, a potentiality. eBay, like women's nineteenth-century scrap bags, can be a site of alternate history making. Its shifting and dynamic archive is a storied store that renews the old cabinet of curiosities' archival tradition and rewrites the nineteenth-century gendered politics of the archive. One strain of the nineteenth-century archival imagination had sought a permanent totality, but as moving, shifting stories in time, the books within the CDVs instead anticipate a movable archive such as eBay's, where the "pile of debris" that famously "grows skyward" before Benjamin's angel of history is sifted, replenished, and also ceaselessly replaced in a real-time auction countdown reminiscent of Benjamin's "alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to 'assembly.'"³⁵ Similarly, Susan Sontag's observation that photography is the "ceaseless replacement of the new"³⁶ in American society also applies to eBay's historical memory of sixty days, to the frequent comments by sellers that they're disposing of objects because their collections are full and need renewing, and to the idea that the

internet more generally is "history's hugest living glossed manuscript, still and indefinitely in the process of production."³⁷

Cartes-de-visite of women readers listed for auction on eBay emerge from the margins of that Web-based manuscript, their stories indefinitely renewed by eBay sellers and buyers, their books asserting their own gloss or history. While Benjamin glimpsed nineteenth-century photographs emerging "from the darkness of our grandfathers' days,"³⁸ the CDVs emerge from those days when the American woman reached, as Abba Goold Woolson put it in 1873, "the transition period of her history ... midway between the fixed limitations of the past and the revealed possibilities of the future,"³⁹ and from the period that Benjamin also called "the era of the curio."⁴⁰ They emerge on eBay from the unofficial darkness of our grandmothers' days like my instant Cambridge ancestor, unearthed from the darkness of her curious cabinet.

NOTES

1. Space only allows for this one image (Figure 5.1), but I have mounted a website with the other images discussed in this essay at www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~trodd/eBay/.
2. Edward L. Wilson in the *Philadelphia Photographer* (1866), cited in George Gilbert, *Photography: The Early Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 96.
3. Thomas Platter, *Thomas Platter's Travels in England 1599*, trans. Clare Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), 171–73.
4. <http://collectibles.ebay.com>.
5. Cited in Arthur MacGregor, ed., *Tradescant's Rarities* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 15.
6. Francis Bacon, 1594, cited in Fulton Anderson, *Francis Bacon, His Career and Thought* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1962), 24–71.
7. As described in an advertisement in the *New York Sun*, August 21, 1835. For a description of this particular "curiosity," see Phineas T. Barnum, *Barnum's Own Story*, ed. Waldo R. Browne (Boston: Peter Smith, 1972), 49.
8. Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5 (1966): 119.
9. "Cartes-de-Visite," *American Journal of Photography* (April 1862): 78.
10. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive," in *Blasted Allegories*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), 116.
11. *Ibid.*, 118.
12. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1863, 12.
13. Sekula, 119, 127.

14. Matt Drudge of *Drudge Report*, address to National Press Club, Washington, 1998. As reported by David T. Z. Mindich, *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 1999, A18.
15. Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935), 247, 249.
16. Honoré de Balzac, *Cousin Pons* (1847; reprint, Boston: Dana Estes, 1901), 9.
17. See Michele White, chapter 16, for an account of how “gay interest” eBay sellers deploy similar narrative effects.
18. Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1985), 76.
19. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 271.
20. Becker, 245.
21. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1990, 1972), 46–47.
22. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 210.
23. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, “Photography” (1857), in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 65.
24. Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography” (1927), in Trachtenberg, 264.
25. See figures 19–20 for comparable images.
26. T. Taylor, *Punch*, March 4, 1895.
27. Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradise* (1860; reprint, New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 7–8.
28. *Humphrey’s Journal* 13 (1861–1862): 292.
29. Benjamin, *Arcades*, 203.
30. See figures 21–23 for nineteenth-century paintings that also figure history as junk.
31. Quoted in translation; B. Max Mehl catalog, *Catalog of the R. Taylor Sale*, November 8 (Fort Worth, TX: B. Max Mehl, 1932), rear cover.
32. Lydia Maria Child (1835), cited in Lynn Oshins, *Quilt Collections* (Washington: Acropolis, 1987), 3.
33. Henry James, *Washington Square* (1880; reprint, Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1986), 220; and Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 272.
34. <http://pages.ebay.com/expowinner/>.
35. Benjamin, “Theses,” in *Illuminations*, 258; and Benjamin, *Arcades*, 205.
36. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 68.
37. Thomas R. Martin, “Propagating Classics,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association, December 28, 1997.
38. Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” in Trachtenberg, 215.
39. Abba Goold Woolson, *Woman in American Society* (Boston: Roberts, 1873), v.
40. *Arcades*, 206.