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# PARTNERSHIP

The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research  
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

vol. 12, no. 1 (2017)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v12i1.3850>

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## How Cute! Race, Gender, and Neutrality in Libraries

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### **Abstract**

This essay explores how feminization and a particular aestheticization thereof is called upon to attempt to mitigate, veil, and neutralize whiteness in libraries and librarianship. It looks specifically at cuteness, an aesthetic category historically shaped by, and deeply invested in, hegemonic formulations of gender, race, and consumption. This paper explores the types of projects cuteness might abet in librarianship—particularly aspirations of political neutrality—by positioning itself as *for all and against none*. Indeed, by calling forth its purported timeless appeal and assuming an aesthetic that no one can resist, cuteness positions the whiteness central to it as both harmless and universal. This essay explores how this category, with its claims of innocence, utilizes a nostalgic white femininity to gesture to a romanticized yet fabricated past that subsequently precludes acknowledgment of and engagement with the present, including race, gender, and other axes of difference. It also addresses how this aesthetic has surfaced in critical and progressive library spaces, drawing attention to the ways in which it has been celebrated, subverted, and made politically productive. Finally, this paper demonstrates the importance of exploring aesthetics and material culture, however tangential they might seem to both the practical and theoretical work of libraries. We must ask after what cuteness and other aesthetic categories that mark librarianship invite us to do, as well as the types of work that they preclude.

### **Keywords**

cute studies, aesthetic theory, neutrality, whiteness, race, gender

I've seen people squeal and hug the libraries when they find them.  
–Tod Bol, co-founder, Little Free Library, *saturdayeveningpost.com*, May/June 2014

## **Introduction**

Certain types of subjects appear in particular spaces, and the ways in which these subjects self-present or are perceived can tell us about the sorts of projects they work in service of, even if (and perhaps most often) unintentionally. Given the predominance of white women in libraries and related fields, it is worth considering how gender and race are co-constitutive, how they recruit and inform one another, and, subsequently, the work they together do. Here, I am interested in exploring how femininity and a particular aestheticization thereof is called upon to attempt to mitigate or even veil the violence of whiteness and white supremacy. Espinal (2001), in her essay calling for an interrogation of whiteness in librarianship, details one of the ways these mitigating effects unfold in libraries when she demonstrates how attitudes towards race can quickly turn blithe when expressed in relation to gender. She describes how seemingly humorous comments such as “the library staff is mostly a bunch of ‘white women in sensible shoes’” (p. 146) effectively renders whiteness unthreatening, safe, and even comforting or somehow appealing. Espinal’s example is a compelling one, prompting us to look more closely at how feminization can work to neutralize white supremacy. Bernstein, in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), picks up similar themes in her analysis, pointing to a “busy cultural system linking innocence to whiteness through the body of the [female] child” (p. 6). Let us consider how innocence might be linked to whiteness through the feminization of libraries more generally. How might this femininity’s purported universal or timeless appeal be called forth to assert its whiteness as innocent and without agenda?

This essay takes up this question, exploring it in relation to *cuteness*. Here, cuteness is understood as what Ngai (2011 with Jasper, 2012) refers to as a minor aesthetic, which we will learn is a historically-specific category shaped by and deeply invested in hegemonic formulations of race, gender, and consumption. This essay also draws upon Natarajan’s forthcoming chapter, “Nostalgia, Cuteness, and Geek Chic: Whiteness in Orla Kiely’s *Library*,” in which she analyzes aesthetics in Kiely’s *Library for Fall 2015* fashion show. Both Espinal and Natarajan’s scholarship raise a number of additional questions, some of which I will attempt to address here. I am also interested in the political work cuteness might do for a profession that is heavily plagued by whiteness and that remains heavily feminized, specifically how it might function in service of librarianship’s commitment to neutrality, which, as I will elaborate on later, I take to mean the (aspirational) state of being *for all and against none*.<sup>1</sup> I also recognize that

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<sup>1</sup> For challenges to neutrality as an aspiration in LIS, see, for example, *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*, A. Lewis (Ed.), 2008, Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press; [“Intellectual Freedom is Not Social Justice: The Symbolic Capital of Intellectual Freedom in ALA Accreditation and LIS Curricula,”](#) by K. Shockey, 2016, *Progressive Librarian* issue 44 (spring), pp. 101-110; [“Never Neutral: Libraries, Technology, and Inclusion,”](#) by C. Bourg, January 28, 2015, *Feral Librarian*; [“Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression,”](#) by n. de Jesus, September 24, 2014a, *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*; [“Compliant Trust: The Public Good and Democracy in the ALA’s ‘Core Values of Librarianship,’”](#) by M. Seale, 2016, *Library Trends* vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 585-603.

cuteness has surfaced in critical LIS spaces, meaning that not only is it complicated and complex but that it can also be made subversive or otherwise politically productive.

Ngai (2012) writes that aesthetic categories “call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose” (p. 11). It is with the aim of uncovering the ways in which LIS reflects, reinforces, and at times challenges these larger social arrangements that this essay is written. My work is concerned less with interpersonal manifestations of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, etc.—which is not, however, to say that these are not worthy of analysis or important to challenge—and more with how narratives, projects, and here, even aesthetics, in LIS might support white supremacist and patriarchal enterprises that are central rather than peripheral to the way in which all subjects experience daily life. Drabinski (2015) reminds us to “look up from our close reading of library problems to the social, political, and economic forces that structure those issues for us” (para. 5), and it is by way of looking up that this essay proceeds.

## ***Cuteness***

Cute objects or subjects are often associated with children and animals—they tend to have large heads and eyes in proportion to small, round, or soft bodies, and they project the need for care (Dale, 2016, p. 7; Merish, 1996, p. 187). Dolls, stuffed animals, domestic pets, and babies all fit the bill, but cuteness manifests in non-anthropomorphized form as well. Ngai (2011, with Jasper) suggests that cute things are “formally simple or noncomplex,” and she stresses that they are also “deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening” (“To Get Our Hands a Little Dirtier Here,” para 1). Thus, objects such as doilies, teacups, birdhouses, or a fluffy pair of pink slippers too can be deemed “cute.”

The “culturally sanctioned response to the ‘cute’” (Merish, 1996, p. 186) is to protect and to cherish it, and “when this [affective] response is manipulated for artistic or commercial purposes, it becomes an aesthetic category” (Dale, 2016, p. 5). Cuteness is at its core linked to domesticity, and in the United States, this category can be traced back to the nineteenth century. For Ngai (2012), the emergence of this “commodity aesthetic” (p. 1) coincided with a shift in the way the domestic sphere was fundamentally understood; the white middle-class home was no longer considered a site of moral refuge, but rather a place that was “supposedly organized primarily around commodities and consumption” (p. 15). In sum, what Ngai calls “the invention of the cute” (p. 15) is just that—a particular historical contrivance rather than a universal and somehow timeless feeling or aesthetic. Cuteness, then, serves a particular purpose not incidental to consumerism’s larger project of the production of desire.

How does the consumer better respond to the affective response—the desire to protect and care for the cute thing—than by taking it home, having it, owning it, so that it is theirs? Loving, cherishing, taking good care—by tapping into normative maternal responses assumed natural or innate, “the cute always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother, and is constructed to generate maternal desire” (p.

Merish, 1996, p. 186). For Merish, cuteness then serves to naturalize a feminine type of ownership, framing consumption as something more akin to adoption rather than crude economic exchange.<sup>2</sup>

What is perhaps most relevant here is that the imperative to adopt, to dote, and indeed the triggering of maternal desire itself is contingent upon the desiring subject's interpretation of the cute object as unthreatening. Ngai (2011, with Jasper) writes: "Cuteness is a way of aestheticizing powerlessness. It hinges on a sentimental attitude toward the diminutive and/or weak, which is why cute objects . . . get even cuter when perceived as injured or disabled" ("To Get Our Hands a Little Dirtier Here," para 1). Here we can see that cuteness not only inspires and taps into feminine desire, but also is itself a distinctly feminine aesthetic inasmuch as it is linked with simplicity, desexualization, infantilism, and a host of other states of supposed weakness. Some have noted that this aesthetic is enabled by the anxious marriage of both tenderness and aggression, a union born from the desire to maintain power over the thing by necessitating its dependence upon the consumer's care and protection. In essence, the weaker, the more childlike, the more pitiful, the cuter (Harris, 1992; Jasper & Ngai, 2011; Merish, 1996; Ngai 2012).

In addition to understanding that the cute thing's appeal is contingent upon it being in a suspended state of weakness invariably and simultaneously enabled by and enabling its feminization, we must also recall that cuteness, like so many aesthetics that mark material culture, is always expressed in relation to race. Both Merish (1996) and Bernstein (2011) point to this articulation, to "the symbolic properties and qualities that define cute in a white supremacist culture . . . white skin, blond hair, blue eyes" (Merish, p. 186), in their analyses of a passage from Toni Morrison's 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Set in 1941, black, nine-year-old Claudia describes a scene in which her sibling Frieda serves foster sister Pecola "four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup" (p. 19). With these decidedly commercialized domestic objects in hand, Frieda and Pecola have what Claudia describes as "a loving conversation about how *cu-ute* [emphasis added] Shirley Temple was" (p. 19). In contrast, Claudia describes her own response when gifted "a big, blue-eyed, Baby Doll . . . I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother?" (p. 20). Yet, Claudia in retrospect admits that "I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her" (p. 19). Not only does Morrison's work demonstrate the imperative (inevitable in Claudia's case) to "[imagine] white girls as tender, innocently doll-like, and deserving of protection, and black girls as disqualified from all those qualities" (Bernstein, p. 29), but this text helps us to understand that cuteness and the "normative aesthetic response" (Merish, p. 186) it elicits is perhaps not as timeless or universal or biologically

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<sup>2</sup> In her 1996 chapter, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," L. Merish pointed out that at the time, those who purchased Cabbage Patch dolls were prompted to complete adoption papers (p. 187). Twenty years later, the company still utilizes this analogy; not only do the dolls come with adoption papers and/or a birth certificate, but the company's [website](#) lists "adoption fees" rather than prices, and what is commonly referred to as a virtual checkout cart is instead a "baby buggy." The company's retail store is named "[BabyLand General Hospital](#)."

hardwired as it might seem.<sup>3</sup> These analyses further shed light on how the demand cuteness makes of us—to see it as deserving of care, to understand it to be innocent, and as I will explore next, to view it as politically neutral—reflects what is perhaps white supremacy’s most deceptive and dangerous claim: that in its timeless universality, it too is innocent, it too is neutral (Hudson, forthcoming).

### ***Cuteness’ Political Work***

Claims of innocence turn on like claims of not knowing. *I didn’t know. But no one told me. How could I have known? So sorry, but I had no idea.* One might understand innocence as not particularly politically useful, as ignorance does not typically facilitate action. Yet, Bernstein (2011) reminds us that “to be innocent [is] to be innocent of something, to achieve obliviousness. This obliviousness [is] not merely an absence of knowledge, but an active state of repelling knowledge . . . of not-noticing” (p. 6). This not noticing, then, can be understood as a political act inasmuch as it gets something done. Bernstein notes that this simulation of ignorance is a “performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and . . . race” (p. 6). Never not presented or otherwise coded as feminine and white (or their proximate), we can begin to see how cuteness, like Bernstein’s nineteenth-century childhood, calls upon this obliviousness—this saying no—to render its whiteness racially unmarked, natural, and normal (Andersen, 2003; Garner, 2007; Hudson, forthcoming; Morrison, 1992). Here, whiteness again plays its tired trick of appealing to universality to assert itself as what Hudson describes as “that which goes without saying,” or just the way it is. And who can refuse the way it is when the way it is is cute?

In insisting that it does not see axes of difference, including race and gender, it follows that the cute refuses to engage with them politically. In all its darling obliviousness, the cute precludes the surfacing of or engagement with the world, making room for a guise of apoliticality. “Non-cathartic” (Jasper & Ngai, 2011, “Can You Say More About the Qualities,” para. 1) in inspiring empathy rather than outrage, cuteness takes no sides and is for everyone. It should come as no surprise that the cute object is often equipped with a simplified mouth or is denied speech altogether—it has nothing to say about anything, and for Ngai, “cuteness or child cult thus reflects, and seems to legitimate by aestheticizing, a saying no to political power” (2012, p. 91).

Ngai (2012) also tells us that the promise that cuteness offers “speaks to our desire for a simpler, more intimate relation to our commodities” (p. 31). She describes the relationship that cuteness presents as *pastoral*, which is defined by its utopic simplicity, its romanticization of life unfettered by the noxious bothers and complications of contemporary existence. Writing of childhood, the state in which cuteness often finds expression, Bernstein (2011) too locates threads of mourning for the passing of the simple life and longing for a return to innocence. Interestingly, one definition of *kawaii*, the Japanese term for cute, explains: “It is the appeal of adolescence, when one is not

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<sup>3</sup> The question of whether cuteness and the affective response it evokes is biological or environmental (or some combination thereof) remains a “core concern” of cute studies (“[Cute studies: An emerging field](#),” by J. P. Dale, 2016, *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 2, no.1, p. 6.)

yet an adult. Kawaii things . . . give you peace of mind and a sense of security” (Okazaki & Johnson, 2013, p. 13).<sup>4</sup>

This same pastoral longing for the simple and the safe surfaces in what McIntyre (2015) calls “retro-aesthetics” (p. 430), which typically center and find expression in young, cisgender, white feminine subjects. He presents a case study of “adorkable” (p. 423) singer and actor Zooey Deschanel—who he describes as having “doll-like” eyes (p. 430)—and argues that the “restorative nostalgia” (p. 423) on which her cuteness turns is one that advocates for a return to an ignorant bliss that refuses to engage with historic or contemporary racial, gender, or class dynamics.<sup>5</sup> He spends considerable energy exploring the sitcom in which Deschanel stars, *New Girl*, which could be described as a post-racial, United Colors of Benetton-like dreamscape of beautiful, young, cisgender urbanites cohabiting in a Los Angeles loft (or perhaps as what one critic calls a “male fantasy of a show about a cooing woman-child in a polka-dot skirt who literally can’t say the word ‘penis’ without giggling” (Maciak, 2013, para. 5)). Through her projection of what McIntyre refers to as a “form of cuteness that obfuscates contemporary cultural exhaustion . . . Deschanel’s activation of tropes of nostalgia with a sentimentalized reformulation of female cuteness enables her to function as a figure who neutralizes political fracture points of race and gender by evoking a paternal response or a sense of belonging to a juxtapolitical intimate public” (p. 436).

Like its feminization, cuteness’ ability to neutralize – to politically silence—can extend to its adoring subjects. For example, Ngai (2012) points to the “deverbalizing effect that prototypically cute objects—babies, puppies, and so on—have on those who judge them” (p. 87; see also opening epigraph). Likewise, cuteness’ qualities can be passed on and taken up, and Bernstein (2011) tells us that in the case of the white child, her “innocence was transferrable to surrounding people and things, and that property made it politically useful” (p. 6). If we trace the genealogy of white women in North American libraries, we recall that they were allowed or encouraged to enter into librarianship in no small part because they were considered unthreatening and nonrevolutionary (Garrison, 1979, p. 203). In other words, they did not and were not meant to—in the public’s imagination, at least—have political agency. Yet, we can look to the work of Eddy

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<sup>4</sup> For a history of cuteness, or *kawaii*, in Japanese culture, see *Kawaii!: Japan’s Culture of Cute* (pp. 10-32), by M. Okazaki & G. Johnson, 2013, Munich: Prestel. See also *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (pp. 78-86), by S. Ngai, 2012, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, and “[Cute studies: An emerging field](#),” by J. P. Dale, 2016, *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 2, no.1, pp. 6-11.

<sup>5</sup> The yearning for the “good old days” this nostalgia evokes can also be traced to racially-charged calls from right-wing corners of the United States, or what can be interpreted as enactments of the “politics of white nostalgia” (“[Racism, Right-Wing Rage and the Politics of White Nostalgia](#),” by T. Wise, August 17, 2009, *Tim Wise*). United States President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” or the battle cry to “take our country back” are just two examples of how this nostalgia is utilized to make claims about history, nation, and of course, gender and race. Just as Natarajan asks after the nostalgia performed by the white fashion models handling books in what appear to be elite university library spaces in Kiely’s *Library for Fall 2015*, we must ask to what point in history does “again” refer? To when or where, or from whom, are “we” taking “our” country? What imaginative, pre- or even inter-racial harmonious past are these slogans meant to suggest? What type of fictive Edenic innocence are they meant to evoke? What realities do they obscure?

(2001), Garrison (1979), Honma (2005), and Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) to identify the sorts of racial, missionary, and “civilizing” enterprises to which white women’s presumed innocence was meant to transfer. Let us now take up this question as we consider cuteness in contemporary librarianship. To what does this aesthetic’s claims to innocence transfer? What does cuteness enable, and what does it preclude? And how might it be made politically useful?

## ***Cuteness and Libraries***

Whiteness refuses to acknowledge itself, asserting itself as universal rather than racially marked, historically produced, and oppressive. In its facade of universality, it claims to be for (or about) everyone while at the same time being against none. As Espinal (2001) has demonstrated, association with the feminine is one of the ways in which whiteness renders itself harmless, and the cute creates space for this supposed state of being for all and against none. In other words, it works to craft a story of neutrality. While cuteness is not always necessarily in service of whiteness (as I will detail later in this essay), it is important to explore how whiteness can recruit cuteness. It is, after all, a “commodity aesthetic” (Ngai, 2012, p. 1), meaning that it can at times serve whiteness by *selling* it. Cuteness, I argue, is a prevalent—though certainly not the only—aesthetic that operates in librarianship, and we must entertain what it might sell in our profession.

Ngai explains that cuteness can be understood “as both discursive evaluations (‘cute’ as something we say, a very particular way of communicating a very particular kind of pleasure) and as objective styles (cuteness as a commodity aesthetic, as a sensuous/formal quality of objects)” (Jasper & Ngai, 2011, “Does This Mean There is a One-to-One Correspondence,” para. 2). In exploring this aesthetic in librarianship, I do not privilege either evaluation (or the apprehension of something as cute and the following response that is evoked) or style, as it should be evident by now that the two work in tandem. Surely, those things that project the qualities of cuteness (be they babies or doe-eyed animals or thick-rimmed glasses, tiny buttons, buckled Mary Janes, and collars pressed neatly on warm fuzzy cardigans) are meant to elicit a particular affective response: a maternal sort of pleasure, a special kind of empathy or affinity, a sense of oneness rather than a feeling of dissonance.<sup>6</sup> In the sections that follow, I will explore cuteness in librarianship as it manifests in four ways: the perception of books as nostalgic objects, the heavily stylized Little Free Libraries and similar neighborhood-based book exchanges, the appearance of domestic felines in particular library spaces, and the fashion or style that can be characterized as “librarian cute.”

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Natarajan’s forthcoming work on aesthetics in *Library for Fall 2015* is important because she not only identifies cuteness’ affective demands in relationship to whiteness, but she

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<sup>6</sup> This essay does not address style or evaluation in interpersonal relationships (e.g. “you’re so cute, baby!” or “you’re my sweetie pie”), though this is not to mean that the personal is not political. It is simply beyond the scope of this paper.

also locates what we can understand to be a twin feature of cuteness: nostalgia. She writes:

The fantasy of white nostalgia imparts the show with its sense of history and aspiration, and in turn, an idea of the “ideal” reader/viewer. In asking what ideas of white femininity the nostalgia of *Library* summons, we might also ask after its absences and omissions . . . By offering up a scene of a 60’s/70’s era academic library, virtually bereft of people of color, Orla Kiely creates a fantasy library space selectively sealed from history, only allowing in the parts that would be “comfortable” to the white viewer/consumer . . . And it is telling that the imagined library functions as a space in which such whiteness is so thoroughly normalized that it strikes its viewers as nostalgically familiar.

In exposing the role that the evocation of a particular past plays in the portrayal of libraries, Natarajan reveals the ways in which nostalgia runs through and charges cuteness. McIntyre (2015) too locates nostalgia in his analysis of the aesthetic, and he demonstrates how cuteness is infused with a longing for the past (and subsequently leveraged for commercial endeavors). He describes a 2012 Apple iPhone commercial in which Deschanel interacts with Siri in an apartment. Not unlike the *Library for Fall 2015* show Natarajan (forthcoming) details in which technology such as computers or self-checkout kiosks found in contemporary libraries is markedly absent, “the stacks of books offset any fears that may be associated with advanced technological change; indeed, the iPhone is the only piece of modern technology discernable in the advertisement” (McIntyre, p. 432). The decision to place an actor, widely recognized and regarded as the poster child of cuteness, next to books—the distinct stuff of librarians and libraries—reveals the political work in play. McIntyre is not the first to identify the linking of the written word with the pastoral, ameliorating cute aesthetic. Ngai too explores the ways in which poetry and cuteness are often associated (2012, pp. 3-4, 70). By promising safety through gesturing to a pre-technological past, books preclude exposure to and engagement with the nasty realities of contemporary society. Inasmuch as they are associated with books, libraries too might be understood to provide an outlet for this sentimental yearning, and it is here where we might better situate the stereotype of the librarian as “too wrapped up in the textual world to experience real life” (Seale, 2008, p. 1).

We can further locate the linking of cuteness and safety, simplicity, innocence, and peace in the language used to celebrate the “itsy-bitsy” (Robinson, 2014, title) Little Free Libraries. Meant to encourage free book exchange, these libraries typically consist of collections of books stored in birdhouse- or “dollhouse-” (Schmind, 2014, p. 36) like structures that are free for neighborhood circulation. Working on a take one, leave one basis, their operation and maintenance relies on trust and goodwill. *Upworthy*, a site that asserts the importance of “stories for everyone, stories that connect us and sometimes even change the world . . . because we’re all part of the same story” and that calls its content the “rocket fuel for empathy” (Upworthy, 2016, “About Us”), published a 2015 article entitled “Love books? These 12 Tiny Libraries Might Steal your Heart.” It begins: “It’s cute, huh? Sort of like an oversized, adorable mailbox you’d see in a fairytale but with books inside” (Couch, 2015, para. 1). The article characterizes the

Little Free Libraries as “magic” and “charming” (para. 5, 6), and not unlike other coverage of the phenomenon, refers more than once to the role of the elfin libraries in building and fostering community (Webster, Gollner, & Nathan, 2015, “Media Framings”). The article concludes: “Isn’t it refreshing to know that even in a world with iPhones and flatscreens, sharing a copy of your favorite book can still make a big difference? \*sigh\*” (para. 19).

The Little Free Library and similarly whimsical neighborhood-based book exchanges provide an interesting case study that allows us to again locate not only the linking of the library with the cute, but also to pastoral life imagined as apolitical. While the cuteness of these handmade libraries can be traced to their diminutive size (some are made to look like miniature school houses, barber shops, or barns (Libraries, Little Free Library, 2017)), their element of craft too gestures to a simpler and perhaps safer and less “confusing” time. Their appeal turns on idyllic notions of “fairytale” communities so safe that they can support a thriving free book exchange. In a recent study, Schmidt and Hale (2017) offer a pointed critique: while Little Free Library claims to help residents located in “book deserts,” many are located on private property in gentrifying, well-resourced, and white neighborhoods. Whose communities, then, are being “built” or invested in? Whose communities are imagined as magic, filled with the trust and goodwill required for a Little Free Library to function? Might the cute aesthetic conceal or even make palatable the damage done when library services once public are privatized along racial lines?

The Little Free Library’s opposite—by extension, the library’s opposite—is the world of the unsafe present with its racial and gender and class difference, the world with its politics. According to Little Free Library co-founder, Tod Bol, “the (political) right likes us and the left likes us. How do you say ‘no’ to reading?” (Grossman, 2015). Schmidt and Hale (2017) additionally tell us that Little Free Library discourages its “stewards” from stocking the exchanges with “overly political” texts (p. 35).

The Little Free Libraries also attempt to transfer their appeals to apoliticality, safety, innocence, and the like to the very spaces in which they are installed. Schmidt and Hale (2017) criticize this move, looking to the Little Free Library *Kids, Community and Cops* program whose tagline is “building healthier communities through police involvement in literacy” and that is promoted as a way to build “safe places for young people to read” (Kids, Community and Cops, 2017). The authors rightfully question this positioning of police stations and precincts as “safe” by way of the presence of little libraries, given the long history of treatment of communities of color by law enforcement. It appears that cuteness is meant to cover all manner of sins.

In recalling that cuteness was engineered to sell not only products but also stories about the purported value and naturalness of whiteness and the ostensible infantile and unthreatening essence of women, we must keep in mind that it was also crafted to have universal appeal. The cute thing, not unlike the library, was meant *for you, for all of us*. Libraries, with their claims of public good, turn on this same notion of universal appeal, even while history has shown that they have certainly not worked in the service of or for all (Honma, 2005). It is helpful to further consider the types of narratives that circulate

and the work that cuteness might abet alongside a reading of Seale's "Compliant Trust: The Public Good and Democracy in the ALA's 'Core Values of Librarianship'" (2016). Here, Seale provides a look at the ways in which the American Library Association's (ALA) professional documents present libraries as a public good for all people. We might consider that an institution's status as "an essential public good" (American Library Association, 2004) is contingent on the perpetration of the idea that it is also neutral; surely, to be good for the "public" means that you are good for an imagined public that includes everyone, even if, as Seale shows, certain "elements" are meant to be kept at bay.

For Seale (2016), the ALA promotes a world in which "libraries . . . float above [politics] as disinterested, apolitical entities . . . The positioning of the library as a neutral and impartial institution, separated from the political fray, resonates with dominant library discourse around libraries" (p. 589). Looking to the discourse surrounding the Ferguson Public Library's response to the police killing of Michael Brown, Seale details the types of language (quite pastoral, indeed) used to describe the library: peaceful, a safe haven, a sanctuary, and a refuge (p. 589). She demonstrates how in presenting itself as a "quiet oasis" from the "trouble" outside of the library's walls, the library rejects engagement with racial conflict in its own community even while it tacitly "participates in . . . discourse of black criminality" (p. 592), revealing its own investment in whiteness. Again, here the public is not only figured as that which ought to be protected from the "criminal element," but the commitment to the public good can also be understood as an endorsement and maintenance of whiteness. We must ask what happens when whiteness itself is understood as the public good.

It is not surprising to find efforts to project libraries as neutral, ahistorical, apolitical—like cuteness, *for all and against none*; indeed, such attempts betray the fact that libraries are always already "embedded in power relations, and reproduce relations of domination and subordination" (Seale, 2016, p. 592). We cannot forget that neutrality is a position. Apoliticality is a project. "Saying no to political power" (Ngai, 2012, p. 91) is invariably a saying yes to something else.

### ***Alternative Readings, or Cats***

Even when cute's—become absent,<sup>7</sup> we must still ask ourselves if its assertions of neutrality and universal appeal, refusal to engage with difference, and rejection of the political are still at work. Surely, these claims are not enabled or bolstered by cuteness only, and we must also entertain the idea that cuteness is not only and always neutral and apolitical, that it does not only and always signal powerlessness. Just as racialization and the gendering of bodies are processes, never static and always responding to and shaping particular contexts, the work cuteness does, and can do, similarly is never fixed. Ngai (2011, with Jasper) reminds us that while

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<sup>7</sup> See "Who Killed the World? White Masculinity and the Technocratic Library of the Future" (forthcoming) by R. Mirza and M. Seale in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in LIS*, Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (Ed.), for an argument that the ideal library worker, once a white woman, is being replaced by the white, masculine, "prophets of Silicon Valley."

there can be no experience of any person or object as cute that does not somehow call up the subject's sense of power over those who are less powerful . . . the fact that the cute object seems capable of making an affective demand on the subject—a demand for care that the subject is culturally as well as biologically compelled to fulfill—is already a sign that “cute” does not just denote a static power differential, but rather a dynamic and complex power struggle (“Could You Explain a Little More,” para. 3).

Indeed, I experienced this power struggle throughout the writing of this essay, as more than once I was distracted by—arrested by, rather—those things that embody cuteness in the Internet age: domestic felines. Instead of continuing a paragraph, I scratched my cats' fuzzy little chins. I jumped at the first pathetic mew and produced a treat or two. I took photos of their furry bodies filling up tiny boxes and their adorable paw pads tumbling from the platform of a hundred-dollar cat tree. While some might interpret this aside simply as an example of my lack of willpower, ability to be easily distracted, or a cautionary tale regarding how one should not spend her hard-earned money, it is also an example of the very real ways in which cuteness can exercise its power over the subject that is often figured as in control.

If cuteness has power or subversive potential, how might it surface in librarianship? To stay with the domestic feline, which is typically associated with not only the feminine, but also serves as the defining accessory of the cat lady librarian stereotype (Gambrell & Brennan, 2014), we find that cats appear in spaces that explicitly resist neutral or apolitical approaches to librarianship and information work.<sup>8</sup> For example, photos of cats appear regularly on the [Critical Librarianship](#) community's website. Critlib for short, the community describes itself as “a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries. We aim to engage in discussion about critical perspectives on library practice” (Critlib, 2016 “About/Join the Discussion,” para. 1). They ask: “Recognizing that we all work under regimes of white supremacy, capitalism, and a range of structural inequalities, how can our work as librarians intervene in and disrupt those systems?” (para. 1). The decision to utilize photographs of cats on the website was in part based on what was described as a “tradition” of celebrating felines in the community, traceable to the #critcat hashtag accompanying photographs of cats posted during biweekly #critlib Twitter chats (V. Fox, personal communication, January 20, 2016). Another online community affiliated with Critlib is Critcat, and though the “cat” here refers to “critlib-inspired discussion of cataloging and metadata” (Fox, 2016) that covers topics such as gender, sexuality, and race in classification systems, still we find a space reserved for feline photographs.

The ways in which cuteness is employed, rejected, or partially incorporated in library spaces illustrates the important fact that human beings have some level of agency in regard to how the aesthetic is culturally produced and how it operates. We can get a

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that associating women or feminized professions with nonhumans is always effective or subversive, however; for an alternative view on the linking of animals and women, see *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, by C. J. Adams, 1990, New York: Continuum; *The Pornography of Meat*, by C. J. Adams, 2003, New York: Continuum; and *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explanations*, C. J. Adams & J. Donovan (Eds.), 1995, Durham: Duke University Press.

fuller understanding of this claim though a look at style or fashion. The “adorkable” style McIntyre (2015) describes is similar to that which could be considered “librarian cute:” thick glasses, chunky girlish bangs, cardigans, and, typically, books. Indeed, a 2016 Google Images search for *adorkable* yields a myriad of images that consists largely of young, smiling white women read as stereotypically feminine wearing black thick-rimmed glasses, cardigans, and skirts holding or near books, as well as images of Deschanel herself. The adorkable, when understood as bookish yet endearing, looks a lot like stereotypical images of “cute” librarians, which is not surprising given Natarajan’s (forthcoming) location of adorkable’s nostalgia in her own exploration of cuteness in library and librarian representation, and Espinal’s (2001) detection of articulations of white feminine innocence in librarianship. Indeed, this flavor of cuteness might be understood as the aesthetic that finds expression somewhere between the “sexy” and the “spinster” librarian stereotypes.<sup>9</sup> One blog post, “Dotty the Librarian,” highlighting a “librarian cute” outfit is quite striking. Photographs of a young, blonde woman wearing glasses, a polka-dot dress, burgundy tights, slipper shoes with bows, and a cardigan with a floral crochet decal accompanies the post. The blogger writes: “Let me first apologize to any librarian I may offend with the title of this post. Something about a nice tan and navy (with a nice burst of maroon and some *cute* specs) makes me think of a librarian. But the *adorable* kind, not the stereotypical kind. Though I may be making a stereotypical depiction as well . . . whatever. The important part is that *you know it’s a good thing* [emphasis added]” (Beauregarde, 2011). Here, the blogger gives voice to cuteness’ usually silent appeal: *you know it’s a good thing*.<sup>10</sup>

It does not take one long on the hunt for evidence of how aesthetics, including “librarian cute,” are negotiated by those in the profession before stumbling upon [Librarian Wardrobe](#), a blog featuring the fashion choices of information professionals and whose tagline is “breaking and embracing the stereotype” (Librarian Wardrobe, 2016). “Cardigans,” “glasses,” “dresses,” and “collared shirts” are among the most frequently used tags assigned to user-submitted photographs, and while “cute” (or its variants) does not appear on the list of frequently used tags, “polka dots,” “bowties,” “oxfords,” and “cats” are among the lesser-used keywords (Librarian Wardrobe, personal communication, May 23, 2017). Though not an overtly political community, still it compels us to ask after “what modes of agency are possible when operating within an aesthetic usually characterized by helplessness and passivity” (Dale, 2016, p. 6). Surely, we can interpret *Librarian Wardrobe* as a space in which the celebration, subversion, and modification of traditional understandings of cuteness and what Dale calls its “soft power” (p. 11) are documented. Some of the photographs feature information workers who appear to embrace or perform the cute or adorkable, and we can read this as not only an affirmation of the aesthetic, but also as an act of

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work*, N. Pagowski & M. Rigby (Eds.), 2014b, Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, for an excellent treatment of stereotypes and librarianship, as well as the sociocultural and historical contexts that have given rise to them.

<sup>10</sup> “Librarian cute” is not limited to clothing only. From [tote bags](#) featuring classics such as *Pride and Prejudice* to [purses](#) and [phone cases](#) made from or to appear to be old books, we can see there is a market for accessories that feature this feminine and nostalgic yet bookish aesthetic.

professional and community validation (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014a, p. 25). In a feminized and devalued profession, such work is no doubt a political act. We also see ways in which information workers have pushed back against stereotypes that call upon the qualities of cuteness; for example, “tattoos” is located near the top of the list of frequently used tags. The blog also provides evidence of how cuteness registers and is registered by race, gender, and sexuality. We can find examples of information professionals of color taking up, flipping, and rejecting cuteness, as well as evidence of how cuteness interprets masculinity and what it looks like when cuteness is queered. The sartorial catalog provides room to explore how cuteness can be leveraged in the move from “infantilism to play, from passivity to social engagement” (Dale, p. 11).

Lastly, the nostalgia that so often accompanies cuteness complicates the way in which we typically understand our potential relationship to the cute. Ngai (2011, with Jasper) describes this potential intimacy as the promise of “romance, in that it indexes the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a *simpler* relation to our commodities . . .” (“To Get Our Hands a Little Dirtier Here,” para. 2) The desire for that which is perhaps more intimate or purer and simpler might seem idealistic—indeed, Ngai refers to it as “utopic” (para. 2)—yet we can also understand it as subversive in that it is a rejection of the complicated and complex, or in terms of librarianship, the technologically mediated and information-fetishized. This seems particularly relevant at a time when more and more library science programs have rebranded as information schools, leaving some “concerned that the ‘imagined future’ conjured through the re-naming of LIS programs is one that diminishes both the perceived value of libraries and the professional values . . .” (Tilly & Walter, 2015, p. 5). Dismissal of traditional libraries, resources, and services and even the framing of them as somehow “backwards” is not unusual in some LIS communities, and it is not uncommon to read calls such as this, published in the ALA’s fall 2016 *American Libraries* magazine: “We should definitely be using *Pokémon* and any other tools at our fingertips to show our communities that we’re not just dusty old buildings with books” (Shaw, 2016, p. 9). We might consider the ways in which the nostalgia for these old buildings and their books—or what Wiegand identifies as “reading and place . . . as important to the American public library . . . as information access” (2016, “A Limited Focus,” para. 5)—can be called upon to encourage us to think critically about and perhaps insist on the value of library services, resources, and subjects deemed no longer relevant simply because they are not sexy or technological (or innovative or 21st century skills-y or entrepreneurial or otherwise in the service of neoliberalism).

The critique of the political work cuteness’ restorative nostalgia performs, specifically in relation to race and gender, is not at the same time a rejection of the “old” or “simple” library services or resources (i.e. print books or the free, neighborhood-based exchange thereof) through which it at times operates. We ought not unapologetically embrace the “out with the old, in with the new” mantra and should certainly remain skeptical of what it could mean if cuteness—with its women and books—is replaced by what Mirza and Seale (forthcoming) call the “technocratic library of the future” with its men and machines.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to take seriously aesthetics, however tangential they might seem to both the practical and theoretical work of librarianship. We must pay attention to not only how certain narratives are culturally produced, but how they are given material expression and how they are performed. We must ask why certain aesthetics show up in particular spaces and consider why it might be that we find cuteness in librarianship, a field that (largely) aspires to neutrality and that claims to be an essential public good. Why is it that the cute rather than the ugly or the sublime, for example, surfaces in a feminized field whose labor is in no small part affective and undervalued, but whose whiteness has been instrumental in securing a certain level of professionalization (de Jesus 2014b, para. 9)? In entertaining such questions, we cannot stop asking after what aesthetic categories invite and what they preclude. We must remember that not noticing, rejecting engagement with the present, refusing to see difference, calling upon nostalgic sentimentality, and the like all do something. All such acts are far from neutral.

My argument thus far has been that by assuming a feminized aesthetic no one can resist, cuteness positions the whiteness central to it as both universal and harmless. As it marks librarianship, cuteness can further be understood to bolster the profession's claims or aspirations of neutrality, subsequently limiting political engagement and often resulting in the (perhaps unwitting) maintenance of white supremacy. At the same time, we cannot ignore that cuteness and the demands it makes can be politically productive. Whether (re)claimed and celebrated, subverted and unsettled, or sampled and mixed, cuteness too can be taken up as a vehicle of power.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Office of Academic Research at California State University, San Bernardino for their support of this work through the 2016 Summer Research Fellowship. Thanks also to Vladymir, Foucault, and Miguel. To say you are "cute" is an incredible understatement.

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