

5A—AESTHETICS AND MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES IN LIS #2

How Cute! Race, Gender, and Neutralization in LIS

Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (California State University, San Bernardino)

This presentation explores the ways in which feminization and a particular aestheticization thereof, is called upon to attempt to mitigate, veil, and neutralize whiteness in LIS. Drawing on the work of Natarajan, Espinal, Ngai, McIntyre, and others, I look specifically at cuteness, an aesthetic historically shaped by and deeply invested in hegemonic formulations of gender, race, and consumption. I also ask whether cuteness abets LIS's aspirations of political neutrality by positioning itself as for all and against none. Indeed, this aesthetic, with its claims of innocence, utilizes a nostalgic white femininity to gesture to a romanticized yet fabricated past, subsequently precluding engagement with the present. I will also address the ways in which this aesthetic has surfaced in critical and progressive LIS spaces, and in doing so, draw attention to the power struggle cuteness enables and the ways in which it has been celebrated, subverted, and made politically productive.