



# creative and critical approaches to cuteness

seminar + exhibition  
21 May 2021



A virtual day seminar co-hosted by the University of Birmingham  
and Royal Holloway, University of London

**aww-struck** adj. the state of being overcome, surrounded or inspired by cuteness; to be filled with wonder at cute persons, nonhuman animals or objects (often edible); rendered speechless; unable to resist the impulse to coo or to stroke (sometimes leading to feelings of cute aggression).

Why is Hello Kitty missing a mouth? What makes us turn to videos of cuddly bunnies to 'wash out our eyes' after a stressful experience? Why does it sound disparaging to label something 'cute' and how might cuteness be reclaimed and reimaged?

Sianne Ngai explains in her landmark work, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, how a 'surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression' can be provoked by such 'unthreatening commodities' as a squishy frog-shaped sponge. While cuteness might be understood as affiliated with pop culture, the emerging field of Cute Studies has challenged the distinction by exploring representations in art and literature. Attentive to its associations with 'intimate address (lyric)...[and] unusually small, lapidary, object-like texts', Ngai suggests avant-garde poetry might be theorised as an embodiment of cuteness. Elsewhere, Lori Merish has explored revealing intersections between cuteness, race and class in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. While some scholars have drawn attention to the problems of cuteness, others have outlined opportunities for productively widening our kinship circles to include nonhumans (Kalnay) or employing the concept in analysing pre-industrial-era works (Boyle and Kau).

We warmly invite you to a virtual day seminar which aims to advance and expand this field through creative and critical presentations and discussion. AWW-STRUCK will run alongside an online exhibition of object poems hosted by [Poem Atlas](#), and the launch of a print publication bringing together these exhibits with work shared in the seminar. Please register for the day via [Eventbrite](#).

We have a small number of 10 to 15-minute presentation spaces available for both creative and theoretical approaches, which are open to submissions. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Literary, visual and cinematic representations of cuteness
- Cuteness and animal studies, gender studies, race studies, queer studies, disability studies
- The culture of childhood, 'Disneyfication' and Kawaii
- Commodification and cuteness
- Cuteness and affect including aggression, sympathy, nostalgia.
- Counter aesthetic categories including the grotesque and the sublime
- Futures of cuteness

If you would like to submit, please send a 250-word abstract/proposal and short bio to [awwstruck.info@gmail.com](mailto:awwstruck.info@gmail.com) by **Monday 29 March**, including **AWW-STRUCK** in the subject line. Abstracts will be reviewed by Dr Isabel Galleymore (UoB) and Caroline Harris (RHUL).

Follow us on Twitter and see the AWW-STRUCK website for more details: [awwstruckseminar.wordpress.com](http://awwstruckseminar.wordpress.com)



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