Book Choice and the Affective Economy of Literacy

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Abstract
This article examines the familiar imperative for educators to cultivate affective attachments between students and reading—to foster love or ward off hate, for books. It considers the interplay of this affective economy with other “economies” of reading long theorized in literacy studies: the moral economy, promoting dominant social norms; and the political economy, prioritizing workers skilled to meet the needs of the state. We examine the relations among these economies through a study of “book choice”—practices intended to give students greater autonomy (and pleasure) in their reading. Using interviews and artifacts from three middle-school classrooms in the U.S. south using varied configurations of “book choice,” we report findings that suggest the affective aims of such programs often intermingled with moral and political economic directives. In conclusion, we suggest that attunement to these contradictions offers an alternate, and more capacious, orientation for literacy education and aesthetic response.

Keywords
affective literacy, critical literacies, adolescent literacy

Introduction
It is a well-rehearsed point in literacy studies that reading and writing are ideological practices, deriving their meaning not from autonomous cultural or cognitive outcomes but instead from the moral and political economies in which they operate (Gee, 1989; Heath, 1983; Smitherman, 1986; Street, 1984). According to Graff’s foundational formulation (1979, p. 25), the moral economy of literacy assigns value to reading that nurtures dominant virtues, habits, and dispositions, and its political economy validates the skills that contribute to the material prosperity of the state. Together, these twin economies have provided generative frames for scholars to explore the varied uses of literacy within and across social settings (Collins & Blot, 2003; Hamilton, 2012; Luke, 1991).

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In this article, we investigate the interplay of these economies with a third—what we call the affective economy of literacy. By affective economy, we mean the often-invoked yet seldom-theorized imperative for educators to cultivate, in their students, affective attachments to literacy: to foster a love for, or pleasure in, reading, or to ward off hatred for books. While the affective economy is commonly contrasted with the instrumentalism of the others, we contend that the three economies are, and always have been, intertwined.

By looking at the popular classroom practice of book choice, we explored the relations among these three economies. Our study followed teachers who used book choice to give students autonomy in their school-assigned reading; these pedagogical techniques included book groups, independent reading requirements, sustained silent reading time, and reading workshops. These practices are often contrasted with more circumscribed modes of reading instruction; they privilege student interests over the narrower aims of molding them into virtuous or productive people. Our research also revealed that these practices are affectively charged, with goals beyond those of the political or moral economies. As indicated by the titles of some of its influential professional resources (e.g., Penny Kittle’s Book Love or Kelly Gallagher’s Readicide), an important aim of book choice is the management of students’ affective relations to reading, nurturing love, or averting hate for, literacy.

In exploring this affective economy, our purpose is not to discredit book choice, its practices, or its practitioners. Indeed, we encourage those we teach to use techniques associated with book choice, which have proved to be invaluable resources for unsettling the hegemony of raced, classed, gendered, and heteronormative representations in school reading and for emphasizing and valuing student meaning-making in classrooms (Ebarvia et al., 2021; Ivey & Johnston, 2018; Möller, 2016). Moreover, they are especially vital in the present, when reactionary forces have mobilized to reduce literacy education to a narrow Western canon and to intimidate teachers into compliance (Dallacqua, 2022; Shearer, 2022).

Instead, we investigate a normative claim commonly associated with book choice: that literacy is not just something students should learn or do, but love. This apparently neutral claim warrants attention because it can dissuade inquiry into the processes that produce such affective attachments, as well as their relation to other reading economies. Drawing on case studies of three middle school English language arts teachers who used different configurations of book choice, we show their activities produced uneven experiences and outcomes in literacy classrooms. In addition, we argue that emphasizing the relations of these reading economies—moral, political, and affective—offers an alternative and more generative understanding of literary education and aesthetic response. We conclude by outlining the implications and stakes of our research for teaching and further literacy research.

From Free Reading to Book Choice

The practices that constitute book choice predate the term itself. Although they are sometimes regarded as recent rejoinders to the aging or antiquated strongholds of literacy instruction—exemplified by whole-class novels, or the Western canon—the
historical antecedents of these practices have enjoyed favor with progressive educators for at least 70 years. In the 1950s, for instance, with the rise of the paperback movement, decades of insular academic debates over the merits of free reading found their way into classrooms and the public consciousness as a coalition of educators argued that diverse, mass-market books should replace the dull regimentation of literary anthologies. The movement inspired various professional resources, such as *The School Paperback Journal*, and was accompanied by several influential studies, including a national NCTE survey (1959), which helped solidify the place of free reading on the agenda of U.S. English teaching, research, and reform (Cohen, 1969). Driving this agenda and other similar developments was the sense that literacy education prioritized instrumental skills over a nobler ambition—to cultivate in students a desire for or pleasure in reading. The psychologist Paul Goodman voiced this sentiment, in a characteristically provocative fashion, during a 1966 *Firing Line* broadcast, where he suggested teachers would serve students better by assigning incendiary and pornographic materials that they might actually want to read, as opposed to wearying exercises that eroded their interest in books.

While not everyone shared Goodman’s inclusive take on the freedoms of free reading, the impulse to emphasize interest and enjoyment in literacy instruction found considerable support among midcentury educators, and over subsequent decades, yielded a range of classroom routines that persist in present-day forms of book choice.

The affective economy of literacy is embodied in this legacy of free reading practices designed to encourage students to find enjoyment in reading. Purves and Beach’s comprehensive review of literary teaching methods (1972, p. 25) included a variety of “free,” “individualized,” and “personal” reading programs, along with their techniques for promoting “emotional and intellectual pleasure” over “instrumental” skills. Examples they gave included book reports, reading logs, out-of-school reading, and student-teacher interviews to encourage independent, out-of-school reading. Parallel initiatives, from bookstore field trips (Cohen, 1964) and classroom libraries (Butman et al., 1963) to the popularization of *sustained silent reading* programs (McCracken, 1971), likewise, brought pleasure-reading into the school day itself. Many of these activities anticipated the reading workshops of the 1980s, which synthesized these disparate practices into a flexible classroom infrastructure. Although workshop models differed among their most influential advocates (e.g., Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, Linda Rief; see Mulcahy, 2010 for a comparison), they all fostered a love for reading. This “love” was something Atwell (1998, p. 34) argued was closely tied to “choice” and “books to choose among.” Much of the literature surrounding book choice in its iterations through the years echoes Atwell’s linking of love and choice (1998).

Consequently, a shared thread from the paperback movement through reading workshops emphasized pleasure over more instrumental modes of reading and associated pleasure with choice. Affective attachments to literacy—love, hate, irritation, ambivalence, boredom—were understood to hinge on the presence (or absence) of freedom to choose what books to read. This freedom to choose remains central today in free reading’s most recent offshoots—what we group together under the common shorthand term, book choice. The most popular authors and speakers affiliated with book choice
continue to promote the same choice- and accessibility-oriented practices as their predeces-
cors: independent reading, either built into class time or assigned as homework;
classroom libraries, brimming with engaging, high-interest titles; and low-stakes assess-
ments (e.g., reading logs, conferences, reflections, quizzes) that ensure accountability
without smothering the joys or pleasures of reading (Gallagher, 2009; Harvey &
Ward, 2017; Miller & Sharp, 2018).

Like their forebears, book choice advocates also connect these practices to particu-
lar affective states of being. For example, a recurring theme in book choice, and the
larger genealogy to which it belongs, transforms reluctant or developing readers into
joyful (Gordon, 2017) and passionate (Ripp, 2017) lovers of books. This affective aspi-
ration appears not just in the titles of its popular texts, like Penny Kittle’s Book Love
(2013), but also in the amorous overtones of its common metaphors. Teachers, for
instance, are sometimes called book matchmakers (NCTE, 2018), with widely
adopted professional resources encouraging them to introduce book choice in their
classrooms with speed dating exercises between students and texts (Gallagher &
Kittle, 2018).

**Mixing Business With Pleasure Reading**

In many circles, the romantic power of book choice is commonplace enough to be
uncontroversial. Few educators would reject “the love of reading” as a desirable
outcome of literacy education. And yet the nature of this love can be ambiguous.
Book choice proponents, like their predecessors, have tended to construct the pleasure
of reading not through a positive accounting of its qualities, aims, or interests, but
through the negation of its apparent opposite—instrumental literacy. Pleasure
reading, in other words, is associated with a natural state that exists apart, and under
threat, from the intrusions and constrictions of normative schooling. In Reading in
the Wild (2014, p. 109), for example, Donalyn Miller invoked this “natural” distinction
directly, suggesting that teachers must “get out of the way” if students are to evolve
into “wild readers.” In Readicide (2009, p. 106), Kelly Gallagher suggested that the
interventions of conventional English classrooms often serve to “kill the love of
reading.” Even popular metaphors about book-matchmaking have echoed this logic
of noninvasive literary guidance: matchmakers (good ones, anyway) do not heavy-
haedly impose relationships, but create conditions for serendipitous connections
to occur. Implicit in such perspectives is an understanding of reading as something
bifurcated: reading is caught between warring imperatives of the natural and unnatural,
the pleasurable and the instrumental, the freely chosen and the coerced. The appeal of
book choice, from this view, is its promise to bridge such divides by building space for
spontaneous and organic relations to literacy in classrooms not always hospitable to
such attachments.

And yet when we look more closely, these distinctions begin to dissolve. While
advocates of book choice have asserted a clean division between the pleasurable and
instrumental, the two have often intermingled, even among its most vocal advocates.
For instance, in Reading Unbound (2013), Wilhelm and Smith’s (2013) study of
young people’s pleasure reading, the authors argued that educators should allow
students to read whatever they choose. However, they justified this stance by appealing to the interpretive complexity that high-interest, pleasure reading helps to develop; and how this, in turn, can be mobilized toward other ends, including the academic standards of conventional English classrooms. Kittle (2013), likewise, legitimizes academic aims by linking students’ love of books to their stamina for reading more (and more difficult) texts. Even Atwell, who insisted teachers refrain from normative interventions and allow students to read freely for reading’s own sake, talked about the ways that pleasure reading also contributes to “high achievement in math and science” (Atwell & Merkel, 2016, p. 130). Of course, statements of such instrumental aims do not mean that these are advocates’ true or primary motivations for supporting book choice. These may well be strategic inclusions, intended to assuage the concerns of skeptical administrators or parents (both authors confess to making such rationalizations to supervisors in their own classrooms). Nevertheless, the ease with which the instrumental and pleasurable commingle in book choice resources is significant. It points to the fact that reading and choice, and the affective attachments associated with them, are not easily divided into simple binaries, but circulate in complex entanglements of institutional and cultural values and commitments.

This complexity is the basis of a rich, existing literature which has explored the competing economies that produce particular ways of reading and responding to texts as worthwhile and desirable (Graff, 1979). In literary studies, for instance, researchers have shown how choice, and the natural pleasures it offers readers, are not easily separated from the unnatural mediations of publishers, agents, printers, purchasing offices, friends, curators, reviewers, award committees, and recommendation algorithms (English, 2005; McGurl, 2021; Price, 2019; Thompson, 2012).

Choosing a book to read, in other words, is never a pure act of agency. It is overdetermined by the competing financial, material, cultural, technical, and interpersonal interests bound up in such choices. Scholars of racialization and literature, likewise, have demonstrated how such choices often replicate dominant norms of White capitalist heteropatriarchy—thus guaranteeing that certain stories, modes of reading, and aesthetic responses are more available (or acceptable) for choosing than others (Thomas, 2019; Toliver, 2020). In the context of book choice, such perspectives complicate straightforward appeals to love or pleasure as ends-in-themselves for reading by highlighting the hybrid interests that underwrite literary practice. Brandt (1998, p. 166) referred to these interests as “sponsors of literacy”: the people and processes that “enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage in some way.” In what follows, we further examine the forms of sponsorship that animate book choice, in particular, the affective economy that shapes its relations to other economies of reading.

The Affective Economy of Literacy

Our theoretical understanding of “affective economy” draws on previous work that invoked this phrase to explore the cultural politics of affect. Grossberg’s work in fan studies (1987) used “affective economy” to conceptualize the way audience loyalties overlapped with other social and economic interests, diverging from familiar
depictions of fandom as a pure extension of pleasure, love, or affinity. In cultural studies, Ahmed likewise explored affective economy (2004a) as a means to clarify how objects and practices accrue meaning and value through the circulation of affect, recognizing that affect was not an individually felt force, but something collective and evolving. Both Grossberg and Ahmed have informed our usage of the phrase: to study the affective economy of literacy, we suggest, is to be concerned with (a) the relations among affect, aesthetic sensibility, and other economies of reading and writing, and (b) how their circulations render particular literacy practices, identities, and dispositions valuable or desirable.

We have considered the role of the affective economy of literacy in relation to the field’s longer engagements with affect: for instance, Cramer and Castle’s exploration of affective attachments in reading education (1994), which stands in the tradition of research that encourages the love of reading and pleasure in reading, such as Gambrell’s connection of affect with reading motivation (1996), an idea taken up by Atwell (1998), Gallagher (2009), and Kittle (2013). Strommen and Mates’s suggestions for cultivating a love for books in older children and teenagers (2004) also stand in this tradition.

Our approach to affect reflects recent developments in social theory (Clough, 2010) and literacy studies (Ehret & Rowsell, 2021; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Lenters & McDermott, 2019). While we are sympathetic contributors to deliberations about the place of affect in literacy research and practice (Nichols & Coleman, 2021; Nichols & O’Sullivan, 2019), we are nonetheless apprehensive about how easily such discussions can depersonify and depoliticize affect. By focusing on affective economies, our aim is to sidestep scholarly disputes over what or where affect is, so as to better understand the work affect does in the contexts of literacy teaching and learning. Our approach thus aligns with a growing pragmatic-contextual tradition in affect studies (Anderson, 2014; see also Ahmed, 2004b; Ngai, 2004), which is concerned with the ways affect mediates, and is mediated by, social contexts and practices. Such a view echoes recent work in literacy studies that likewise addresses the interplay of affect with the material, spatial, and textual ordering of reading and writing activities (e.g., Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Garcia et al., 2021; Lewis & Crampton, 2015; Nichols & Campano, 2017).

We contend that the affective economy of literacy should be studied in relation to, rather than as a break from, the moral and political economies that have shaped popular imaginaries of idealized reading, readings, and readers. That the social, political, and cultural aspects of reading have influenced one another is affirmed in recent histories of literary reception, which have highlighted the interplay of affective and aesthetic response with evolving sociopolitical circumstances. Lynch (2014), for instance, documented how the very idea of loving literature is a historical artifact, emerging in the 19th century with the increased availability of books and class identities that made it a thinkable and imitable expression of desire. In a similar way, Price (2012) noted the ambivalence associated with this historical affinity: the love of reading has, at different times, either been celebrated for cultivating the individual imaginative capacities of readers or decried as a solipsistic retreat from the communal bonds or material concerns of one’s own milieu. Neither view is untrue.
What renders love for reading desirable or undesirable is not intrinsic to reading itself, but rather is an outgrowth of its relation to other economies that value it in certain times, places, and communities. In other words, while affect is deeply personal, and often regarded in literacy research as a turn toward the interior life of reading subjects, affect is not, and has never been, disembedded from the moral and political imperatives of the wider social worlds through which it moves.

It is important to note that acknowledging the relations among literacy’s moral, political, and affective economies is not meant to impute questionable motives to calls for nurturing pleasure in reading. Rather, it is intended to tune attention to the ways pleasure is mediated through the routines, rituals, and norms of literacy instruction and practice. The purpose of studying the affective economy of reading, in other words, is not to reject love itself as a valid reaction to literature, but to explore the conditions that elevate it as distinct from, or purer than, other forms of aesthetic response. Furthermore, there are important things at stake for taking such a stance. As Berlant (2011) argued, affective attachments—like love for reading—are laden with internal contradictions. Berlant (2011) called them “optimistic,” wedding us to a wider sense of possibility; when left unexamined, however, they can become cruel, drawing us to practices or dispositions that undermine our intentions or diminish our commitments (Dernikos & Thiel, 2020). By investigating the affective economy of literacy, we unsettle these familiar schemas for ideal reading (and readers) by clarifying their relation to other reading economies and their implications for literacy instruction and practice.

**Method**

In what follows, we report findings from a descriptive multiple case study (Yin, 2018) that examined the presence and practice of book choice in the classrooms of three middle school English Language Arts teachers in the Southern United States. Each teacher served as a single case, which allowed for cross-case analysis and the triangulation of findings (Yin, 2018). Though the sample size did not allow for generalizability in a quantitative sense, the data revealed much about the practice of book choice and the role the affective economy of literacy has played in shaping teacher practices surrounding it. In particular, we examined the role of affect in each teacher’s integration of student-selected reading in their class, which was an unintended focus that emerged through conversations with teacher participants and our processes for collecting and analyzing data.

By exploring book choice as a situated instructional practice dependent on its classroom context, our study aligns with the tradition of New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003) —an approach that understands reading not as a discrete set of skills but as a social activity embedded with ideological meanings for those who use, teach, promote, and regulate it. This perspective allowed us to approach the familiar practice of book choice in unfamiliar ways, looking at its contingencies and contradictions in classroom use and among teachers, students, and the wider social worlds to which they belong. By so doing, we explore how affect moderates the political and moral economies of literacy in the classrooms of the teachers we studied.
Participants. To identify and select participants, we first conducted an email survey of teachers in grades 4–12 who attended a professional development workshop with Penny Kittle on book choice, hosted at our home institution—a research university in the Southern United States. The survey queried educators about their experiences and practices with free reading programs; asking how long they had used free reading; what were the size and presence of their classroom libraries; what were their experiences with and exposure to professional development surrounding book choice; and how willing were they to participate in follow-up interviews and observations for our study. We also asked English language arts supervisors in two districts, with whom our institution holds longstanding research-practice partnerships, to identify literacy educators currently practicing some form of book choice and who might be willing to share their experiences with us.

These avenues led to an initial list of potential participants from which we selected three teachers for our study: Sarah, Julia, and Kristina (all names are pseudonyms). Selection was based on years of experience; diverse pathways into, and approaches for using, free reading programs; and availability for interviews and classroom observations.

Sarah, a veteran ELA educator with 25 years of experience, was teaching eighth grade at a rural middle school. She started experimenting with book choice after encountering the work of Penny Kittle and Kylene Beers at a professional development workshop and, over time, adapted their techniques to create a structure that could work for her classroom. Sarah assigned students one book per month to read, and she set Fridays aside as “book choice days,” in which students were given 45 min to read. She also relinquished conventional homework assignments throughout the week and instead required students to read 20 min each night. She supported these practices with a classroom library that students could borrow from, and she also monitored students’ reading through end-of-month written reflections.

Julia has 16 years of classroom experience and was a sixth-grade teacher in a suburban intermediate school. While she drew ideas and inspiration from contemporary book choice advocates, she saw her use of free reading as a legacy practice from the start of her career, when she worked in an elementary school where students selected their own books using Accelerated Reader (AR)—a computer-based program providing data on students’ independent reading levels with a test bank for thousands of books. When students finished reading a book, they completed the accompanying AR test and earned points based on comprehension score and the length and/or difficulty of the text. Julia used AR tests and informal conferences to monitor students’ reading comprehension and progress, but the heart of her program was the daily time she set aside for students to read quietly or to select new books from her classroom or school library. She required students to read one book every two weeks.

Kristina, who had 24 years of experience, was teaching sixth-grade ELA at a suburban intermediate school. Like Julia, Kristina began her career in an elementary school that used AR; however, after moving to a school that did not have access to the program, she developed her own forms of assessment and
student check-ins based on resources from reading workshop advocates. She set aside daily blocks of time for students to select and read books and required them to read three fiction books every six weeks; they were then required to answer a reflection question about each (e.g., “who is your favorite character and why?”).

Data Collection and Analysis. Data collection focused on participant interviews, augmented by survey results and classroom artifacts. While not a scientific instrument, the survey, which was used to identify potential study participants, provided general insights into the variety of literacy teacher experiences with and approaches to book choice. These details became a valuable resource for identifying the practices of our participants as part of a wider pedagogical phenomenon.

Classroom artifacts were incorporated into the study after the original research design (which included three months of regular observations in each teacher’s classroom) shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In lieu of these observations, the teachers provided examples of current and previous lesson plans, conference charts, and assessment tools that they used to facilitate book choice in their classes. These artifacts also doubled as interview prompts for the teachers to explain how they developed and used these tools in practice.

Interviews were conducted between March and May 2020 via Zoom due to school closures during the pandemic. Interviews with each participant lasted 60–90 min and followed a semi-structured approach, with some open-ended questions about participants’ histories and practices related to book choice. These questions included how they became interested in book choice; how they organized classroom time and space to support it; examples of success and challenges they experienced in implementing it; and other questions rooted specifically in the classroom artifacts they provided. One unanticipated advantage of the pivot from in-person interactions and observations to virtual interviews was that it shifted conversations from the specifics of a given class period or a particular student–teacher interaction to a more general recounting of the participants’ philosophies and reasoning behind their pedagogical choices in regard to book choice, and how these choices had evolved over time. This shift in perspective lent itself well to the direction our analysis took as we began to recognize tensions in the purposes and practices of our teachers’ approaches to book choice and the role of affect in easing them.

We analyzed the data in multiple stages, using procedures for open coding and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In the first phase, we read through the interview transcripts to assign inductive codes and patterns related to the teachers’ purposes for and approaches to, using book choice in their classrooms. For instance, we noted when participants talked about the “successes” or “challenges” they encountered in implementing book choice and how these experiences were related to their larger pedagogical goals (e.g., “love of reading” or “stamina”). Through this process, we noticed an apparent tension among the freedoms the teachers associated with the Book choice, the constraints they used to nudge students into particular forms of participation, and the affective attachments they invoked to reconcile the two. Codes included commonalities of practice—such
as accountability, instructional goals, ELA standards, work/life skills, classroom time and space—as well as motivations for implementing book choice—such as love/desire, challenges, and successes.

This first round of coding led us to a second phase of analysis, where we applied our emergent theoretical framework (i.e., the affective economy of literacy, and its relation to other reading economies) to the data and deductively coded for instances in which these different economies presented themselves. For example, comments from the teachers about the workplace skills that might be gleaned from independent reading routines, and classroom artifacts that assessed students’ ability to demonstrate these competencies, were coded as “political economy.” (See the Appendix for a table of codes and coded transcript excerpts.)

In the final phase of analysis, we identified patterns in the clusters of codes that emerged from the prior two stages in order to clarify the relations between book choice and the moral, political, and affective economies of literacy. We focused, in particular, on overlaps in these economies, as when, for example, the same practices contributed to multiple, competing aims ascribed to literacy, such as developing a love for reading (affective), preparing students for future employment (political), or cultivating desirable dispositions or abilities (moral). During this stage, we also used our early findings to further refine our theory of literacy’s affective economy, which we then applied to a re-reading of key texts authored by popular book choice advocates and research articles from the long history of scholarship about free reading. This step also helped us understand the degree to which the interplay of moral, political, and affective economies of literacy was unique to our participants or present in the wider literature on book choice. This final stage involved collapsing the codes to this interplay and focusing on what these tensions revealed about how the affective economy moderates and modulates the other two economies of literacy. The preceding sections of this article that detailed the evolution of free reading programs, and the role of affect therein, were shaped through this analysis.

**Findings**

We organized our findings around the two categories that our analysis identified as the most significant overlaps in the moral, political, and affective economies of book choice. These categories were “choice” (what students read) and “practice” (how students read). These concepts competed in expressing and renouncing norms for reading and literary response, creating contradictory messages about the kinds of readings and readers that were regarded as more or less desirable in the participants’ literacy classrooms.

**Moderating Choice.** While the teachers in our study had different reasons for incorporating book choice in their instruction, they shared similar motivations for doing so. Each associated the choice of books in ELA classrooms with the cultivation of pleasure in reading, and they understood this goal to be a necessary counterpoint to the forms of instrumental and regimented reading they perceived as dominant in other classroom and school settings. They expressed a common concern that the absence of choice—
and, by extension, the absence of pleasure—was eroding the desire of students to read. As Julia put it, “If you’re not reading something you want to read, then you are not going to love reading. And if you don’t love reading, you’re only going to do it because you have to.” Kristina affirmed this view, voicing frustration that other teachers in her district did not seem to grasp the importance of choice and pleasure in reading. “You’re going to see kids reading in sixth grade on free choice in my class, and then never read another free choice book all the way through the rest of their high school career,” she said. Such worries echoed those expressed in professional resources related to book choice. Gallagher’s *Readicide* (2009), for instance, similarly warned that ELA educators risk killing reading for students when they fail to carve out space for student-selected pleasure reading in their courses.

All three teachers had witnessed this effect in different ways with their students. Prior to implementing book choice, they said, many of their students were reluctant to pick up books for fun and viewed whole-class reading as a chore. Sarah attributed this hesitation, in part, to a generational shift. Twenty years ago, at the start of her career, she recalled students being more enthusiastic when she introduced a class novel. “It kind of just evolved from… being excited to, ‘We don’t really want to read that. That’s too long,’” she said. Sarah interpreted this change as an outgrowth of the shifting reading practices of young people in the digital age. Between the internet, social media apps, and texting, students were reading more than ever before, but this kind of reading did not always translate into sustained, long-form reading. “They’re reading, but they’re not reading novels,” she explained. “They’re constantly reading, and they have too much overlap.” For Sarah, this “overlap”—the fractured way she saw young people reading in and across texts—was a challenge that Book choice seemed to address. The Book choice approach preserved the pleasures of choice, such as when students navigated websites and scrolled through newsfeeds, but it also anchored this choice in a narrative form that could hold their attention over time. According to Sarah, introducing Book choice had helped revive the enthusiasm that once accompanied class novels: “Now they get more excited over choice.”

Julia and Kristina shared similar stories that illustrated the successes of Book choice in nurturing a love for reading in their classes. Their accounts focused more on the personal (rather than generational) relevance that *choice* afforded their students. Julia, for instance, described several “sporty guys” in her class who began the year uninterested in reading. Their attitudes changed, however, when she introduced them to texts by Matt Christopher and Tim Green, authors of sports books for children and young adults. For Julia, choice made reading pleasurable by freeing students like these to find books aligned with their interests, identities, and passions. This alignment, in turn, could inspire them to pursue similar literary experiences and, ultimately, to develop a long-term love of reading. One example Kristina recounted demonstrated this potential. She recalled a former student who approached her to describe the impact her class had on his life. In her words,

He said, “I had never read a book all the way through until your class, and then I went on in 7th and 8th grade and achieved all of my Accelerated Reader point goals and went to all
the parties [for students who met their reading targets]. It’s because you taught me that I could pick a book that I liked, and that reading was something I could do.”

Kristina saw firsthand (like Julia) the transformative effects of choice as her student’s relationship to reading solidified, as well as the importance of book choice for ELA classrooms.

Accounts like these clarify the role of choice in literacy’s affective economy. Across interviews, our study’s teachers stressed that pleasurable attachments to reading were modulated by students’ freedom to choose texts for themselves. The teachers also drew distinctions between classrooms with book choice, which nurtured love for reading, and those which relied on whole-class or canonical texts, which inspired boredom or aversion.

It was when the teachers described their students’ aversion to reading and the downstream consequences of this failure to develop a love for reading, that the links between the affective and other reading economies began to crystallize. While expressing concerns that many ELA classrooms were tempering students’ enthusiasm for books, Julia remarked, “You’re going to lose [students] without choice.” She then elaborated on the nature of this loss: “You’re talking about the difference between being able to provide for themselves later and dropping out of school, or reaching their full potential.” Subtle, but implicit in this and similar statements from our interviewees, is the connection not just between choice and pleasure (i.e., the affective economy) but also between choice and students developing as integrated and successful members of society, traits conventionally associated with literacy’s moral economy (Graff, 1979, p. 25).

The love for reading, in other words, was not always as easily distinguished from instrumental literacy as it was presented. Importantly, such conflations were not unique to our participants. In returning to the writings of book choice advocates, we found frequent slippages between affective appeals for pleasure reading and the moral benefits of reading—empathy (Kittle & Ivey, 2019); adaptability (Atwell & Merkel, 2016); confidence (Miller & Sharp, 2018); and critical awareness (Gallagher, 2003)—conferred on those who practice it.

Our interviews also revealed instances when the political economy of literacy slipped into discussions of students’ affective attachments to books. Even as teachers described choice as a means of bringing interesting and relevant texts into their classrooms, they also suggested that book choice eased the way for more instrumental ends. In a conversation about the limitations of using classical literature in the curriculum, for example, Kristina remarked, “You could teach the same concepts with Divergent or The Hunger Games … and that would be so much more captivating and interesting.” Sarah likewise said that allowing students to choose books made it easier to teach particular competencies: “If you don’t have a book that’s on your level that you can read—that you can go through and pick apart and find meaning, find connections—you’re not gonna be able to practice [the skill].” These statements highlighted the entanglement of affect with other literacy economies. As much as pleasure was intended to draw students into reading, it was also a way to create conditions for training students in particular, desirable skills. We are not, by the way, suggesting that such aims are wrong or misguided; only that they are present, even when they are concealed beneath the veneer
of choice. Our point is not to indict teacher participants as unwitting agents of a repressive educational system, but rather to articulate a set of entanglements present in contemporary literacy education. Acknowledging the intermingling of these economies is important—not because they ought to be kept separate, but because failing to recognize their porousness can produce contradictions in the classroom, wherein the expectations from one economy are grafted onto the practices or assessments of another.

The clearest example of such a contradiction in our interviews was the tenuous place of graphic novels in the book choice programs of our teacher participants. On the surface, students selecting graphic novels in book choice should generate little controversy: if the point is for students to choose books that are interesting and relevant to them, this can be accomplished with graphic novels as easily as with print-based novels, short stories, or poetry. Throughout our interviews, however, the teachers expressed ambivalence about the genre. Most voiced a begrudging acceptance of them, not as literary objects in their own right, but as a gateway to higher and richer forms of literary experience. Sarah, who was most vocal in her disapproval, said, “I hate graphic novels,” before tempering her response to admit that “some can be a little higher level.” Kristina likewise appreciated students gravitating to such texts, but also believed exposure to them ought to be limited. “A lot of kids only want to read Big Nate or Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Those are great, but you need to experience an actual novel, not just a graphic novel.” Categorizing some novels as more real or “actual” than others was striking to us, but it made sense once we understood such classifications as emerging from a disjuncture among competing reading economies. While graphic novels aligned with the imperatives for pleasure and choice (the affective economy), it was less clear how they nurtured the dispositions (the moral economy) and productive skills (the political economy) that teachers also felt beholden to, even if they did not always emphasize them in their book choice practices. This disconnect explains why the acceptance of graphic novels turned on the extent to which the pleasure associated with them could be channeled toward other desirable purposes for literacy.

Even though choice was mobilized in these classrooms as a way to free students to select books of interest and enjoyment, these affective attachments were never entirely disentangled from the idealized reading norms that characterize other economies of literacy. Julia captured this uneasy alliance in the following statement: “[Book choice] is tricky because people do what’s comfortable, and I make them step out of that comfort zone and choose something else that maybe they wouldn’t.” The paradox Julia expressed of making students freely choose certain books rather than others is understandable when we locate this contradiction in the overlapping economies that animated our teachers’ literacy classrooms. In this view, book choice is not just concerned with nurturing affective attachments to reading, but also with modifying these attachments to fit the imperatives of other reading economies.

**Moderating Practice.** The role of affect in moderating which forms of reading were more (or less) valued in the everyday practice of book choice also extended to the kinds of readers that choice was meant to cultivate. For the teachers in our study, the freedom for students to select texts had implications not only for what students
read, but how they read, in other words, their motivations for, and dispositions toward, reading.

As noted in the previous section, the teachers were not disinterested in what students did with this freedom; they had a clear, if tacit, understanding among themselves about what reading dispositions were most desirable. Like many educators, all three expressed an interest in nurturing lifelong readers—students who loved books and regularly read for pleasure. They saw book choice as the best means of developing these attachments, in part, because the program’s flexibility allowed students to discover the joy of reading for themselves, based on their own interests. Nonetheless, as we listened to the teachers describe this ideal, we were struck by an obvious tension: even as they positioned book choice as a way to foster a love for reading through choice as opposed to coercion, all three mentioned the systems of rewards and accountability they used to coax students to participate. Reading, in other words, was simultaneously understood as something students organically enjoyed (once the intercessions of teachers, tests, and assignments were removed) as well as something they were inclined to avoid without external motivators to nudge them toward it. As previously noted, this tension made more sense when understood as less as a betrayal of some pure affective ideal (e.g., love for reading) than as a result of the competing but intertwined reading economies present in schools.

All three teachers used rewards as an incentive for student participation in book choice. As much as they wanted students to enjoy reading without prompting, they felt that the prior experiences of their students with assigned books had so sapped their natural predilections toward reading that these desires needed to be retrained. As Julia put it, “[Students] really need to have choice, but they need some other motivating things to help.” External motivators encouraged readers until they developed affective attachments to books that would lead to a sustained internal motivation for reading.

Getting students to read was the first step in getting them to love reading. As Sarah observed, although the tactics weren’t ideal, “If you can eventually just get them [reading], it’s worth it.” For Sarah and Kristina, reading incentives often took the form of sticker charts that tracked the number of books students read throughout the year. Sarah also hosted a competition in which students who read more than 25 books during the year would be entered into a raffle for an Amazon Kindle. Julia took a slightly different approach, inviting students to set personal reading goals (beyond the required two books per month) that she would follow up on in smaller, one-on-one conferences. She would then host periodic ice cream parties for those students who met their goals. For Julia, these incentives helped make reading “a thing to be celebrated.”

As much as the teachers employed rewards and celebrations to encourage students to read—and, by extension, to become the kind of people who enjoy reading without coaxing—they also depended on other accountability systems to ensure that their students met particular reading standards for quality. Throughout our interviews, the teachers repeatedly voiced concerns about “fake reading”—a phrase that covered a variety of strategies students devised to get around their free reading requirements: for instance, not reading a text they claimed to have read; skimming over large sections
of text without appropriate attention to detail; or even re-reading the same books over and over again. As much as the teachers valued the flexibility book choice provided, they were unsure whether students were actually reading in the ways they were supposed to. Sarah, for instance, noted that when she first implemented book choice as described by Kittle (2013), she found that students could easily work around the short, low-stakes reflections she assigned to hold them accountable. In response, she pivoted to a formal accountability system with conferences and more developed reflective writing assignments. Julia had a similar experience, but instead turned to AR. While she acknowledged that AR was controversial among book choice advocates, she appreciated its blending of choice and accountability. In fact, when Julia’s district ended its contract with Renaissance Learning, the parent company of AR, she successfully petitioned her principal to purchase a school-wide license so she could continue her book choice program with confidence that students would not be fake reading in her classes.

Taking a step back, it might seem strange that choice would be so closely coupled in these classrooms with extrinsic motivators like rewards and quizzes. If the purpose of book choice is to counter the forms of coercive and instrumental literacy instruction that threaten students’ love of reading, the persistence of practices that herd students toward certain behaviors and dispositions is puzzling. However, when we view these contradictions not as a desertion of book choice’s affective economy, but as an expression of its interconnection with other reading economies, it becomes clearer how these incongruous ideas merged.

Concerns about fake reading are a direct illustration of this confluence of economies. Teacher anxieties about fake reading stemmed from the sense that students were missing out on the benefits of “real” reading. As shown above, one of these benefits was affective; the teachers believed the love of reading could only result from their students having enjoyable experiences with books. Coercing students into non-coercive relations with texts thus appeared as a worthwhile compromise because of its potential to cultivate lifelong lovers of reading. However the teachers were not only concerned that fake reading would hinder students’ affective attachments to books. Throughout interviews, the three teachers expressed this worry in conjunction with concerns that students would also fail to develop the skills and dispositions necessary for personal and intellectual advancement (i.e., associations of reading’s moral economy) or for success in the workplace (i.e., associations of reading’s political economy). All three teachers contended that book choice, when properly practiced by students, was a foundation for personal growth, advanced course placements, and college- and career-readiness. Sarah passionately articulated this view, saying that reading not only taught students “to think and look outside the box” but also that it “prepared kids for jobs that don’t yet exist.” Citing current events like the spread of online misinformation and the transformation of the economy, she stressed that no matter where students go, they “have to be able to think and read and think critically about what [they] read.”

Statements like these emphasize how the uneasiness about fake reading in book choice classrooms was not a simple or singular anxiety, but a cluster of concerns that emerged from the intersecting demands of different reading economies. For the
teachers in our study, students cutting corners in their reading would not only obstruct the formation of positive affective attachments to literacy; it could also stand in the way of students developing personally, intellectually, and economically. This view helps explain why, in classroom settings that explicitly valued choice and freedom, all three teachers instituted rewards and accountability as viable means to coax students into what they felt were desirable relations to reading and books. At the same time, such practices not only worked to mitigate against “fake” reading, they also constructed its obverse: the emergence of “real” reading as a practice that not only nurtured pleasurable attachments to literacy, but also leveraged pleasure to mediate forms of practice tied to other reading economies.

Discussion

The findings of our study complicate the standard depictions of book choice and its associated practices as distinct from, and opposed to, more instrumental or coercive forms of classroom literacy instruction. For our participants, the concepts of choice and freedom were closely intertwined with the affective experiences of joy, pleasure, and love of reading. However, instead of being opposed to the moral and political imperatives that have historically animated literacy education (cf. Graff, 1979), this affective economy actually mediated the relations between these imperatives and everyday reading practices in schools. As much as the cultivation of the love of books was expressed as an anodyne and unobtrusive end-in-itself, it also functioned as a means of deemphasizing the asymmetries between the competing desires of teachers, students, and the wider social and political-economic structures to which they belong. The freedom to choose books, in other words, arrived freighted with normative ideals about how students ought to use that freedom and what kinds of readers, and people, they ought to become in doing so.

Importantly, we would also argue that this is not suggestive of some duplicitous motive, or state of false consciousness, in the participants of our study and other book choice advocates. More than anything, it speaks to the conflicting demands that literacy educators increasingly face, and the material work book choice does to reconcile these pressures. Literacy teachers are regularly accused of both pedagogical overreach (e.g., assigning or encouraging the reading of ideologically motivated books) and underreach (e.g., failing to equip students with skills or dispositions for personal social mobility or to serve the needs of the market). Moreover, they are simultaneously accountable to the narrow metrics of the administrators who evaluate them, the romantic and pragmatic expectations of the various members of the public who weigh in on the nature of their work, and the attention and longings of the young people they teach. Against this backdrop, book choice offers teachers resources for navigating these conflicting demands: teachers can steer reading activity while promoting choice; they can reinforce norms without direct coercion; and crucially, they can couch such compromises in the assuasive language of affective attachment that nurtures a love for reading. The entanglement of the affective, moral, and political economies of literacy in our participants’ classrooms, in other words, should not be interpreted as a deficiency in their teaching or a failure to implement book choice.
with fidelity. Instead, it should be understood as an expression of the dialectical relationship among these economies and the strategic uses to which these resulting ambiguities can be directed.

What is significant in our findings, then, is not the presence of tensions among these economies, but the consequences that follow when useful instructional approaches, like book choice, ignore or paper over their relations with one another. Our findings suggest that the affective economy, by prioritizing the pleasurable attachments of literacy over other purposes, elides the moral and political ideals already embedded in reading practices—even those animated by a love for books.

Overlooking these relations obscures those instances when, to paraphrase Berlant (2011), optimistic attachments can abruptly turn cruel and thus work against the desires and commitments of teachers, students, and communities. As we have shown, each of our participants had success stories about reluctant readers transformed into passionate lovers of books. The unspoken norms for ideal readings and readers made such stories evidence of book choice’s success; however, these norms also produced new ways of marginalizing literacy activities that deviated from them. When students did not feel, express, or perform love for books according to these norms, it became feasible to view them with suspicion—either for misusing their freedoms by selecting the wrong books (e.g., graphic novels) or for engaging in the wrong kinds of reading practices (e.g., fake reading). This “love” also prioritizes and valorizes books over alternative texts, such as websites, social media, and other digital media. This prioritization ignores the fact these alternative texts can be just as, if not more so, effective at evoking affective responses (Burnett & Merchant, 2018) and conveying cultural values surrounding “ideal” reading, as opposed to examining the strengths of the texts through the lens of social practices (Hall, 1980). In this way, just as the moral economy has historically sorted readers according to their abilities, and the political economy ranked them according to their usefulness to the market, the affective economy extends these divisions to the intimate scale of feelings about and desires for literacy.

Crucially, classifications like these not only condition the discursive place of good and bad reading and readers in classrooms; they also shape the material practice of literacy. As our findings have shown, the teachers’ concerns that students might fail to develop appropriate attachments to reading led to the creation of rewards and accountability systems to nudge their behaviors in the direction of these norms.

One surprising pattern that emerged from our interviews was the influence of these systems in structuring students’ choices about books. Sometimes the influence was overt. For instance, Julia’s reliance on AR to assess reading limited her students’ choices to texts included in the AR test database. Other times, however, the influence was more subtle. All three teachers discussed the importance of giving their students ambitious reading requirements (1–2 books per month) and supporting them in reaching these goals. Adapting the recommendations of other book choice advocates (Gallagher, 2009; Kittle, 2013), they encouraged students to choose books that could be completed in 2–4 weeks and to abandon those that did not hold their interest. While these scaffolds were very effective at coaxing students to finish more books, they also incentivized particular reading selections and responses, tacitly discouraging
students from choosing longer or more challenging texts that might hinder them from reaching their monthly benchmarks. It is ironic that practices intended to smooth the road for students to read more demanding books simultaneously advanced and undermined this aim.

It is only by attending to the affective economy of literacy as something entwined with, rather than separate from, other reading economies, that we can recognize such contradictions not as individual shortcomings of teachers and students but as outgrowths of the competing imperatives these economies introduce into the teaching and practice of literacy. Centering the relations among the affective, moral, and political economies of literacy, then, creates a starting point to understand and intervene in these contradictions in order to better serve the needs of students and the values of teachers. While we have focused on the interplay of these economies in the practice of book choice, and in the context of middle school classrooms in the Southern United States, there are promising avenues for future research that follow these relations as they unfold in other reading practices, school levels, and geographical contexts.

Conclusion

The common depiction of pleasure and choice as positioned in opposition to more instrumental or coercive forms of reading overlooks the significant ways that literacy’s affective, moral, and political economies are entangled. We have shown how this elision in the popular practice of book choice has produced classroom contradictions with unintended implications for students. Not only do these contradictions shape unspoken norms for good and bad reading by which students are evaluated, but they also materially impact the ways students learn to select, engage, and respond to texts. For this reason, we suggest that the interplay of the affective, moral, and political economies of literacy be a starting point for further research; such inquiries can attune researchers and teachers to the ways these competing imperatives might undermine the stated aims of pedagogical approaches or personal practices. We believe such research might also open literacy teaching and learning to more generative engagements with these economies by further exploring the politics of affect and forms of aesthetic responses that are not easily reduced to interest, pleasure, or love. Our study is only an initial step in these endeavors.

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**Supplemental Material**

The Appendix 1 referenced in this article and abstracts in languages other than English are available at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/1086296X231200812.

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