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READING FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: A NEW MODEL FOR READERS'
ADVISORY

BY

E.E. LAWRENCE

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Library and Information Science
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Emily J.M. Knox, Chair

Associate Professor Kate McDowell

Professor Allen Renear

Professor Jonathan Furner, University of California, Los Angeles

ABSTRACT

Readers' advisors are tasked with suggesting leisure reading materials to library patrons. The current discourse within the field has it that these advisors ought to adhere to (what I am calling) a *pure preference satisfaction model* wherein they aim to satisfy readers' existing preferences without judging or attempting to alter them. On this standard view, Readers' Advisory (RA) operates as a kind of "matchmaking service" in which advisors pair readers with books they are likely to enjoy in an effort to promote the act of reading *simpliciter*. Constituted as such, the service sets regulative ideals of pure preference satisfaction and aesthetic neutrality for its practitioners.

While such an approach to RA is politically commendable in some respects, in this dissertation I interrogate the incompatibilities that have emerged between theory and practice as a result of higher-level moral principles to which librarians are committed. In so doing, I provide a critical inventory of the (in some cases intractable) tensions evident in contemporary RA service, going on to offer normative critiques of the dominant moral framework underpinning RA. The first of these concerns the various ways in which RA functions as a prescriptive project; the second takes aim at the moral conflict between the pure preference satisfaction approach and critical practitioners' policies of committing *a priori* to the recommendation of diverse books; finally, the third critique argues that the promotion of popular fiction—a core activity of contemporary readers' advisors—presently lacks a compelling theoretical justification rooted in the political purpose of the public library.

In each case, I recommend theoretical revisions that will help to alleviate harms associated with the problems identified. In light of the cumulative effects of these revisions, I propose a new unified theory of the modified RA practice: an alternative *aesthetic education model* that both privileges genuine aesthetic experience and is grounded in the library's overarching democratic project. Drawing on insights from reader-response criticism, I argue that leisure reading is valuable in part because it offers us opportunities to deliberate on our aesthetic experiences, creatively testing out our ideas, listening and responding to competing views, and establishing mutually-acceptable interpretive norms in communities of differently-situated readers. To do this well, we must be confident in articulating and giving reasons for our own beliefs but also willing to readjust in light of new evidence and persuasive argumentation. Working through this process with literature helps to cultivate in participants certain epistemic, moral, and perceptual virtues necessary to full democratic engagement, including intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and testimonial justice. Ultimately, I hold that RA-as-aesthetic-education functions as a dynamic forum for readers to practice democratic citizenship and thus develop its requisite character traits. The new model both furthers the political aims of the public library and reestablishes continuity between theory and critical practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research presented in this document has been funded through a Eugene Garfield Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship. My gratitude goes to Beta Phi Mu for their vote of confidence in the project as a whole.

I have been mulling over how to properly thank my advisor, Dr. Emily Knox, who has served as both an indefatigable academic mentor and unwavering advocate for my best interests throughout my time at Illinois. Among other things, she has taught me how to do the hard work of being a scholar, how to defend the integrity of that work, and how to hold on to one's basic humanity in the process. I would not be where or who I am today without her guidance.

I am indebted to the other members of my committee: Dr. Kate McDowell, Dr. Allen Renear, and Dr. Jonathan Furner. Kate provided support even when her own schedule shouldn't have allowed it, Allen treated me like an intellectual equal from the word "go," and all articulated insightful comments, humane objections, and tough questions. The last of these is a way in which philosophers show respect for a project; I am eternally grateful for the respect with which my committee treated this one.

Thank you to the iSchool community: faculty, staff, and students. To Beth Strickland Bloch, whose friendship (and unequalled aptitude for giving pep talks) helped get me through this program; to my students, whose fresh eyes and insights kept me on my toes; to Dr. Bonnie Mak, who once declared "You can't just stop there!" when I hesitated halfway through a thought for fear of taking up too much space in her seminar; to the good folks at the IT Help Desk, who just make things work; to Penny Jo Ames, who talked me down when I was first driving from DC to

Champaign to visit campus in the hours before a major snow storm; and to Dr. Linda Smith, who we should all be thanking most of the time.

Outside of the iSchool, I would be remiss if I did not also thank Dr. Karla Möller, whose “Response to Literature” class—and thoughtful feedback throughout—played a crucial part in the development of several key claims advanced in this dissertation.

I owe a great deal to the many wonderful librarians who do the critical work described here and elsewhere—in particular Dianne Babski and Janet Zipser for giving me my very first library job and encouraging me to make this field my home, and Vikki Wilder, Eleanor Lynch, and Jen Fick (collectively known, in my household, simply as “The Librarians”) for years of camaraderie, warmth, and wit.

Thank you to my family, whose affectionate and longstanding practice of recommending all manner of media to one another has shaped me as a researcher (and a person).

And, finally, to my partner Rick, who travels with me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 On Recommending *Dawn*

“I’m looking for horror recommendations,” I typed into the webform. It was still September, but I was already gearing up for a little light Halloween reading. “I tend to like fast-paced, character-driven horror where you’re genuinely attached to/worried for the protagonists,” I wrote. “Also, I’ve never come up with a good term for this, but I often enjoy stories that are both scary and a bit sad.”

I was in the process of completing a request for reading recommendations through the Brooklyn Public Library’s online BookMatch program, an instance of form-based Readers’ Advisory (RA) first launched in 2014. As a result of both my academic interest in RA—the service dedicated to helping individuals select leisure reading materials—and my professional background in librarianship, I was being fairly meticulous in my completion of the different fields. When a box in the form prompted me to share books or authors I enjoyed, I entered in a few relatively well-known titles: *The Troop*, *Horrorstör*, *Heart-Shaped Box*, *The Exorcist*. All of these shared the sorts of features I was hoping for in my next read. Asked if there were any authors or types of books I specifically did not want recommended, I noted that, while I adored *Heart-Shaped Box*, I didn’t need to read anymore Joe Hill for the moment. His books, much like his famous father’s, seemed to be getting longer and longer with each subsequent release, and in the first year of my PhD program I was, frankly, out of patience for slogging through eight-hundred-page tomes in what purportedly counted as my leisure time. (I did not include this last piece of information on the form, although I now recognize that it may well have provided the

librarian with some helpful context.) I scrolled down and recorded my precise age, format preferences, and a note about how I heard about the service. Then I clicked ‘submit.’

A week or two passed. The BookMatch service was still rather new and had received some early positive press to boot, which meant that it would take time to hear back from a librarian.¹ When I did get a response, it came in the form of a brief message and a list of ten recommended titles, each with a capsule summary and link to the relevant record in the library’s catalog.

“Thank you for using Bklyn BookMatch!” read the email. “Based on your interests in fast paced character driven horror novels, I’ve created a customized reading list for you. Most of the books I have selected are recent titles in a similar vein to *Heart-Shaped Box*, *The Troop*, and *The Exorcist*, with a couple of modern classic titles thrown in. I have also included *Dawn* by Octavia Butler which is technically a Sci-Fi title but certainly chilling in its own right. Enjoy!”

I proceeded to scan the list. There were a couple titles I had heard about elsewhere but had yet to get around to actually reading (like Josh Malerman’s *Bird Box* and Lauren Beukes’s *Broken Monsters*, neither of which turned out to suit my tastes) and several that immediately called to me on the basis of their short descriptions (Paul Tremblay’s *Head Full of Ghosts*—about an ill-fated exorcism filmed for a hit reality TV show—was, and is, a particular standout). And yet it was the librarian’s inclusion of Octavia Butler’s post-apocalyptic science fiction novel *Dawn* that most intrigued me. Not because it was the type of book I wanted to read at that moment, but because it was not. In fact, it deviated so obviously from the terms of my initial

¹ BookMatch has remained widely popular—surely due in part to the Brooklyn Public Library’s willingness to accept RA inquiries from individuals without BPL library cards—and the wait time has only increased in the intervening years. A note on the form now assures its users that, despite delays, there is indeed “a librarian on the other end!” If nothing else, this serves as evidence that some people remain hungry for personalized recommendations from librarians rather than—or, perhaps, in addition to—those they receive from, e.g., friends and automated recommender systems.

request that the recommender felt compelled to issue a special caveat: not horror, but chilling nevertheless. Clearly they could have just gone ahead and suggested a Stephen King or a Dean Koontz to me in its place. With no great shortage of “fast-paced, character-driven horror novels,” why, I wondered, had the librarian chosen to include a book from another genre entirely?

There are a few possible explanations. One is that the librarian recently read and enjoyed *Dawn*, and so was apt to suggest it to individuals who may have had some interest. This sort of off-hand recommendation has been known to occur in RA interactions.² If it were indeed the case here, the differences between *Dawn* and the other titles on my personalized reading list would be largely incidental.

More charitably—and, I think, more plausibly—we could interpret the librarian as having made a considered choice to recommend a book that differed in at least one key respect from what I requested. Perhaps they were making some attempt to expose me to a similarly fast-paced, character-driven title in an adjacent genre: to, as my students would put it, “push me outside of my reading comfort zone.” Or perhaps the librarian noted the lack of diverse representation in either the books I mentioned enjoying (four, all written by white men) or the ones they were about to recommend (all—excluding *Dawn*—by white authors, eight by men), and thus felt some moral or aesthetic or professional obligation to include a book by and about a person of color. Perhaps the librarian was interested in doing some combination of these things all at once. Perhaps they were interested in doing something else entirely.

There is, a handful of years later, no real way to be sure. Even reading *Dawn* itself provides few, if any, clues. (Although I would agree with the BookMatch librarian’s verdict that the novel

² See, e.g., Shearer 1996.

is indeed “chilling in its own right.”) Moreover, the larger question of what it is that today’s readers’ advisors do in practice—and the ideals and ideological commitments to which they are beholden—remains a murky one. Is the goal of the service simply to give the reader what they want, or is it something more? If the latter, what might that be and how do readers’ advisors work to accomplish it? In the end, what (and whom) is Readers’ Advisory for? What *should* it be for?

1.2 Background

To better make sense of these questions, we can turn to the practical and scholarly literature on contemporary RA service. The general consensus in this literature is that reading is an intrinsically valuable practice that ought to be encouraged (Crowley 2015; Dali 2010, 2015; Saricks 2005). Individuals are more likely to read if they reliably have pleasurable or otherwise satisfying experiences with print; however, identifying books that will afford them these experiences is a deceptively complex task, one that requires a rich array of decision-making skills and heuristics (Ross 2001). Librarians (as proficient selectors) are called on to aid in this process, helping readers to locate books that will appeal to them as they are presently constituted. On this standard view, the reader’s preferences are action-guiding because they most consistently lead us to texts with which the reader will have pleasurable experiences.

In short, contemporary RA adheres to a *pure preference satisfaction model* (PPSM) in which readers’ advisors have a duty to satisfy patrons’ aesthetic preferences without judging or altering them. I have termed this the ‘pure preference satisfaction model’ because I believe it makes apparent what is being valorized and centered in contemporary RA service: the reader’s preferences. Elsewhere in the Library & Information Science literature, the PPSM is sometimes referred to as the “give ’em what they want” approach, a moniker originated in the 1960s by

Charlie Robinson of the Baltimore County (Maryland) Public Library system to describe patron-mediated collection development (Robinson 1992). Although the BCPL's approach provides an historical antecedent to the PPSM, "give 'em what they want" (as a term of art) lacks sufficient precision in the RA context. It has also accrued something of a pejorative ring that could potentially poison the well.³ Pure preference satisfaction, on the other hand, serves as a relatively value-neutral descriptor.

Practically speaking, present-day RA service—following a pure preference satisfaction approach—constitutes a concerted effort to empower the patron *qua* reader, both by facilitating free (in more than one sense) book selection and encouraging them to “never apologize for [their] reading tastes” (Rosenberg 1982). Readers’ advisors perform “matchmaking” labor between patrons and books in an effort to instill in the former a desire to devote (at least some of) their leisure time to pleasure reading. Effective matchmaking requires knowledge of the reader, the reading context, and what readers’ advisors generally refer to as the “appeal” of a book—that is, those features that characterize a typical experience of the text (e.g., leisurely, thought-provoking, romantic) (Saricks & Brown 1989; Smith 2001).

Although not entailed by a pure preference satisfaction approach, much of the RA literature published since the early 1980s also endorses a response-dependent aesthetic relativism. On this view, readers are in fact the sole arbiters of aesthetic value, and an individual reader’s aesthetic

³ This is arguably the case in Juris Dilevko & Candace F.C. Magowan’s (2007) critical history of RA, *Reader’s Advisory Service in North American Public Libraries, 1870-2005*.

judgments are always and only true for that particular reader.⁴ As Keren Dali (2015, 485) puts it in her exposition of reading-related philosophical principles originating in library science, “the reader, not the critic, educator, librarian or another expert, is the one who decides how ‘good’ reading material is.” In the preface to *The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion*, Kenneth Shearer (2001, xiv) further proclaims that “a book’s ‘goodness’ is not a property of the text but is rather a property of a reader’s response to a text,” and concludes that a “major goal of librarians must be to increase the number of...positive responses to texts.” Here, positive responses are just those deemed pleasurable by a “particular reader reading at a particular time” (Ross 2009a, 654). According to a number of influential voices in RA, these are also the only reading effects it is permissible for RA practitioners to take into account: that is, the effects sought by the readers themselves.

1.3 Problem Statement

One could easily come away from much of the RA literature with the impression that any and all alternative agendas—particularly those that aim at educating, diversifying, or otherwise improving readers’ tastes—have no place in contemporary reader services. But if this is right, what then are we to make of recommendations like the one I received from the BookMatch librarian? Or those issued by readers’ advisors who follow (largely informal) diverse book recommendation policies? What about readers’ advisors who establish representation quotas for

⁴ There are a number of different forms of aesthetic relativism to which one might subscribe. The form often apparent (though underdeveloped) in the RA literature is most closely related to what philosopher James Young (2009, 224) terms “aesthetic subjectivism,” wherein “the aesthetic value of an artwork is relative to the subjective feelings of audience members.” Again, the PPSM does not entail subjectivism, but subjectivism would seem to count in favor of the PPSM *if* it is joined with a few subsidiary political and prudential claims (i.e., that we should not impose our own preferences on others and that we should trust readers when they tell us what they do or do not enjoy). This represents a standard view within the RA field.

their book displays and ‘best of’ lists, or who encourage their patrons to take part in “reading challenges” that push them to interact with texts that deviate from their preferences for books in particular genres or on particular topics or authored by particular sorts of people?⁵ Regardless of how one ultimately interprets such practices, it is clear that these reader’s advisors have objectives other than mere preference satisfaction. Are we to believe that so many thoughtful practitioners are simply misguided? And if not, where is the theory, unified or otherwise, that underpins their activities?

Readers’ Advisory scholar Bill Crowley has written about other instances of apparent incompatibility between readers’ advisors explicit theoretical commitments and their actual daily practices. For example, Crowley (2001) observes that RA scholars and practitioners alike frequently assert that purportedly universal judgments of textual quality should not figure into readers’ advisors’ recommendations. One of the more famous advocates of this view is Duncan Smith, librarian and co-founder of the most popular RA database presently on the market, *NoveList*. Smith argues that readers’ advisors should not “speculate about which texts meet the highest need or which serve the highest purpose” because this would necessarily involve issuing judgments of textual value that “are inappropriate for a democratic society and for a profession with democratic ideals” (Smith 1992, 205, quoted in Crowley 2001, 38). Temporarily setting aside the accuracy of that claim, it is critical to note, as Crowley does, that “RA practitioners make and often follow judgments regarding book quality on a daily basis,” whether they are using critics’ reviews and literary prizing as heuristics of aesthetic value, creating lists of ‘top

⁵ For instances of readers’ advisors testifying to the exercise of such practices, see RUSA CODES Readers’ Advisory Research & Trends Committee Conversations (Reference and User Services Association 2017, 2018).

picks' and 'best bets' for their patrons, or requesting assistance tracking down high quality books from other readers' advisors online (2001, 39).

Crowley, however, maintains that this is not a form of intentional “professional duplicity” but rather a “seemingly predictable divergence” between two theories of action: one explicitly held and endorsed (aesthetic relativism, in this case), the other implicit and revealed only through behavior (some flavor of aesthetic realism). He thus concludes that:

At minimum, the real possibility that RA ‘as professed’ is often different from RA ‘as delivered’ represents an interesting research topic in itself. So does determining whether, when, and how books of certain types affect the lives of their reader. (Crowley 2001, 39)

These points of tension between RA’s explicit and implicit theories of action constitute major obstacles to the cultivation of critical *praxis*, defined by educational theorist Paulo Freire as “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (1970a, 126). The problem is itself symptomatic of an RA that has experienced little in the way of theoretical, practical, or pedagogical revision in the last several decades. While today’s readers’ advisors increasingly engage in educative and progressive practices on the ground, the ways in which we talk about and teach RA have remained largely the same since the 1980s (Dali 2013, 475). This has in turn generated a state of play in which RA theory persistently mischaracterizes the objectives of its practitioners just as practitioners take themselves to be doing something other than what they are in fact doing. This is the antithesis of praxis, for fully reflective action—action inflected by theory—requires, minimally, knowledge of one’s aims. As Freire argues,

The action of men without objectives, whether the objectives are right or wrong, mythical or demythologized, naive or critical, is not praxis, though it may be orientation in the world. And not being praxis, it is action ignorant both of its own process and of its aim. The interrelation of the awareness of

aim and of process is the basis for planning action, which implies methods, objectives, and value options. (1970b, 206)

The lack of a robust RA praxis relates to a further worry: that little attention has been paid to the prevailing or progressive aims of the service in practice because RA theory has itself congealed into dogma—that is, instructors and practitioners rigidly endorse certain principles that are at times incompatible with their actual practices.⁶ Passive acceptance of RA dogma—as well as the longstanding marginalization of fiction readers and reading in the LIS discipline⁷—has thus far served to insulate the service from critical interrogation and theoretical revision. This has, at least in part, led to what reader services librarian Stephanie Anderson (2016) calls the “RA gap,” or the growing “chasm between academia and RA practitioners” that “[starts] with the lack of attention to RA in MLIS programs.”

Recreational reading services have mostly gone unstudied by contemporary LIS scholars,⁸ and even in those instances where they have not, critical interventions have rarely done much to alter the going theory. As a result, RA theory and pedagogy have generally failed to capture the normative complexity of aesthetic recommendation. To put it plainly, the practical literature and readers’ advisors themselves continue to repeat the same axioms—e.g., never apologize for your tastes, never judge the reader, there is no aesthetic value except for that which the reader assigns themselves—without attending to the ways in which RA serves contradictory interests and objectives, in some instances seemingly by necessity.

⁶ See Crowley (2014).

⁷ LIS tends to privilege the provision of free information access as the primary function of the public library, effectively adopting what Mary K. Chelton (1999, 42) calls an “exclusionary rhetoric of ‘information’” despite the fact that “daily evidence of public library user preferences shows at least an equal interest in ‘entertainment.’”

⁸ See Dali (2014).

My hope for the present project is then multifold. First, I aim to map these theoretical and practical incompatibilities—*RA gaps*—in their many permutations, providing an inventory and exploration of the (in some cases intractable) tensions evident in contemporary Readers’ Advisory service. Next, I offer normative critiques of the dominant moral framework underpinning RA in an effort not merely to point to the apparent discord between conflicting values but to present some appropriately-motivated theoretical revisions that will help to alleviate it. Finally, in light of the cumulative effects of these revisions, I propose a new unified theory of the modified RA practice, one that aims at aesthetic education rather than pure preference satisfaction. That theory provides a foundation for taste-based interventions in which today’s critical RA practitioners are, in a number of instances, already engaged.

In clarifying RA’s foundational principles, analyzing their consequences, and offering alternatives, this project figures into a larger scholarly effort to, as ethicist Elizabeth Anderson (2001, 22) puts it, “convert dogmas into tools, or ideas we can choose to use or not,” depending on how worthwhile they are and how well they align with our other professed commitments as librarians. Which is to say, regardless of whether one ultimately endorses either my critiques or my revisions, the practice of troubling commonly-held assumptions in RA—about, as I said at the start of this chapter, what RA is for and what it *should* be for—remains usefully disruptive. We can only determine what the right objectives are for the readers’ advisor once we have worked to untangle the web of explicit and implicit aims guiding their work. This is a valuable practice even if one remains convinced at the end that the practitioners referenced earlier are simply misguided in their efforts.

But I do not think that they are in fact misguided, or at least not obviously so, and this intuition provides further justification for the project at hand. Too often scholars in our discipline have complained that practitioners are both overly pragmatic and theory averse. Librarians, it is not uncommon to repeat, think too little about the reasons for their work, preferring instead the security of performing their duties by rote. This (often gendered) criticism conflicts with my own experience both in the classroom and on the ground. For while the lived reality of library labor in an age of austerity does often invite (or restrict us to) a kind of no-nonsense practicality, it is naive to think that librarians simply lack interest in the nature and purposes of their work. In any case, we ought not presume that, when these practitioners do run afoul of theory, it is because of a problem *with them* rather than with the theory itself. Promoting a more unified RA praxis is not merely a matter of paternalistically bringing practitioners into line with the critical stances of scholars but of bringing those scholars' stances into line with the (often politically-motivated) activities of practitioners.

Given the progressive innovations of today's readers' advisors, I hold that we are called on to carefully reconsider RA's commitments through a lens furnished by critical librarianship, or the body of approaches that target structural inequity and asymmetrical power relations in the library as a social institution. This is a key rationale for the chapters to come. Further, as Jonathan Cope (2017) notes, critical library and information studies should not simply be an "act of negation" but must "propose substantive alternatives based on normative arguments that can also be subjected to critical scrutiny and debate" (7). In other words, work aimed at creating more socially just libraries should take on the positive project of advancing new theoretical frameworks and practices. I take seriously Cope's thesis, and for this and other reasons to come,

I propose an alternative model for Readers' Advisory that can itself "be subjected to critical scrutiny." Perhaps my greatest hope for this project is to complicate the conversation around reader services, to invite new proclamations of purpose alongside the airing of grievances, and, through that process, to help foster the critical dialogue and reflection necessary to the cultivation of a genuine Readers' Advisory praxis.

1.4 Research Methodology & Design

Throughout the subsequent chapters, I deploy analytic methods to resolve conceptual and normative questions pertaining to the ways in which RA functions—and ought to function—in the public library. The project as a whole can be situated in value theory broadly and practical ethics more specifically. In the following section, I explain just what I mean by this and provide more detailed descriptions of the methods I will deploy.

1.4.1 Information Ethics

In this project, my main objective is to determine the right course of action for readers' advisors given the myriad tensions that arise between their explicit and implicit commitments as members of a shared library profession. Here, librarian and patron are the object of moral judgment and moral consideration, respectively. I focus considerable attention on the librarian's duty to educate the patron but propose an education that is aesthetic and politically-motivated, aimed at cultivating in patrons certain epistemic and perceptual virtues necessary to democratic citizenship. Such an education is meant to benefit the wider moral community and information society. Thus, while the project incorporates insights from aesthetics, critical librarianship, and reader-response theory, it can most productively be understood itself as an information ethics project.

Information ethics (IE) is a species of *practical ethics*, a term that generally refers to the contextual application of moral theories—be they deontological, consequentialist, virtue-based, or pluralist—to particular practical domains. Ethicists working in this area ask what is right or good in some specific situation and marshal tools from normative ethics to develop answers. Within moral philosophy, practical ethics can be held distinct from metaethics (which “[examines] the logic of moral reasoning” [Childress 2007, 16]) and normative ethics (which devises theories of morality), although of course the boundaries between each of these three “branches” are sometimes hazy.

Beyond its status as a kind of practical or applied ethics, the precise nature of IE is subject to some dispute. Philosopher Kay Mathiesen (2015a, 427) defines IE as “the study of *normative questions* related to the creation, preservation, organization, access, presentation, and control of information” (emphasis mine). Normative questions are questions about what is right or good: what ought to be, rather than what is. While there are different sorts of normativity—juridical, pragmatic, epistemic—IE specifically addresses what we might think of as “moral shoulds”: claims about what one *should* do as a rational agent bound to a universal moral code.

Mathiesen argues that “for the most part, questions of information ethics are questions about how we should treat one another—how we should share, protect, and use information in ways that [benefit] (or at least [do] not harm) other human beings” (2015a, 430). That is, IE tends to deal with moral agents (i.e., bearers of moral responsibility) and moral patients (i.e., objects of moral consideration) who are both human. This stands in contrast to the competing environmental approach of Luciano Floridi (2010, 83-85), who describes IE as “an ontocentric, patient-oriented, ecological macroethics” that widens the scope of moral patients well past

sentient beings to include inanimate objects: on his view, “IE holds that *being*/information has an intrinsic worthiness” and that “every entity, as an expression of *being*, has a dignity, constituted by its mode of existence and essence...which deserves to be respected...and hence places moral claims on the interacting agent” (emphasis original). Of the two, this project follows a more Mathiesenian approach to the normative domain staked out by IE—that is, the work is largely focused on human beings as “a unique kind of moral patient” but is not “committed to the view that *only* human beings are moral patients” (Mathiesen 2015a, 430). In the upcoming chapters, this translates to an approach that takes as its central concern the moral responsibility of librarians to foster a community of democratic citizens, primarily via practices of information sharing and control related to the provision of recreational reading materials. Here, library patrons are moral patients, but the things they are owed relate directly to their capacity as moral agents: to the ways in which they can, in virtue of their character, enhance or disrupt democratic deliberation.

Of course, the library provides the critical institutional and professional context for the project as a whole. In her book *Library Ethics*, Jean Preer (2008, 24) argues that “providing access to information...has become the central ethical value of librarianship and the one that is unique to the library profession.” It follows that library ethics involves doing some role-based/professional information ethics, and this would seem an apt description of much of the research presented in the subsequent chapters as well.

1.4.2 Moral Methods

In addition to delimiting the range of potential research questions, IE roughly demarcates the field of potential methods. My own methods are characteristic of ethics research, and I elaborate on them below.

In Henry Sidgwick’s classic ethical treatise *The Methods of Ethics* (1874/1981), he states that a moral method is “any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ‘ought’—or what it is ‘right’ for them—to do, or to seek to realise by voluntary action” (1). Under this broad heading, bioethicist John Childress (2007) specifies two methodologies for practical ethics: principle-based methods (top-down reasoning) and case-based methods (bottom-up reasoning).⁹ I employ the former, which I explicate below.

1.4.3 Principle-Based Methods

A principle-based method is one in which we appeal to some specific principle or principles in order to determine the correct course of action. Principle-based approaches are quite varied, and while they must minimally “hold that general moral action guides are central to moral reasoning,” there is no requirement that they subscribe to the same principles or “reduce all moral reasoning to explicit principle-based reasoning” (Childress 2007, 17).

Philosophers disagree about the existence, nature, and number of general moral principles. If we take there to be such principles, we must still determine what they are and, if there is more than one, which of them are overriding. Further, principle-based methods need not defer to a single or single kind of moral principle. There is even good reason to think that such approaches

⁹ While Childress is speaking specifically about methods in bioethics, his insights are equally relevant to other areas of practical or applied ethics, including IE.

fail to capture the nuances of our lived experiences as moral agents. Philosopher Steven Coughlin (2008) notes that:

[with] the possible exception of theories, such as utilitarianism, in which only one principle is defended, the notion of absolute mid-level principles that must not conflict seems inconsistent with the moral life. An alternative conception views moral principles as “contributory” rather than as absolute. This contributory conception of moral principles holds that more than one principle can apply to a particular case.

The contributory conception also allows for pluralistic principle-based methods, those that combine principles of different “types.” In a pluralist principlist method, “for instance, a principle of utility may be included on equal footing with principles of respect for autonomy and justice” (Childress 2007, 22). A famous example of this is the “four principles framework” developed in Tom Beauchamp & Childress’s (2001) influential *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, which derives rules and judgments from four basic moral principles: “(1) *respect for autonomy* (a norm of respecting the decision-making capacities of autonomous persons), (2) *non-maleficence* (a norm of avoiding the causation of harm), (3) *beneficence* (a group of norms for providing benefits and balancing benefits against risks and costs), and (4) *justice* (a group of norms for distributing benefits, risks, and costs fairly)” (12, emphasis original).

In his book *The Principles of Information Ethics*, Richard Severson (1997) devises an analogous framework for information ethics. Like Beauchamp & Childress, Severson’s approach relies upon four primary principles: (1) respect for intellectual property, (2) respect for privacy, (3) fair representation, and (4) nonmaleficence. Robert Hauptman—the influential author of a classic 1976 paper on reference librarians’ responses to a request for information on bomb construction—has objected to Severson’s principle-based approach, asserting that it “is only

applicable when the problem is clear and the solution obvious” (Hauptman 2002, 8). Although Hauptman’s longstanding criticism of unreflective deference to moral heuristics is well-taken, his critique of this particular methodology would seem to turn on a conflation between principles and simple axioms. Instances of conflict between principles inevitably do create difficulty, but this is in fact where principlism, as method, offers a path forward. As Severson himself notes, “applying principles is a deliberative process; in the end, a creative and individualized judgment must be made about how the broad principle fits the particular circumstances” (1997, 16). Library philosopher Lane Wilkinson (2014) further observes that principlism “provides a framework of principles to be used when balancing competing obligations” (2). When faced with a moral dilemma, principlism prescribes a critical process of identifying relevant moral obligations, specifying the moral rules they generate (i.e., “[creating] mid-level ‘bridging’ norms”), and ultimately “reflecting on conflicting obligations and rules to determine which rule is the strongest in a given situation” (Wilkinson 2014, 9). It is precisely *because* solutions to moral dilemmas are often not “clear and obvious” that principlism proves a particularly useful methodology for practical ethicists.

I make use of this methodology throughout the project, first identifying a system of core moral principles that guide RA and later revising that framework to better reflect (a) the moral intuitions of critical readers’ advisors and (b) the shared values and commitments of the wider class of librarians. The former can be inferred from practice and informal professional discourse, while the latter are evident not only in the LIS literature but also in policy documents from the American Library Association, such as the Code of Ethics (1939/2008) and Library Bill of Rights (1939/2019). Among the mid-level principles to which I refer are informational justice

(“justice for persons and communities in their activities as seekers, sources, and subjects of information” [Mathiesen 2015b, 199]) and intellectual freedom (“an ontological state that encompasses two distinct circumstances: First, that individuals have the right to a belief and to express that belief. Second, that society is committed to allowing access to information by all” [Knox 2015, 10]).

1.4.4 Informal Analytical Methods

The techniques employed in this project can be broadly characterized as informal methods of philosophical inquiry. Whereas formal methods make use of formal languages/notation and logical calculations, the analytical methods used here involve applications of informal logic to clarify, analyze, and articulate arguments in natural language. Over the course of the dissertation, I attend not only to the veracity of premises but to the quality of the relevant reasoning—i.e., the logical relationships between propositions—in order to effectively evaluate everyday argumentation.

This is a method that, according to philosopher Alec Fisher, includes three main phases: (1) recognizing and extracting an argument from some “[context] in which reasoning is taking place” (2) revealing “the structure of a piece of reasoning,” and (3) determining whether we ought to accept the author’s conclusions—that is, whether their “reasoning is correct or incorrect” (Fisher 1988, 15). Hans Hansen & Daniel Cohen (2011) characterize this as a “thinking about it” method that requires significant subject area knowledge and imagination, both of which facilitate the use of relevant thought experiments designed to help the investigator identify and assess the consequences of claims in the field.

Among other virtues, informal analytical methods generate work that is readable by a relatively unspecialized audience. Given that this project centers on a subject that is relevant to a general LIS readership composed of both scholars and practitioners, my hope is that my work will be largely accessible to most attentive readers with some sustained exposure to library science. This counts in favor of using informal analytical methods, which have been similarly deployed by other LIS scholars, including, e.g., Michael Buckland (e.g., 1991; 1997), John Budd (e.g., 1995; 2006), Don Fallis (e.g., 2004; 2015), Melanie Feinberg (2012), Jonathan Furner (e.g., 2004a; 2015), Anna Lauren Hoffmann (e.g., 2016); David Hudson (e.g., 2017), and the aforementioned Kay Mathiesen (e.g., 2015a; 2015b).

Informal analytical methods are also quite useful in research that demands a significant degree of conceptual clarity. So while principle-based moral reasoning is chief among the methods deployed here, I will also at various points engage in informal conceptual analysis, which aims to formulate definitions “by identifying and specifying the conditions under which any entity or phenomenon is (or could be) classified under the concept in question” (Furner 2004b, 233). Instances of conceptual analysis appear predominantly in the first few chapters of the dissertation, as I interrogate the practical literature of contemporary RA and articulate an early critique. More specifically, I use informal analytical methods to answer questions like “What is appeal?” and “Is taste expansion a form of taste elevation?” The goal of such analysis is to identify the contours and conditions of the relevant concepts.

1.5 Scope, Limitations, & Bias

The scope of this project is limited to contemporary Readers’ Advisory services for adults. By contemporary, I mean to capture the family of philosophical tenets and best practices first

formulated in the early 1980s and that, in the intervening years, have continued to dominate the ways in which we teach and talk about RA in the LIS discipline. While chapter two will discuss, briefly, the history of RA service, knowledge of that history is neither a central focus nor a necessary antecedent to the study at hand.¹⁰ In those rare instances where some additional historical context would aid the reader in making sense of my or another author's views regarding RA, I will provide that context in either a footnote or the body of the relevant chapter.

As I noted above, this project deals predominately with RA services geared towards adult patrons. I will offer no sustained analysis of RA for youth, which has its own ideological commitments and history of taste elevation (Burek Pierce 2006; McDowell 2009, 2011). However, it is worth remarking that even a casual inspection of the literature on RA for children and young adults reveals something of a more progressive and comfortably pedagogical bent. For example, some recent articles discuss the historical roots and practical implications of the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement (Booth & Narayan 2018; Mabbott 2017; Rapp 2017; Ostenson et al. 2016) and interrogate the troublesome use of (presumed) gender identity as a heuristic for literary recommendation (Widdersheim & McCleary 2016; Kolling-Perin 2016; Brendler & Tarulli 2014; Lukoff 2013). Further, the popular and professional discourse surrounding the need for diverse representation in books—an important theme in future chapters—tends to focus on the recreational reading of children and young adults.

Because we generally accept that children are appropriate objects of paternalism (to a greater or lesser extent), it is not terribly surprising that RA for youth is more amenable to progressive interventions aimed at safeguarding and enhancing their wellbeing. Children are learning and

¹⁰ For fuller historical treatments of RA, see Dilevko & Magowan 2007; Kimball 2006; Crowley 2005; Ross 2005; Luyt 2001; Martin 1998.

growing, and most of us endorse the claim that they are owed an education. It is then not particularly controversial to argue that it is important to put books in front of young people that will expand and perhaps improve upon their worldview. Adults, on the other hand, are generally understood to be owed a much greater degree of autonomy: the freedom to self-govern as we see fit, to exercise “authority over our own actions” (Buss & Westlund 2018). Thus, librarians typically take themselves to have a negative duty not to interfere in individuals’ self-government and a positive duty to render technical assistance when needed. This explicit adherence to an overriding principle of autonomy would seem to guide much of contemporary thought on RA for adults, differentiating it ideologically from the comparable service for youth. However, as I discussed in section 1.3, the gap between adult RA service as theorized and as practiced suggests there is important (and foundational) philosophical work to be done here. RA for youth—infused as it is with insights from education, literacy studies, and developmental psychology—is more theoretically sophisticated and less apt to find itself locked in analogous (and intractable) internal conflicts. For these reasons, the project will focus on RA service to adults, which is at present more difficult to justify within the ethical context of the public library.

It is also important to note that this dissertation concentrates on the provision of fiction, especially popular fiction. This is something of a limitation, as RA’s reach does in fact extend to non-fiction read recreationally. However, I have chosen to restrict my commentary to fiction because (1) it continues to dominate both public library circulation and RA discourse, (2) its history of derogation in the library is productive of certain longstanding tensions in (and between) RA theory and practice, and (3) it represents, however imperfectly, a category of texts to which readers often attend aesthetically. With respect to (3), I take it that the salient distinction

between reference and RA services is not located in the *kind* of materials to which patrons are directed (e.g., fiction or non-fiction, narrative or non-narrative) but rather in the experience sought. RA, I hold, traffics in predictions about chiefly aesthetic (rather than informational) experience—predictions, that is, about the nature of an individual’s qualitative, lived-through transaction with a text. That being said, much of what I argue will apply equally well to the provision of non-fiction intended to be read aesthetically.

Finally, in the interest of transparency I should note that, while analytic methods in philosophy purport to be fully neutral with respect to the peculiarities of social location, inevitably one’s (necessarily limited) perspective is reflected in the intuitions they have, the arguments they make, and the conclusions they reach. Indeed, my own background as a white, developmentally disabled, and trans* former librarian both sharpens and constrains my own perspective intermittently throughout the project. Moreover, I have found myself with widely varying degrees of privilege at different points throughout my professional and academic career, and this undoubtedly informs my perceptions of the library field in ways that are only sometimes readily apparent to me. I welcome diverse, inclusive, and sustained dialogue on the issues raised in the chapters to come and hope that what I ultimately provide is an adequate starting point for critical deliberation on the theory and practice of Readers’ Advisory going forward.

1.6 Structure of the Project

I began this chapter by considering the tension that exists between the dominant model of Readers’ Advisory—a pure preference satisfaction model—and the activities of contemporary practitioners, particularly as they relate to aesthetic exposure and taste diversification. I went on to ask about the purpose of RA—that is, what ends it presently serves and which it ought to

serve. This is a central motivating question for the chapters to come, throughout which I will engage in a systematic interrogation of contemporary RA that leads to a series of proposed theoretical revisions and, ultimately, the articulation of an alternative recommendation model.

Because this interrogation requires a solid understanding of the central aims and tenets of contemporary RA as it is currently theorized, chapter two looks to a selection of canonical practical texts in order to identify the core moral principles and associated regulative ideals that currently underpin best practices. The work the chapter performs is largely propaedeutic, laying the groundwork for the subsequent three chapters, each of which presents a critique of the pure preference satisfaction approach to RA service.

To that end, chapter three argues that RA is, *contra* the dominant view, a fundamentally prescriptive project caught at the center of a long-standing ideological dilemma between populism and elitism that is foundational to modern librarianship. This chapter further considers the ways in which contemporary RA continues to function as a form of (attempted) taste elevation.

In chapter four, I consider a thought experiment relevant to the promotion of diverse books—that is, narrative texts written by and about marginalized persons—and demonstrate that RA's going ethical framework renders universal diverse book recommendation policies morally impermissible. That conclusion conflicts, however, with the progressive practices and beliefs of a number of critical RA practitioners; the remainder of the chapter thus draws on insights from feminist aesthetics to explore potential grounds for understanding readers' advisors as having an overriding moral obligation to promote diverse books in the library.

Chapter five articulates the third and final critique of contemporary RA, arguing that the active promotion of adult popular fiction is in need of a theoretical justification consistent with the larger political project of the public library. The chapter considers and ultimately rejects a series of candidate justifications currently on offer in the LIS literature; it concludes by offering an alternative justification in which popular fiction—and, more precisely, genuine aesthetic experience—serves as a resource for the development of dispositions necessary to democratic citizenship.

Chapter six takes stock of the theoretical revisions proposed in chapters three through five. While these changes appear unproblematic when considered individually, taken together they generate a new approach to RA, one that is inconsistent with the pure preference satisfaction model that currently pervades professional discourse. The final chapter therefore takes as its primary goal the proposal of a new aesthetic education model for RA in which readers' advisors seek to cultivate civic virtues in their patrons through the social practices of literary selection and reflection. I conclude the dissertation with some thoughts on future research questions and directions for Readers' Advisory scholarship.

CHAPTER 2: THE PRINCIPLES OF CONTEMPORARY READERS' ADVISORY

2.1 Introduction¹¹

Readers' advisors—indeed, all librarians—function as moral agents: they are bearers of moral responsibility to their patrons. Thus, patrons are librarians' moral patients, the beneficiaries of moral consideration, both as individuals and, in the aggregate, as communities.

This is a relatively uncontroversial claim. U.S. librarians' primary professional organization, the American Library Association (ALA), routinely produces and modifies documents meant (at least in part) to elucidate the nature of practitioners' moral duties to patrons. We need only look so far as the *ALA Code of Ethics* (1939/2008), *Library Bill of Rights* (1939/2019), and *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (1974/2015) for examples. Exhortations to, e.g., “protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality” (from the *Code of Ethics*) or “challenge censorship in the fulfillment of [our] responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (from the *Library Bill of Rights*) are essentially claims about what it is we owe our patrons in our professional capacity as librarians.

It has been argued, further, that some altruistic duty is a basic requirement of professionalization: “The essence of profession,” writes library ethicist Jean Preer (2008, 3), “is service to society, a commitment not to self-interest but to the community's well-being.” A foundational commitment to the community's well-being generates a whole host of more specific

¹¹ This chapter includes material previously published by the author — see: Lawrence, E. 2017. “Is Contemporary Readers' Advisory Populist? Taste elevation and ideological tension in the *Genreflecting* series.” *Library Trends* 65 (4): 491-507. The copyright owner has provided permission to reprint.

norms in the context of particular domains of practice. A doctor, for instance, subscribes to norms “respecting the decision-making capacities of autonomous persons” and “avoiding the causation of harm” (Beauchamp & Childress 2001, 12), whereas a librarian subscribes to, e.g., a norm of respect for privacy and a (typically less stringent) commitment to non-maleficence (Severson 1997).¹² LIS professionals in different subfields also adopt moral rules specific to their own areas of practice. Catalogers, for instance, follow a norm of “[preserving] cultural specificity in name headings” (Blair 2005, 23), while reference librarians exercise “independence of judgment” in their client relations, or a “continual awareness and reflection so as to keep one’s judgments from being clouded or colored by personal philosophies and biases” (Bunge 1999, 34).

But what exactly are the norms that readers’ advisors endorse? What core moral principles underpin the practice of recommending leisure materials to readers in the library? I would maintain that identifying these principles is a crucial first step in any considered ethical analysis of the service, for we must first understand the moral aims of RA—the things it seeks to protect and promote—before we can investigate whether these aims are in fact the right ones. To that end, the following chapter adopts a *principle-based* and *inferential* approach to the ethics of contemporary Readers’ Advisory—that is, to normative inquiry into right (or good) and wrong (or bad) action in RA. It does so in service of essential ground-clearing: in order to engage in the aforementioned moral analysis of RA, we must first get clear on the normative state of affairs.

¹² One could argue that too strict a principle of nonmaleficence would entail placing more rigid limits on speech than librarians can justify as guardians of intellectual freedom. For a classic critique of librarians’ tendency to value intellectual freedom over non-maleficence, see Hauptman (1976, 1996).

In the absence of a formal RA ethics literature, I turn in this chapter to the robust practical literature available. In particular, I focus on seven editions of the flagship *Genreflecting* series, published between 1982 and 2013. It would be difficult to overstate the historical and philosophical significance of *Genreflecting* to the discourse of contemporary RA; not only did its first edition help spark a radical shift in approach in the early 1980s, Joyce Saricks (2005, 23-4)—herself a tremendously influential voice in Readers’ Advisory—has since described it as “a remarkable reference book that provides a framework for learning more about genres, an extensive list of authors and titles to suggest to interested readers, and an example of *the attitude that inspires and sustains readers’ advisors*” (emphasis mine). In its multi-decade discussion of the history, mechanics, and best practices of RA, *Genreflecting* goes a long way towards clarifying the mainstream viewpoint and rhetorical posture considered normatively appropriate for contemporary readers’ advisors.

In addition, I will draw on several other foundational practical texts on Readers’ Advisory, all of which have been used as textbooks in RA courses for MLIS students. I maintain that these textbooks are an ideal place to look for indications of core moral principles because they aim to enculturate students into the RA community of practice. As Nik Hassan and Jack Becker (2007, 170) note in their content analysis of introductory information systems textbooks, these volumes “clearly define the subject matter being studied and the core concepts advocated by their scholars,” ultimately constituting “a major component of the discipline’s teaching and pedagogy.” Further, RA textbooks solidify a particular historical narrative of the service, taking “a selective approach...to the past by choosing what is considered necessary to better understand the present”; this process helps to define the nature and aims of a particular sort of “moral

community” (Schiffauer & Sunier 2004, 33)—in this case, the one composed of RA practitioners and scholars.¹³

I begin the chapter with a brief note on library ethics and further justification for seeking out moral principles specific to Readers’ Advisory. I go on to provide some useful historical context for contemporary RA before continuing on to give a full account of the moral framework that currently guides best practices, with reference to the practical literature that communicates and consolidates those practices. Through my analysis of RA textbooks, I identify a framework of three core moral principles underpinning contemporary RA. The first is respect for autonomy, or a norm of facilitating the patrons’ right to self-determine with regard to their leisure reading. The second is a commitment to egalitarianism, or a collection of norms for treating all readers as equals and guarding against the undue influence of culturally elite tastes. The third and final principle is a commitment to the intrinsic or extrinsic value of reading as practice—put simply, a strong endorsement of the claim that “reading is good.”

Finally, I argue that the three-principle framework guiding RA gives rise to (1) a pure preference satisfaction model, wherein readers’ advisors endeavor to satisfy readers’ preferences without judging or altering them and (2) a secondary principle of neutrality, or a norm dictating that readers’ advisors remain agnostic with respect to differing conceptions of the aesthetic good. This chapter performs necessary ground-clearing in preparation for the critiques of contemporary RA service presented in the upcoming three chapters. In other words, its purpose is to address the

¹³ I do not mean to suggest here that the ideological work performed by textbooks leads straightforwardly to instances of value acquisition. The effectiveness of the enculturation process referenced above is an empirical matter worth exploring elsewhere.

descriptive question regarding which moral principles underpin RA such that later chapters can take aim at the normative question of whether these are in fact the right principles.

2.2 A Note on Library Ethics

I asked in the previous section what moral principles guide RA practitioners in their work. This may strike some readers as a question with a fairly immediate answer. “They are librarians, aren’t they? They endorse the principles that librarians do.” However, RA constitutes a particular professional context, one with its own specific history and community of practice. It will not do to assume at the outset that the principles of RA—as articulated in its core literature—and the principles of the library profession are identical. Nor should we presume that RA simply modifies or expands upon a collection of established library norms. To do so—that is, to begin with general library principles¹⁴—would be to run the risk of obfuscating points of conflict between RA and the profession at large.

Even a preliminary reading of the core RA literature suggests, at minimum, that the things readers’ advisors take themselves to owe to their patrons do not exactly match what, e.g., the cataloging or web librarian believes they owe to theirs. In fact, it is somewhat striking how rarely the RA literature makes mention of core library values to which other areas of the LIS literature frequently appeal, such as intellectual freedom, privacy, and democracy. Still, there are certainly areas of librarianship that are more closely affiliated with RA than others. Reference librarianship is surely RA’s closest sibling, with the added benefit of having a fairly well-developed ethics literature. Both are front-facing services that deal directly with the public’s inquiries and are frequently performed by the same professionals and sometimes even at the

¹⁴ Such as they are, and here too there is disagreement.

same desk. Given this, why not apply what we already know about the ethics of reference to our moral analysis of RA?

Setting aside the fact that reference ethics constitute a site of contention rather than consensus, the two services also differ in several key respects that preclude the possibility of simply applying the principles of one to the other. Greater ambiguity surrounds RA transactions than it does reference inquiries, and while RA's analog to the reference interview requires some of the same skills and dispositions (Roy 2010; Trott 2012; Dali 2013), it also traffics in aesthetic preferences rather than information needs. This means that there is no univocal right answer when a librarian is faced with an RA request for a good book (Baker 1992; Chelton 1999; Saricks 2005). As Crowley (2015, 93) contends, contemporary RA "[requires] a paradigmatic change of mind," an active departure from reference standards; "the nature of RA," he concludes, "will never allow it to approach the reference goal of the right answer and its source" (95). Library scholar Connie Van Fleet (2008) has maintained that reference has objectives and justifications that differ from RA because the latter is not essentially about information acquisition. For this reason, understanding RA "as an add-on to basic reference" will "unintentionally [undermine] the unique conceptual framework, processes, and goals of readers' advisory service" (2008, 225).

I would add that the reputedly low stakes of RA (in contrast with reference service) have shaped the conversation around the degree to which readers' advisors are called on to respect the ends of individual readers. Whereas reference ethicists allude to dramatic dilemmas involving patrons who seek information about, e.g., bomb-building (Hauptman 1976; 1996), freebasing cocaine (Dowd 1990), and denying the Holocaust (Wolkoff 1996), there are no comparable cases

subjected to scrutiny in the RA literature. This is not to say that such cases do not exist, but rather that the principles of the service have developed in an intellectual environment where anxiety tends to relate to the provision of romance novels and series books rather than, for instance, information regarding the most effective way to commit suicide (see Ross [2009] and Juznic et al. [2001], respectively).¹⁵

One might object to the kind of moral silo effect described above, arguing that RA, like reference, should ultimately be answerable to the overarching principles of librarianship. I would agree, and indeed this principle-based discord is a source of moral tension in the profession. A significant objective of the project at hand is to work towards a more unified library ethics, one in which RA is responsive to principles of democracy and social justice that underpin the larger profession (as well as the views of critical LIS practitioners). However, it bears repeating that the task of this chapter is fundamentally a descriptive one. Insofar as RA has developed its own framework of principles—as specific in what it omits as what it includes—it is my intention here to document it.

2.3 The History of Readers' Advisory

To make sense of the aims of Readers' Advisory, it is helpful to understand a little of the service's history. Contemporary texts tend to define RA service in opposition to older models of RA, a rhetorical move that bears on the established principles of and justifications for present-day recommendation practices. The historical narrative therefore underscores the ways in which

¹⁵ It is worth noting that, in future chapters, the dissertation seeks to problematize the notion that RA is in fact a “low stakes” practice. Indeed, conflicts between personal and profession principles (Hauptman 1976) and between client and third-party obligations (Bunge 1999) emerge in RA just as they do in reference, albeit with differing details. For one example of this, see the discussion of social justice and the provision of diverse books in chapter four. In such instances, the robust literature on reference ethics is a valuable resource, although it does not offer decisive resolutions to RA-specific problems for many of the same reasons mentioned above.

contemporary discourse functions (or is intended to function) as a corrective for a paternalistic legacy in public libraries, especially with regard to the institution's treatment of leisure readers.

Although the activity of advising readers extends back to the early days of modern librarianship in the 19th century, the beginning of RA as a distinct library service is usually dated to the 1920s (Crowley 2005; Ross 2005; Saricks 2005; Wiegand & Herald 2006). This was the decade during which offices devoted specifically to RA first appeared in large urban public libraries, at a time when institutions sought "to fill a social need for public education in the postwar years" (Ross 2005, 210). Readers' advisors of the 1920s and '30s directed patrons towards "serious" reading by conducting RA interviews, during which they appraised the reader and their purposes in order to produce customized bibliographies for sustained self-instruction (Wiegand 2015, 115; Martin 1998, 52). From 1925 to 1933, the American Library Association even published a series of sixty-eight topical reading courses under the series title "Reading with a Purpose" to supplement local RA services; these included introductions and recommended readings on a wide range of subjects, including philosophy, the physical sciences, capital and labor, twentieth-century American novels, interior decoration, and "farm life" (Crowley 2005, 39). On the whole, the old RA was "geared specifically toward elevating public tastes, self-education, and adult learning" (Dali 2014, 26).

To that end, the service treated nonfiction as "the gold standard" towards which all readers should strive (Crowley 2005, 38). Librarians unequivocally aimed to elevate the common reader's taste by recommending books of increasing "moral or literary quality," gradually guiding patrons up a "reading ladder" that began with mass fiction and peaked with "genres of nonfiction and nonnarrative writing" (Ross 1987, 153-4). As library historian Wayne Wiegand

(2015, 115) puts it, the early “reader’s advisor promoted purposeful, productive reading through a systematic process that favored useful knowledge and high culture literature”; the job of the advisor was essentially “to ‘prescribe’ books” that would help the reader improve their taste, character, and epistemic standing. This prescriptive approach found its theoretical justification in both the educational rationale for the public library and what LIS scholar Emily Knox (2014, 15) terms “a traditional-modernist view of reading effects,” wherein “reading ‘good’ books will lead to ‘good’ outcomes” and “reading ‘bad’ books will lead to ‘bad’ outcomes.”

Around the middle of the twentieth century, distinct RA programs were mostly absorbed into adult reference services departments, a shift that closely tracks the general decline of the adult education movement (Martin 1998, 53), as well as a concomitant “diminished...philosophical commitment to [the library’s] educational and recreational responsibilities” following the Second World War (Crowley 2005, 39). Mainstream interest in RA subsequently lay largely dormant for several decades, only to be revived in the early 1980s during what is often referred to as the “RA Renaissance”: a groundswell of professional attention that accompanied a rather radical shift in ideology and approach.

While there are surely a host of relevant causal-historical factors, Juris Dilevko & Candace F.C. Magowan (2007) have traced the roots of the RA Renaissance to the academic legitimization of popular culture on the one hand and the rise of the 1960s New Left on the other. The academic ascent of reader-response criticism would appear to have played a significant—and related—role as well. In the opening of her influential anthology, Jane Tompkins (1980, ix) states that “reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words *reader*, the *reading process*, and *response*

to mark out an area for investigation” (emphasis original). Reader-response criticism’s far-reaching influence on our understanding of reading in librarianship is in part a function of the degree to which it represents a larger movement in literary criticism and pedagogy; its rise to prominence in the 1960s and ’70s signaled a significant departure from the mid-century New Criticism, a formalist school of literary theory that advocated close-reading and discounted both authors’ and readers’ contributions to meaning.¹⁶ That sweeping scholarly shift reverberated throughout library theory and practice, drawing new attention to the reader as an active participant in the production of meaning rather than its merely passive recipient. Accurate or not, readers’ advisors took from reader-response criticism—and particularly the work of Louise Rosenblatt, to which we will return in chapters five and six—the notion that, “if reading is a meaning-making transaction to which the active reader brings half the meaning, then it makes sense to trust and support the reader’s own choices” (Ross 2009a, 653).

The twin notions that recreational fiction reading can be a valuable pursuit in itself and that readers should be trusted in their leisure-time pursuits ultimately found new support among library practitioners, and RA consequently underwent a radical transformation. Among its most significant changes, the new RA that began (in part) with *Genreflecting*’s first edition explicitly opposed efforts to elevate the tastes of ordinary readers. Instead, it encouraged patrons to read what they wanted and obligated librarians to come to their assistance, freshly armed with expert knowledge of genres, popular authors and titles, and literary appeal. RA thus reemerged in the 1980s as “a patron-centered library service for adult leisure readers” (Saricks 2005, 1). The old RA, with its musty elitism and taste-based cultural coercion, was something of a distant memory,

¹⁶ See the intentionalist fallacy (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946) and the affective fallacy (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949), respectively.

now invoked primarily to signal the endorsement of contrasting ideological commitments underpinning contemporary practice.

2.4 The Three Principle Framework

In the following section, I identify and flesh out a principle-based framework for the post-Renaissance Readers' Advisory service described above. The framework includes three principles (i.e., general moral action guides): (1) respect for autonomy, (2) a commitment to egalitarianism and anti-elitism, and (3) the belief that reading is a valuable activity worth pursuing. I have identified these principles in the following foundational RA texts: seven editions of *Genreflecting* (Rosenberg 1982, 1986; Rosenberg & Herald 1991; Herald 1995, 2000; Wiegand & Herald 2006; Orr & Herald 2013); *The Readers' Advisor's Companion* (Shearer & Burgin 2001); *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* (Saricks 2005); and *Reading Matters* (Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer 2006). That said, my work places a special emphasis on the first of these—that is, on the flagship *Genreflecting* series. Because of its significant historical role in the RA Renaissance, its regular updates by scholars and practitioners of RA over the last three decades, and its frequent use as both a textbook and canonic reference work, I hold that *Genreflecting* serves as a particularly useful guide to the dominant moral theory of contemporary RA.¹⁷

Each edition of *Genreflecting* includes some form of introduction; a chapter or chapters on reading, the reader, and readers' advisory; and chapters on the individual genres (e.g., western,

¹⁷ All seven editions of *Genreflecting* emphasize its potential use as a textbook for library school students. Textbook use is first treated explicitly as the primary purpose of *Genreflecting* in editions one and two, then as a secondary purpose in editions three through six, and finally as the first in a list of several possible purposes in the seventh. Moreover, an informal review of publicly available syllabi corroborated my anecdotal sense that recent editions of *Genreflecting* are commonly used as required texts in RA courses.

science fiction, romance) for which authors and titles are listed and sometimes annotated. I focused my attention primarily on the introductory materials in each edition. This is where the text does much of its direct ideological work and also where it is explicitly instructional, addressing the ideal commitments and practices of the readers' advisor.

Edition	Publication Year	Title	Editor(s) / Author(s)	Other Contributor(s) to Introductory Materials <i>only</i>
1	1982	Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction	Betty Rosenberg	N/A
2	1986	Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction	Betty Rosenberg	N/A
3	1991	Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction	Betty Rosenberg; Diana Tixier Herald	N/A
4	1995	Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction	Diana Tixier Herald	Betty Rosenberg (not listed)
5	2000	Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction	Diana Tixier Herald	N/A
6	2006	Genreflecting: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests	Wayne Wiegand; Diana Tixier Herald	Melanie A. Kimball; Catherine Sheldrick Ross
7	2013	Genreflecting: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests	Cynthia Orr; Diana Tixier Herald	N/A
1	2001	The Readers' Advisor's Companion	Kenneth Shearer; Robert Burgin	N/A
3	2005	Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library	Joyce Saricks	N/A
1	2006	Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals About Reading, Libraries, and Community	Catherine Sheldrick Ross; Lynne McKechnie; Paulette Rothbauer	N/A

TABLE 1. RA TEXTBOOKS

Moving through the series chronologically, I performed a close reading of the introduction and first chapter(s) of each edition. I made note of differences and similarities and tracked important topics (e.g., taste elevation, critical appraisal, the purposes of genre reading, the role of

the library, and the education-entertainment dichotomy). I also attended holistically to the basic structure of each edition.

The *Genreflecting* series is the product of a number of different contributors and, in many cases, material is reused and repurposed from edition to edition. The first four editions retain much of Betty Rosenberg's original material, although Diana Tixier Herald became a co-author/editor in the third edition and officially took the helm in the fourth following Rosenberg's passing in 1993. The sixth edition is co-edited by Herald and Wiegand and includes contributions from other scholars, while in the seventh edition Cynthia Orr takes the reins as editor. To maintain clear attribution, I always cite the first edition of *Genreflecting* in which a quote appears and make a point of noting (a) the contributing author responsible for the text and (b) the edition or editions that include that text. Editors and authors for each edition are shown in Table 1 above, along with comparable information for the other influential textbooks to which I refer in this section. These include Saricks's (2005) *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, Shearer and Burgin's (2001) *The Readers' Advisor's Companion*, and Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer's (2006) *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community*.

Finally, I should note that my goal in this chapter is to articulate a framework to which most properly normed readers' advisors will assent. That is, my hope is that the RA community will largely agree that this is what has been established via formal norming mechanisms, even if some readers' advisors disagree that it is *the right* moral framework for RA. Rather than undermining the project at hand, any disagreement with respect to the latter (let's call it *normative*

disagreement) would signal a willingness to engage productively with—though not necessarily endorse—the critiques offered in the subsequent chapters.

More concerning would be disagreement about the accuracy of the framework articulated here (let's call this *descriptive disagreement*), either in relation to the nature of the principles themselves or because there may be additional principles to which practitioners of RA subscribe. Regarding potential additions, my intention here is to present a maximally conservative framework—or one incorporating only those norms and commitments that are prerequisites for RA labor that recognizably conforms to dominant standards of practice. Thus I exclude some candidate principles that certain prominent voices in RA endorse but that appear to be optional (such as a commitment to furthering any specific conception of the value of reading). If the framework does turn out to be incomplete, it will at least be accurate as far as it goes. Any other descriptive disagreements not pertaining to defensible conservatism will need to be resolved in dialogue with the RA community. The moral framework presented here is based on charitable close-readings of some of the most important publications in the last thirty-five years of Readers' Advisory service to adults.

2.4.1 Respect for Autonomy

Respect for autonomy is “a norm of respecting decision-making capacities of autonomous persons” (Beauchamp & Childress 2001). Autonomous persons are best understood as “self-governing agents,” or individuals who determine their own actions (Buss & Westlund 2018). To respect an individual's autonomy is to defer to their authority to self-govern—that is, to choose which ends they want to pursue. In the narrower RA context, it constitutes *a norm of respecting the patrons' right to self-determination vis-à-vis their reading*.

Respecting the right to self-determination entails opposition to paternalism, a form of “interference with a person’s liberty of action” that is “justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced” (Dworkin 1972, 65). Such interference would seem to be in obvious tension with the public library’s mission to promote and preserve collective self-government, although the RA literature does not generally appeal to that mission in even its most anti-paternalist passages. Rather, contemporary RA is especially concerned with historical examples of cultural coercion in the library, such as early RA’s didactic attempts to elevate mass tastes by leading readers away from fiction and towards nonfiction and non-narrative writing (Kimball 2006, 16; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer 2006, 11). As I noted earlier, contemporary RA redefines itself in firm opposition to the RA that blossomed in the 1920s, which Melanie Kimball (2006, 16) describes as having been “prescriptive in nature” with the aim of “[guiding] patrons into a directed, systematic program of reading for improvement.” In the first four editions of *Genreflecting*, Rosenberg (1982, 32) notes that “librarians are...castigated for providing books of poor literary quality” and identifies an unfortunate “pressure on [librarians] to be concerned with improving patrons’ tastes.” Her statements are a straightforward reminder that contemporary RA rejects the recommendation model to which the service once adhered (see Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer 2006, 211; Saricks, 2005, 4-7). In a discussion of that old approach to advising readers, Saricks (2005, 6) even notes explicitly that the traditional “moralistic, didactic tone” of the old RA “contrasts strikingly with that of the present.”

That advocates of contemporary RA object to efforts to elevate popular taste is no secret, but it is important to see that they do so in part because such efforts violate a norm of respect for

autonomy. That is, on their view, attempted taste elevation constitutes a coercive intrusion into a patron's choice of reading material. In the RA literature, the principle of respecting the reader's autonomy frequently comes through in visions of the service as one dedicated to facilitating free choice. For example, in the sixth edition, Wiegand (2006, 12) stresses that the word "advisory" should be "defined to mean 'enabling choice' and not 'prescribing better' or 'elevating taste.'" In that same edition, Ross (2006, 28) writes that "[the] readers' advisor's job is to help narrow choices to a manageable number of suggestions that match the reader's stated interests and tastes." Of taste elevation, Orr (2013, 29) says in the seventh edition:

Trying to change a reader's book preferences or 'elevate their tastes,' as librarians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries used to say, does not work. Instead, modern libraries should *acquire a great variety of books* that can fit every taste and mood, *make these choices accessible*, and *let readers choose what appeals to them*. (emphasis mine)

Consistent with RA's foundational respect for autonomy and attendant commitment to enabling unobstructed choice, the *Genreflecting* series sometimes constructs contemporary RA as a kind of "matchmaking service" in which advisors serve as "the link between readers and books" (Ross, 2006, 25; Orr, 2013, 19). With striking similarity, Saricks (2005, 12) argues that "[readers'] advisors today see themselves as links between readers and books, just as reference librarians are the connection between users and informational materials" (emphasis original). Again, the focus here is on the librarians' positive duties with respect to the patron's basic right to self-determination.

Kimball's (2006, 15) brief history of RA in the sixth edition juxtaposes this present-day approach with the earlier phase of service in which "librarians saw it as their professional duty to be the arbiters of what constituted 'good' reading." Herald (2000) notes in the fifth edition that

while “critics, scholars, and even some librarians hope to elevate the tastes of the reading public, readers continue to read what they like” (p. xv, emphasis mine). The present-day readers’ advisor thus stands in defiance of snobby academics and (a minority of) unenlightened practitioners. That a large proportion of library patrons (i.e., ordinary readers) want popular fiction serves in the fifth edition as a justification for RA service:

As a gatekeeper, a librarian may question the value of dispensing the latest Stephen King horror novel or Catherine Coulter romance to eager patrons, or may wonder how to justify the expenditure of library funds on popular fiction. Yet it is in this capacity as a provider of genre fiction that librarians may be able to best serve their publics. Circulation figures consistently demonstrate that library users seek and use fiction collections as much or more than other parts of the library. (Herald 2000, xvii)

That is, the people want popular fiction, so they shall have popular fiction. It is not, on this view, the librarian’s place to intervene in that choice, even (and perhaps especially) if such intervention is performed for the reader’s own good. A principle of respect for autonomy would appear to underwrite RA’s rejection of the traditional gatekeeping role to which Herald refers: a (populist) impulse to serve the public eclipses the gatekeeper’s anxiety about “the value of dispensing” popular fiction. Unlike librarians on both sides of the historic fiction problem, present-day readers’ advisors do not take themselves to be “arbiters of what [constitutes] ‘good’ reading” (Kimball, 2006, 15). Instead, they serve as matchmakers between readers and reading material, deploying thoughtful techniques to identify patrons’ preferences and select several books that fit those preferences. Gone are paternalist concerns about improving readers’ tastes. In contemporary RA, the reader determines what is best for herself, and the advisor—subscribing to the autonomy principle—is called on both to respect and to expedite that determination.

2.4.2 *A Commitment to Egalitarianism*

Although egalitarian doctrines can take a number of different forms, they “tend to rest on a background idea that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status” (Arneson 2013). At its most general, egalitarianism typically refers to some principle of equality between persons that further entails treating individuals as being equal in terms of their basic moral worth. In contemporary RA, the egalitarian principle encompasses *a group of norms for treating all readers as equals and guarding against the undue influence of culturally elite tastes*. It can be roughly characterized as an anti-elitist commitment to the idea that all readers and their tastes are of equal (moral and aesthetic) worth.

The commitment to egalitarianism is related but not identical to the autonomy principle. Whereas the latter calls on readers’ advisors merely to respect the choices of individuals—to treat patrons as free persons with the right to read what they prefer—the egalitarian principle speaks to the *quality* of those choices. One can dutifully refrain from interfering with individuals’ decisions without taking those decisions to in fact be equally good. It is a commitment to egalitarianism, and not respect for autonomy, that forces a principle of equality between particular reading tastes.

If respect for autonomy undermines taste elevation as an intentional service objective, egalitarianism rules it out even as an incidental benefit of RA. Thus, RA’s commitment to egalitarianism is similarly visible in the systematic devalorization of taste elevation in the practical literature. Note, for instance, Rosenberg’s First Law of Reading (“never apologize for your reading tastes”), which is included in every edition of *Genreflecting*. Returning in the seventh edition to Rosenberg’s “somewhat defiant” First Law of Reading, Orr (2013, 54)

constructs “a corollary: ‘Be careful not to disparage anyone else’s reading tastes.’” She even suggests “taking this corollary a step further by praising readers whenever possible,” telling them, e.g., “‘You are one of our very best customers!’” or “‘You set such a good example by reading’” (Orr, 2016, 54). This is meant to help counteract the negative social messages patrons may have received about the value (or lack thereof) of reading the books they choose for pleasure.

Egalitarianism, in at least some instances, motivates a kind of aesthetic subjectivism, or the view that aesthetic value is “relative to the subjective feelings of audience members” (Young 2009, 224). An aesthetic subjectivist takes there to be no universal aesthetic standard to which one might appeal in an effort to guide a reader to better and better books. No book is better or worse than another apart from an individual reader’s assessment, and that assessment only has evaluative force for the reader herself. There is, further, no sound way to judge the quality of someone else’s aesthetic preferences, just so long as they are genuinely held. In short, all tastes are equally good and are therefore not the sort of thing that is apt for improvement. This is a common refrain in both the RA literature and classroom, one to which we will return in several of the upcoming chapters.

Ross (2006) provides the fullest endorsement of subjectivism in the sixth edition of *Genreflecting*, in which she claims that “it is now generally recognized that the term 'a good book' is relative to the particular reader" (25). The scope of “generally recognized” is not further delineated in context, although Ross does go on to suggest that when readers ask for a good book they “may mean a book to match my mood right now, or a book that suits my level of reading ability, or a book that speaks to my particular interests,” and so on (Ross 2006, 25). Ross

concludes that “unlike those earlier readers' advisors...intent on pushing the reader up the reading ladder from light fiction to 'serious' works, today's effective readers' advisor is nonjudgmental, values all kinds of reading, and takes the view that the reader, not the librarian, knows best what kind of reading experience is desired” (Ross 2006, 28). On Ross’s view, taste elevation is bound to a singular canon or reading ladder, one that devalues the popular literature so many library patrons enjoy. Given that such a hierarchy depends upon a universal aesthetic standard that Ross does not believe exists, she further objects to taste elevation on the grounds that it is conceptually confused.

Not all RA textbook authors take quite so relativist a stance with respect to aesthetic value, but the notion that readers’ advisors should avoid judging the tastes of others is pervasive. In fact, the word “nonjudgmental” appears at least ten times in Saricks’s (2005) influential book, while Crowley (2006, 38) notes in the *Readers’ Advisor’s Companion* that RA practitioners standardly endorse the view that judging the value of texts or their readers is morally wrong and, further, antithetical to the library’s democratic purpose. There are, however, occasional instances of somewhat less egalitarian judgment even in the core practical literature of RA. For instance, in a special section on the appeal of romance fiction included in the first four editions of *Genreflecting*, Rosenberg (1982, 127-8) claims that “devoted [romance] readers, blissfully unaware that their taste is lamentable, have ensured by their demand the steady supply of romantic fiction since Henry Richardson's *Pamela*.” Even here, however, Rosenberg may simply mean to say that the average reader does not care about the opinions of cultural elites who consider their taste lamentable.

Genuine egalitarianism is thought to obligate the readers' advisor to set aside their own taste in the course of recommending books to patrons. In her "Golden Rules of Readers' Advisory Service" (included in the seventh edition of *Genreflecting*), Orr (2013, 55) emphasizes the importance of setting one's own preferences aside when advising readers:

As tempting as it may be to talk about your favorite book or the book *you* are reading at the moment, Rule #1—It's Not About You—means that we have to put ourselves into our readers' shoes and try to understand what *they* might like, what *they* are in the mood for, what would appeal to *them*, and not necessarily what we ourselves enjoy—or even worse, what we think they *should* read. (emphasis original)

Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer's (2006) discussion of the Public Library Inquiry—a mid-century, Carnegie-funded investigation into the mission of the public library (Wiegand 2001)—provides further evidence for a foundational egalitarian commitment. The conclusion to the Public Library Inquiry argues "that the public library should relinquish the entertainment function" (Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer 2006, 13). However, Ross refers to the report's characterization of opposing librarians as an accurate description of present-day RA advocates: "[The dissenters] say that the public library's function is to give the people what they want whatever the nature and quality of the demand may be" (Ross 2006, 13, quoting Leigh 1950, 22). For readers' advisors, egalitarianism counts strongly in favor of giving readers what they want.

2.4.3 Reading is Good

Contemporary RA takes as one of its central tenets that reading is good, either intrinsically (i.e., in its own right) or instrumentally (i.e., in service of some other end). Put another way, *reading—as an activity—has some non-trivial value*, although there is not universal agreement on the precise nature of that value.

As I noted above, some prominent RA advocates argue that reading is intrinsically valuable. Saricks (2005, 1), for instance, holds that “[readers’] advisors and proponents of the service subscribe whole-heartedly to the philosophy that reading has intrinsic value.” In contrast with extrinsic (i.e., relational) value, intrinsic value is the value something has *in itself*. That is, “the distinction [is] between things which have their value in themselves and things which derive their value from some other source: intrinsically good versus extrinsically good things” (Korsgaard 1983, 170). To say that reading has intrinsic value is to claim that it is good to do for its own sake: reading is good in itself, and not (or not only) because it, e.g., produces pleasure or increases the reader’s empathic capacity. If this is right, then it is not difficult to see the basic value of a service dedicated to promoting reading *simpliciter*.

That said, it is not always clear that RA scholars and practitioners who refer to the “intrinsic value of reading” mean to deploy the term in its technical sense. Furthermore, RA advocates often appeal to some extrinsic value(s) of reading rather than intrinsic value. For example, the contributors to *Genreflecting* refer to a range of extrinsic values, including, e.g., pleasure production (in every edition), escapism (in editions 1-5 and 7), social bonding and community building (in editions 6 and 7), and psychological/therapeutic benefits (in edition 7). Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer (2006) cite reading’s capacity to develop literacy, while Shearer & Burgin (2001) stress the value of personal response to literature. To be clear, endorsing some extrinsic value(s) does not preclude the possibility that reading is also intrinsically valuable. There are other activities that we can reasonably argue possess both intrinsic and extrinsic values, so it may just be the case that these RA advocates take reading to be like, e.g., physical exercise. In any event, to perform RA in a way that is consistent with standard practice, one need

not endorse the claim that reading is intrinsically valuable, only that it is a reliable source of value worth promoting.

The consensus in the contemporary RA discourse is that the activity of reading is valuable (intrinsically and/or extrinsically) and that promoting it is an important function of the public library. There is even some indication that the goal of contemporary RA is to transform patrons into avid readers, or individuals who are disposed to read whenever they can. Orr (2013, 12) implies as much in the seventh edition of *Genreflecting* when she argues that “if readers have trouble finding good stories that they will find pleasurable, and potential readers who never find a pleasurable book will never become avid readers, then it follows that successfully suggesting a book to a reader is extremely important work.”

2.5 Regulative Ideals

Taken together, the three principles outlined in the previous section generate two regulative ideals for RA practice: *pure preference satisfaction* and *aesthetic neutrality*. I offer fuller accounts of each below.

2.5.1 The Pure Preference Satisfaction Model

The three-principle framework gives rise to what I have termed the ‘pure preference satisfaction model’ (hereafter referred to as the PPSM). This is the dominant recommendation model guiding best practices in contemporary RA. It is a “preference satisfaction” model because it dictates that, in formulating and issuing book recommendations, readers’ advisors seek to fulfill the reader’s standing preferences. The modifier “pure” calls attention to the valorization of preference satisfaction above any and all other potential ends we might be tempted to impose upon the reader, such as education or aesthetic taste elevation. Put another way, matching readers

to books that conform to their tastes is a regulative ideal of RA service. Ultimately, the PPSM holds that readers' advisors are called on to satisfy patrons' existing reading preferences without judging or aiming to alter those preferences.

The PPSM arises from the three principles detailed above. The autonomy principle calls on advisors to (1) refrain from interfering in the (non-injurious) decision-making of their patrons and (2) to assist them in their efforts towards self-determination. The commitment to egalitarianism mandates that advisors treat all readers' and their tastes as being of equal value, such that taste in particular books or genres is not an apt object of either praise or criticism.¹⁸ The third principle asserts that reading is a worthwhile activity (i.e., intrinsically or relationally good) and thus warrants active pursuit and promotion.

The PPSM is a direct manifestation of these three principles. Because we ought to treat readers as autonomous individuals with tastes that are beyond reproach, and because we have an ethical duty to promote the good (in this case, the act of reading), readers' advisors must aim to recommend to a reader only those books the advisor has good reason to believe will satisfy the reader's current preferences. No longer can practitioners seek to change the character of those preferences (that is, to elevate the reader's tastes) as this would violate both the autonomy and egalitarian principles. Furthermore, recommendation efforts should be geared towards promoting reading as an activity rather than particular (or particular sorts of) books. The PPSM—which is consistent with the “matchmaking service” depiction of RA presented elsewhere in the literature—is in a sense the natural by-product of a specific moral framework that forms the basis for Readers' Advisory service.

¹⁸ In contrast, a taste for reading as a preferred leisure activity is in fact deemed an apt object of praise (recall, for instance, Orr's [2013, 54] suggestion that advisors “[praise] readers whenever possible”).

Given this model, it makes sense that the RA literature often reframes aesthetic preferences as “leisure reading needs” that the readers’ advisor is obligated to fulfill, in much the same sense as the reference librarian has a duty to satisfy their patron’s information needs without judging them. The project of RA thus becomes robustly empirical, because “[in] order to meet the needs of fiction readers, library staff providing readers’ advisory service need to understand readers” (Shearer & Burgin 2001, 66).

Two additional features of this model are worth noting here. One is that the PPSM is fundamentally *relativist*, in the sense that it yokes aesthetic value exclusively to the individual reader’s experience (or, perhaps more accurately, the reader’s assessment of that experience). The second is that the PPSM reifies a kind of preference utilitarianism, wherein the goodness of any particular action is judged by the degree to which it satisfies some agent’s interests or preferences. Preference utilitarianism can be contrasted with classical utilitarianism in that it does not take the pleasure of individuals to be morally salient. That is, “[utilitarians] who adopt this theory of value...claim that an agent morally ought to do an act if and only if that act maximizes desire satisfaction or preference fulfillment, regardless of whether the act causes sensations of pleasure” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2015). This is an important distinction for RA, the literature of which often appeals to pleasure production. Indeed, RA is even sometimes cashed out in terms of the promotion of *pleasure* reading. However, given its principle commitments to autonomy and equality, contemporary RA generates a preference utilitarian model rather than a classically utilitarian or hedonistic one. I take it this is partly the result of a firmly held belief that the readers’ preferences are the best guide to what will bring them pleasure, but it has a

somewhat counterintuitive result: As an advisor, I ought not recommend books I strongly suspect will give you pleasure if they clearly deviate from your stated preferences.

It is perhaps then somewhat predictably the case that there is evidence to suggest that library staff have often failed to adhere to the PPSM. Shearer's 1996 study of RA service in North Carolina libraries—described here by *NoveList* founder Duncan Smith—reveals as much:

[Students] enrolled in a public library administration course at North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Sciences...entered a library and made the following statement: "I enjoyed Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and would like something like it. Can you help me?" In at least 50 percent of the cases, the "patrons" received no assistance when they sought help in finding a good book to read. Another 30 percent of the students were told by the librarian to read book X, book Y, or book Z. One staff member recommended Knowles's *A Separate Peace* because she was currently reading this book and it reminded her of Lee's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel. In only 20 percent of cases did a staff member attempt to discover something about the reader's experience of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. (Smith 2001, 60-1)

Smith further notes that a second, New York-based study by May et al. (2000) generated similar results, quoting from the authors' conclusion that their "findings under-scored that a non-methodical, informal, and serendipitous response was the norm to a patron's request for a 'good read'" (May et al. 2000, 43, quoted in Smith 2001, 62).

That library staff sometimes deviate from the PPSM in practice does little on its own to undermine the model (either descriptively or normatively); more immediately, it would seem to justify better and more consistent RA education. However, these departures should also serve as an important reminder that we must be cautious when inferring things about practice from the dominant discourse of contemporary Reader's Advisory. The potential for misalignment between theory and practice is especially pronounced in RA because many individuals who function as

readers' advisors have never taken an RA-specific course or received any other formal training. Further, as Crowley (2014, 38) argues, it seems likely that RA practice sometimes grows out of advisors' tacit knowledge, which is "poorly reflected in contemporary RA knowledge literature." I will return to the subject of practical deviations from theory in chapters three and four.

2.5.2 A Secondary Principle of Neutrality

Together, principles (1) and (2) gives rise to a secondary principle of neutrality—or, put another way, a liberal neutrality constraint for RA. Just as it is often argued that the democratic state should "remain neutral with respect to reasonable conceptions of the good life" (Husak 2000, 97), the present-day readers' advisor, by virtue of their other commitments, *must remain neutral with respect to diverse conceptions of the aesthetic good.*

It is worth noting here that librarianship has a heavily freighted legacy of purported political and institutional neutrality.¹⁹ Mark Alfino & Linda Pierce (2001, 473) maintain that there is a causal-historical relationship between the early development of RA and the modern librarian's professional commitment to neutrality; they argue that the "difficulty concerning personal judgment" faced by early-20th century readers' advisors "was one of the contributing factors in the now institutionalized and codified stance of professional neutrality regarding information." Subsequently, "[the] skills of the librarian became less dependent upon any ability to discern but rather upon technical skills of retrieval" (Alfino & Pierce 2001, 474). This shift is reflected not only in reference services but also in contemporary RA, which focuses a great deal of attention on refining the tools and techniques utilized by readers' advisors to successfully match patrons to books. In fact, "[the] problem for [today's] readers' advisors becomes one of more consistently

¹⁹ See Jaeger et al. (2013), Lewis (2008), Samek (2001; 1996), Josey (1973), Berninghausen (1972), and Foskett (1962), among others.

identifying [the appeal of books] so that we can work better with readers” (Saricks 2005, 42), rather than one of identifying those books we judge to be morally and/or aesthetically valuable in a universal sense.

In addition to a causal-historical relationship, there is a theoretical relationship between neutrality and the core principles of RA. Because readers’ advisors have a duty to respect the decision-making capacities of their patrons (i.e., the autonomy principle) and because they must treat all readers as equals (i.e., the egalitarian principle), they must be able to adopt the critical criteria of their patrons without attempting to evaluate the good- or bad-making features of those criteria. This constitutes a commitment to agnosticism with respect to patrons’ differing conceptions of the aesthetic good. Of the widely-accepted principle of state neutrality, Wall (2001) writes that “the state should not favor (or disfavor) any permissible non-neutral conception of the good or give greater (or lesser) assistance to those who pursue it.” The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the readers’ advisor; however, Wall further notes several ambiguities in this characterization, as well as “an important tension between the principle of state neutrality, on its most widely accepted understanding, and strongly egalitarian conceptions of social justice” (Wall 2001, 390). I will expand upon this tension and, more generally, on RA’s secondary principle of neutrality in chapter four.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that, in order to engage in an informed ethical analysis of contemporary Readers’ Advisory, we first needed to identify the service’s core moral principles. To that end, I have drawn on a close reading of RA textbooks to discern a framework of three principles currently underpinning best practices in RA: a principle of respect for autonomy; a

principle of egalitarianism; and a commitment to the claim that reading is valuable (often, though not always) in itself. The three-principle framework outlined here—along with the regulative ideals of pure preference satisfaction and aesthetic neutrality that it generates—forms the jumping-off point for the next section of the dissertation, which lays out three normative critiques of contemporary RA. Aspects of the moral framework guiding RA are implicated in each of these, as are the PPSM and secondary principle of neutrality. As the following three chapters will make clear, contemporary RA faces a number of burdensome conceptual and moral problems. These ultimately illustrate that the service, as theorized, is not merely in need of a new *post hoc* rationale or trivial revision but of substantial transformation.

CHAPTER 3: READERS' ADVISORY AS A PRESCRIPTIVE PROJECT

3.1 Introduction²⁰

In chapter two, I argued that the framework of moral principles underpinning contemporary RA gives rise to a liberal neutrality constraint, or a norm of remaining impartial with respect to differing conceptions of the aesthetic good. In virtue of their foundational principles, readers' advisors are called on to accept at face-value the tastes and concomitant selection criteria of their patrons. The regulative ideal in RA is a kind of aesthetic fluidity that ostensibly allows advisors to successfully match readers to books; as Catherine Sheldrick Ross (2001, 20) puts it, "the role of the library" is not to guide patrons towards "different/better/more challenging/or more diverse materials" but rather "to acquire a variety of books for every reading taste and mood and then help readers in the tricky process of finding those books that match their own preferences." On this view, there is no space in RA for critiquing or aiming to improve upon any aspect of a patron's taste—that is, on their inclination to derive dis/pleasure from certain (or certain kinds of) works. The view essentially presupposes that the reader appears in the library fully formed, with an established set of preferences the readers' advisor must aim to identify and satisfy.

This dominant conception of contemporary RA is a seemingly populist one wherein ordinary readers determine the direction the service takes. The advisor serves not as a cultural gatekeeper but rather as a kind of aesthetic matchmaker, discerning the reader's tastes through conversation and then recommending a selection of titles consistent with those tastes. The readers' advisor is

²⁰ This chapter includes material previously published by the author — see: Lawrence, E. 2017. "Is Contemporary Readers' Advisory Populist? Taste elevation and ideological tension in the *Genreflecting* series." *Library Trends* 65 (4): 491-507. The copyright owner has provided permission to reprint.

there to listen to the reader, to draw them out, to make connections between what the reader says and what books might appeal to them. Readers' advisors are friendly and knowledgeable, patient and caring, approachable and nonjudgmental. As Keren Dali (2013, 521) notes, "a librarian's personal opinion can be a bonus in the RA conversation insofar as it is expressed in a non-imposing, casual way and positioned as just that — a personal opinion rather than an expert, prescriptive recommendation." The readers' advisor thus takes a stance of non-expertise with respect to aesthetic judgment.

Contemporary RA's pervasive discomfort with aesthetic prescriptivism is perhaps best encapsulated by its internal dispute surrounding the word "recommendation." Joyce Saricks, for instance, holds that readers' advisors *suggest* titles rather than *recommend* them:

Although the distinction between *suggest* and *recommend* may seem a trivial question of semantics, our terminology preference is important. We provide far better readers' advisory service when we stop using these words interchangeably. When we talk with friends, we likely *recommend* titles we want them to read, based on our personal knowledge of their interests or perhaps because we want them to read and then discuss that particular book with us. When we work with readers in a library, we talk with them about what they might enjoy reading. We then *suggest* a range of books that might appeal to them, based on what they have said about their reading tastes, interests, and moods. (2005, 75-6, emphasis original)

Saricks maintains that readers are more comfortable rejecting a suggestion than a recommendation, meaning the term more effectively enables and facilitates reader choice. As an empirical claim, this may well be accurate. 'Suggest' does sound somehow softer and more tentative than 'recommend.' Yet there is not a true conceptual distinction between the two. After all, I can certainly recommend "a range of books that might appeal to [a reader], based on what they have said about their reading tastes, interests, and moods" or suggest to a friend what I

“want them to read, based on [my] personal knowledge of their interests.” A recommendation is, at base, a kind of argument founded on a prediction—e.g., “I suspect you will enjoy books that share x characteristics; here, read these books with x characteristics.” Whether a prediction is based on prior personal knowledge of the reader or a recent conversation with a stranger makes no difference to the fundamental form of the argument. Similarly, the force or indelicacy with which a recommendation is administered has no conceptual import. The semantic quibble thus seems to bottom out in largely pragmatic considerations—a question of etiquette and its consequences—as well as an anti-prescriptivist sensibility that thrives in this particular community of practice

That sensibility notwithstanding, I contend in this chapter that RA service (*contra* the dominant view) continues to serve prescriptive purposes within the library, operating at the tension point between populism and elitism. Following an introduction to the relevant ideological conflict, I go on to elucidate four prescriptive functions of contemporary RA—functions aimed, directly or indirectly, at improving the reader: RA (1) performs a canonizing function within a newly expanded literary field, (2) seeks to inculcate in patrons a preference for reading over other potential recreational activities, (3) endeavors to improve readers’ powers of aesthetic prediction, and (4) aims to expand patrons’ aesthetic taste through exposure to different kinds of books. Given these functions, I argue that, in spite of its expressed opposition to universal aesthetic judgments and elitist taste elevation, contemporary RA remains a robustly prescriptive project caught at the center of an irresolvable ideological dilemma foundational to modern librarianship. I conclude that inattention to this dilemma in the RA context has systematically obscured the normative complexity of the contemporary service and,

consequently, restricted the scope of meaningful debate largely to practical and prudential considerations rather than ethical or aesthetic ones.

3.2 Ideological Tension: Populism and Elitism

In her influential study of ideological change in librarianship, sociologist Evelyn Geller (1984, xix) defines three “major sources of potential value and role conflict” within the library profession. The first of these foundational dilemmas is a *populist/elitist* conflict “between the tastes of professionals and sponsors and the more popular taste for bestsellers of little literary value or lasting interest” (1984, xix). The second is a *neutrality/advocacy* dilemma that appears in the tension between the librarian’s obligation to adopt a nonpartisan stance with respect to political, moral, and epistemic disputes, and social responsibilities that sometimes count against neutrality. The final dilemma, *freedom/censorship*, “involves the attitude toward deviant ideas outside the framework of conventional debate” (1984, xix).

Geller’s three foundational dilemmas facilitate a productive approach to ideological tension in the library field, one that Christine Pawley (2003) deploys to great effect in her article “Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling.” One can refer to the original source (Geller, 1984, xix) or to Pawley (2003, 428) for a full exegesis of all three dilemmas. While my focus here is primarily on the conflict between populism and elitism, it is worth noting that each of the dilemmas is pertinent in its own way to the theory and practice of contemporary RA and will thus be implicated in the critiques articulated in future chapters.

As noted above, the populist/elitist dilemma arises from the persistent clash between mass and culturally elite tastes in the public library. On the one hand, librarians are public servants who seek to serve the needs of their communities and promote intellectual freedom; on the other,

they are cultural gatekeepers employed by a state apparatus charged with cultivating an informed citizenry. The librarian can never fully embrace one of these roles over the other without undermining core values or abdicating professional responsibility.

Commonly known as the *fiction problem* or *fiction question*, the classic late-nineteenth-century debate about whether, which, and to what extent fiction ought to be included in public library collections provides what is perhaps the canonical manifestation of this ideological tension. A relatively brief account of the fiction problem will help illustrate the populist/elitist dilemma, but it also serves as helpful background for the ensuing discussion of contemporary RA's prescriptivism.

The fiction problem materialized against the backdrop of industrialization and the attendant proliferation of mass literacy and inexpensive books. These large-scale changes—and the popular literature they brought about—provoked anxiety in cultural elites who, according to historian Dee Garrison (1979, 69), “were aware that one effect of the growth of mass literacy and popular culture would be to decentralize the influence once held by a small group over American letters.” Garrison describes enormous tension between the value system endorsed by literary conservatives (“a fusion of ascetic Protestantism and democratic capitalism” [71]) and “the reality of mass tastes” (68). Whereas the former counted in favor of a public library that served a purely educational function, the latter implicated that library in an emergent middle-class leisure culture.

Nineteenth-century librarians unsuccessfully endeavored to limit fiction reading as best they could, employing two-book systems (i.e., patrons could check out two books, but one of them had to be a nonfiction title) and policies that delayed the purchase of popular fiction titles until

several months after their publication, such that readers' enthusiasm for them had time to cool (Carrier 1965). Some libraries also used their newly open stacks to further deter patrons from reading fiction, as when the Los Angeles Public Library "opened stacks for nonfiction" in 1897, "but kept novels 'behind the rail'" (Wiegand 2015, 79). We can read these efforts to suppress fiction circulation as part of a larger project aimed at maintaining cultural values under threat, particularly patriarchal and Protestant values. Those who feared the purported effects of fiction were almost inevitably thinking of its effects on women and children, with the former making up the majority of novel readers. As Janice Radway (1997, 144) argues, "the debate over books and reading was a heavily gendered debate in the sense that cultural conservatives always associated the threat of cheap fiction and passive reading with the dangers of 'aimless,' 'indolent,' and 'ardent' femininity."

Literary traditionalists perceived novels as a dangerous distraction from more disciplined reading, or that which focused primarily on substantive works of nonfiction. Of course, despite this worry, those librarians who advocated what library historian Esther Carrier (1965) calls the "generous inclusion" of fiction did in fact prevail. However, it is important to recognize that even those who endorsed the inclusion of (some) popular works "would not tolerate the presence of immoral or vicious books, and agreed that libraries should not supply poor books" (Carrier 1965, 44). Relatedly, Wayne Wiegand (2015) notes that library leaders, while they may have disagreed on the value of particular titles, largely subscribed to what has been called the "library faith," or the belief "that by bringing the public to printed works that contained reliable information and useful knowledge, the public library would inevitably contribute to progress and social

order” (75–76). On both sides of the fiction problem, library faith retained a kind of bipartisan appeal.

Where advocates of generous inclusion often diverged from their more conservative peers was in the increased humility that accompanied their aesthetic verdicts, and their conviction that “there was no use in furnishing only books so good that they would not be read” (Carrier 1965, 44). These librarians acknowledged the state of mass taste, and inferred from it an obligation to help members of the public climb the proverbial “reading ladder, elevating reading taste and gradually leading the reader from lower to higher sorts of books” (Ross, 1987, 150). This involved beginning at a given reader’s present “rung” and slowly climbing up through a stable literary hierarchy, with historical, philosophical, and theological works at the top.

While there were those who saw special value in fiction reading—for example, in its capacity to soothe the weary worker and divert attention from more objectionable activities (Carrier 1965, 76–77)—the basic premise of generous inclusion was that it would facilitate an effective taste elevation project that began with readers as they were presently constituted. Still, the victory of popular fiction in the public library can largely be attributed to the patrons who overwhelmingly preferred it from the very start. Fiction accounted for “65 to 75 percent of books circulated at the turn of the century” (Wiegand, 2015, 89), and after a certain point there was simply no putting the genie back in the bottle. Generous inclusion represented a rather pragmatic approach to the undeniable state of mass taste, but it did not signal a resolution to the core ideological dilemma. Taste elevation as a conceit and eventual RA service objective largely served to reassert the natural superiority of the tastes of cultural elites, even as it justified significantly more populist collection development practices.

As we saw in chapter two, the contemporary ideology of RA entails opposition to these (and other) efforts to elevate patrons' tastes in books. Yet the egalitarian turn in RA has not in fact resolved Geller's dilemma. I hold that, despite their explicit deference to the tastes of the ordinary reader, contemporary readers' advisors perform certain prescriptive functions— aspects of which they share with their forebears—as expert intermediaries between elite and mass tastes. In the following sections, I explicate four of these functions in order to make clear the ways in which RA continues to serve as a robustly prescriptive project, one that is ultimately aimed at improving library patrons.

3.3 Performing the Canonizing Function

As library historian and bibliographer Don Krummel (1988) notes, “correctly or ill-advisedly, for better or worse, printed bibliographies ‘canonize’ the literature, as they hold it still in a historical instant” (244). Although contemporary RA has dispensed with the “reading courses” of the past, it continues to produce no shortage of bibliographies. The textbook and reference guide *Genreflecting*, for instance, is in large part composed of printed lists of suggested authors and titles, and therefore constitutes what Krummel has termed a “canonic bibliography.” The criteria for inclusion in *Genreflecting*, however, are meant to capture popularity—associated here with likely enjoyment—and not aesthetic value. In fact, Betty Rosenberg draws this distinction in the first four editions of the book. “[One] criterion for inclusion in this guide,” she notes, “is sheer quantity [of titles published by an author], *not necessarily linked to quality*” (1982, 21, emphasis mine).

This distinction falls away in the post-Rosenberg editions, although the criteria for inclusion do not change much over the course of the series. These criteria include prolificacy of the author,

practical availability of the title, and the existence of some established fanbase. Occasionally “authors are included who have written only a few novels that have made a tremendous impact on their specific genre or who are relatively new authors who are popular or show marked promise” (Herald 2000, xxii). That is, authors who have made a big splash in their corner of the literary marketplace are sometimes included even if they have not (or have not yet) published many books.

None of the criteria listed above appeal directly to any universal aesthetic standard. Instead, they emphasize popularity among ordinary readers, which is presumed to have some predictive power. These criteria for inclusion in a canonic bibliography might then strike us as maximally populist: they are meant to track what many readers already enjoy rather than identify titles that readers *ought* to enjoy.

However, even if contemporary readers’ advisors explicitly dispense with the universal aesthetic standard, they remain engaged in practices of (a) selecting evaluative standards (or alternative criteria for canonization) with real implications for patrons’ access and reading patterns and (b) rejecting their role as aesthetic judge while appealing to proxy measures for aesthetic value. With regard to the latter, the sixth and seventh editions of *Genreflecting* include symbols next to titles that suggest certain markers of quality, such as literary awards, movie and television adaptations, and the “respect” of genre readers. Indeed, in the seventh edition Cynthia Orr (2013) writes that “winning an award doesn't necessarily mean that a book is a great read...but it's a good indication” (46). The claim that readers’ advisors are no longer “arbiters” of aesthetic value has significantly less force if the buck is passed—that is, if librarians simply defer to other cultural authorities for their aesthetic verdicts.

3.4 Cultivating a Preference for Reading

Much of the most explicit anti-elitism in the literature of contemporary RA is aimed at taste elevation. Insofar as readers' advisors have abandoned the practice of directing patrons to better and better books (in accordance with some purportedly universal aesthetic or moral standard), they have taken the service in a distinctly more populist direction. As Michael Gorman (2000, 22) puts it, "[the] ethos of the modern public library seems to be in direct conflict with the ideas of discriminating selection and elevating taste," and nowhere is this normative shift more readily evident than in contemporary RA service for adults.

Yet the concept of taste elevation need not be limited to improvements in one's taste for specific books or genres. Taste—understood here as aesthetic preferences rooted in our sentimental responses (Hume 1757)—may target any number of objects or events, insofar as these invoke aesthetic perception. In the case of RA, taste elevation is no longer primarily about improving one's taste in reading material (although, as we shall see in a subsequent section, this remains an implicit goal for many practitioners). RA is instead fundamentally about improving one's taste *in leisure activities*.

Contemporary RA scholars and practitioners agree that recreational reading is valuable (intrinsically or extrinsically) and that promoting it is an important function of the public library. For instance, Dali (2015, 485) notes both that "the reading process and the reading act have inherent goodness and merit" and that "access to reading materials, freedom to read and various types of literacy form one of the foundations of civil society and democracy." There is even some indication that the goal of contemporary RA is to transform patrons into avid readers, individuals who are disposed to read whenever they can. Orr (2013, 12) implies as much in the seventh

edition of *Genreflecting* when she argues that “if readers have trouble finding good stories that they will find pleasurable, and potential readers who never find a pleasurable book will never become avid readers, then it follows that successfully suggesting a book to a reader is extremely important work.” Here, the librarian’s ability to guide a patron to the right book at the right time might trigger that patron’s transformation into an avid reader. This, on Orr’s view, makes RA service itself particularly valuable.

At the very least, RA constitutes an effort to get the reluctant patron to read for pleasure and to support the patron who already does so (such that they will continue). In the first case RA is clearly meant to be transformative, and in both cases it is normative, in the sense that it promotes the idea that we ought to read recreationally. We should derive pleasure from reading, and deriving pleasure from reading is contingent on finding the right book. This is where the readers’ advisor comes in.

Ultimately, advisors hope their patrons will spend (more) time with books,²¹ but this inevitably means dedicating time to reading that could be spent doing something else. For example, let’s say that on a typical day I have three hours of leisure time. Generally speaking, I spend two of those hours woodworking and the third watching *Golden Girls* reruns. The rest of my time is consumed by my job, errands, meal preparation, eating, sleeping, and so on. In other words, those are not hours during which reading is feasible. In order to become a reader, I would need to reallocate a portion of my leisure time—time I would otherwise spend woodworking or watching *Golden Girls*—to reading books. At minimum, readers’ advisors think that this, *ceteris paribus*, is a thing that I should do because reading is valuable—even if all that means is that it

²¹ See, e.g., Dali (2014), Orr & Herald (2013), Smith & Young (2008), and Ross (2001).

has the capacity to bring me pleasure. Of course, my other leisure time pursuits also give me pleasure, so reading would need to be a superior pleasure producer in terms of its, e.g., intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, nearness or remoteness, fecundity, purity, or extent (Bentham 1789/2010, 22). Alternatively, it might be that some readers' advisors take a more Millian approach, in which reading is a form of higher pleasure—that is, it generates pleasure of a different kind than some of my other activities (Mill 1861/2005).

In any event, the goal to get me reading is inextricably bound to the idea that I ought to prefer reading books to doing something else, at least some of the time. Cultivating such a preference for reading is then about improving my taste in leisure activities. Further, if one agrees with Orr that RA is about turning people into avid readers, the strength of my preference will need to be quite strong such that I devote a much larger proportion of my recreational time to books. The upshot here is that taste elevation remains an essential part of RA, despite objections articulated in the RA literature. Rather than being a purely populist endeavor, contemporary RA is (probably unavoidably) a normative project aimed at improving and disciplining its users.

Notably, aspects of this project date back to the early decades of the modern public library. In his discussion of the founding of the Boston Public Library in 1852, Wayne Bivens-Tatum (2012) notes that the library's trustees held that the library should supply popular reading material "because they hoped providing such books would 'create a real desire for general reading...cultivate this desire among the young, and in the families' of as many Bostonians as possible" (108). Of course, the trustees of the BPL also believed that, once a preference for reading was firmly established, patrons would go on to read books of higher and higher quality also furnished by the library. This form of taste elevation has largely been abandoned in the

contemporary era, but the form directed at leisure activities remains just as vital to the project of RA as ever.

3.5 Improving Patrons' Aesthetic Predictions

The concept of appeal is a linchpin of contemporary RA. Appeal—often defined as “the feel of the book”—was first introduced by Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown in their classic 1989 publication, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*. Saricks has further developed the concept of appeal in subsequent editions of that title, as well as in her other work. In accordance with her formulation, readers' advisors express appeal in adjectival forms relating to five key aspects (or *appeal elements*) of literary works: pacing (e.g., fast, leisurely), characterization (e.g., quirky, realistic), storyline (e.g., thought-provoking, action-packed), style (e.g., ornate, stark), and tone (e.g., dark, romantic). The readers' advisor listens for appeal during RA conversations with readers, using it to match readers to books with the desired feel. Appeal terms and appeal-laden descriptions also directly assist leisure readers by giving them *a priori* access to the feel of particular books, such that these readers can determine if a given book will afford them the kind of reading experience they desire (be it dramatic or disturbing or romantic or what have you). Appeal, it is often said, takes the reader beyond mere plot summaries and subject headings. It is, in the parlance of the popular RA database NoveList, “the key to successful matchmaking” between readers and book, “the ‘chemistry’ of readers' advisory” (NoveList, n.d.).

“Most [recreational] readers,” writes Saricks, “are usually not looking for a book on a certain subject” but rather “a book with a particular feel” (Saricks 2005, 40). She subsequently makes the case for integrating adjectives for the “feel” of the book (i.e., appeal terms) into our plot summaries and book talks. These appeal terms do not replace but rather “enhance” other

metadata, thereby (in her words) “[revealing] more of the book’s essence” (Saricks 2005, 42). According to Saricks, the use of controlled appeal vocabularies in RA is really just a formalized procedure for something we already do instinctively: talk about books in terms of the way they make us feel. For instance, when I recently brought up Austin Chant’s paranormal romance novel *Peter Darling* in casual conversation, my description of what the book is about—Peter Pan returning to Neverland as an adult—was peppered with appeal terms. I noted that the set-up was original, that the tone was somewhat dreamy and surreal, that the story was shot through with a kind of melancholic nostalgia. That is, I described not just the text per se but my own experience of reading it. This, Saricks holds, is a standard way to think about and discuss the books we read in our leisure time.

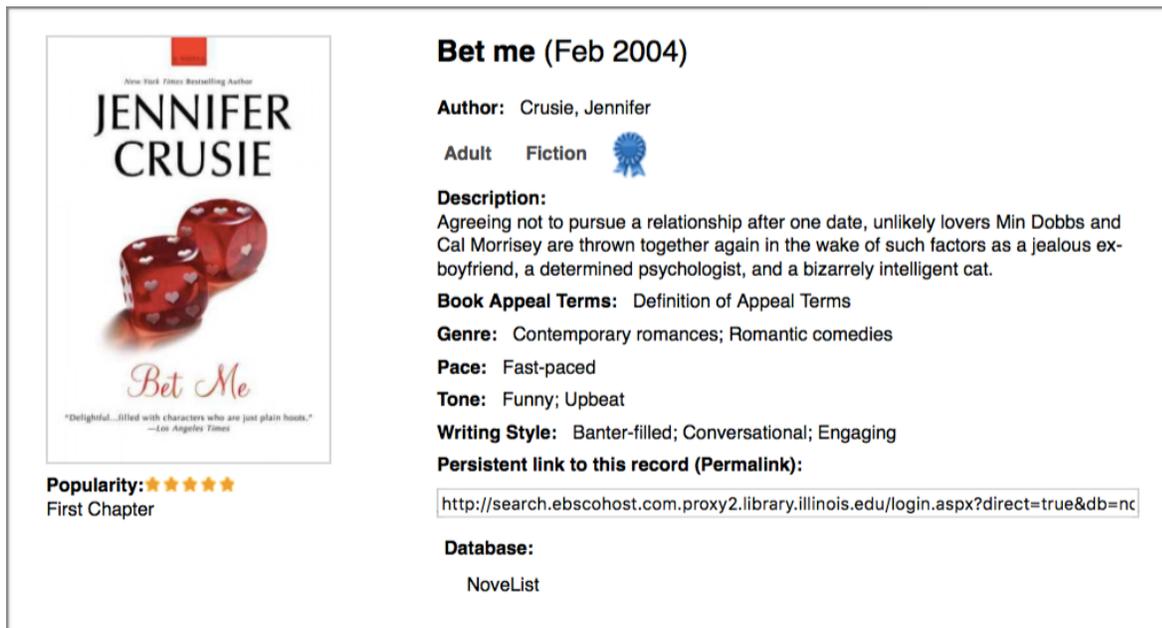
The trouble, conceptually-speaking, is in distinguishing between appeal terms and other terms related to the book’s form and content, since descriptors of this latter type clearly bear on the ways that we respond to the book—that is, on how reading a book makes us feel. In fact, Dali (2013, 2014) has argued that no robust distinction exists between, e.g., subject headings and traditional appeal terms, and that the concept of appeal ought to therefore be expanded to accommodate all such descriptive terminology.²² She concludes that the traditional distinction between appeal and other data about the book is artificial, precisely because we cannot “claim with any degree of certainty that the reader responds to” one rather than the other (2013, 480).

However, I hold that this line of reasoning mistakenly presumes that appeal captures something like “all features that might appeal to a reader,” rather than some otherwise-distinct

²² “Skillfully chosen [subject headings],” she writes, such as sadness or farce, “may reflect appeal” just as genre conventions and appeal elements can at times “converge” (Dali 2013, 479).

subclass of features to which readers respond (or, if one prefers internalism about such things, features of that response).

Let us take, for instance, Jennifer Crusie's popular contemporary romance novel *Bet Me*. According to its NoveList record (see Figure 1), part of the appeal (in the Saricksian sense) of Crusie's modern-day fairytale is its upbeat tone and its conversational and engaging style. Few would deny that (a) the book also qualifies as a romantic comedy (its genre), (b) that it deals with wagers and dating (two of its subject headings), or (c) that a reader might choose to read the book on the basis of any of these facts about it.



Bet me (Feb 2004)

Author: Crusie, Jennifer

Adult Fiction 

Description:
Agreeing not to pursue a relationship after one date, unlikely lovers Min Dobbs and Cal Morrisey are thrown together again in the wake of such factors as a jealous ex-boyfriend, a determined psychologist, and a bizarrely intelligent cat.

Book Appeal Terms: Definition of Appeal Terms

Genre: Contemporary romances; Romantic comedies

Pace: Fast-paced

Tone: Funny; Upbeat

Writing Style: Banter-filled; Conversational; Engaging

Persistent link to this record (Permalink):
<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nc>

Database:
NoveList

Popularity: ★★★★★
First Chapter

FIGURE 1. NOVELIST RECORD FOR *BET ME*

To be sure, once a reader knows its genre and subject, they might well infer that *Bet Me* will be upbeat and engaging, and this inference could motivate them to try out the book. But conceding that other, non-appeal metadata supports such inferences is not the same as saying—as Dali does of other similar examples—that the subject or genre *determines* the book's tone and style. Further, predicting that reader R will perceive work W as upbeat (as in cases where one

guesses on the basis of genre or subject) is different in kind from claiming that work W is in fact upbeat (as in cases where one simply applies an appeal term). This is one distinction that eludes an overly expansive conception of appeal as “all features of books that potentially appeal” to the reader.

While I agree with Dali that various other characteristics of the book bear on its appeal, it is critical to see that no list of formal elements, however meticulous, can supply us with sufficient conditions for the application of appeal terms. A romantic comedy about a man dating a woman on a bet (Crusie’s *Bet Me*) could just as easily be tonally melodramatic or cynical. Rather than conversational and engaging, its style might well be frank or sarcastic. In short, to know that *Bet Me* is upbeat, conversational, and engaging, one must discern that it is so.

This, I take it, is key to understanding what is special about appeal, and that is that appeal requires a certain sort of immediate sensitivity for its apprehension that subject and even genre do not. This is because there is no precise application of rules that will yield decisive verdicts with respect to appeal. This leads me to believe that appeal terms—as conceived by Saricks—are usually aesthetic terms, and their use in RA is as a kind of aesthetic metadata about literary works. Significantly, the application of aesthetic terms is traditionally understood as necessitating an “exercise of taste”—meaning, in this case, discernment or perceptual discrimination rather than patterns of aesthetic preference.

This would seem to be the source of Dali’s skepticism about the appeal/non-appeal distinction. As aesthetician Frank Sibley (1959) famously argues in his paper “Aesthetic Concepts,” we often justify the application of aesthetic terms by “referring to features which do not depend for their recognition upon an exercise of taste”—for example, we might say that a

painting is “delicate (an aesthetic term) because of its pastel shades and curving lines,” just as we might say, as Dali does, that the “menacing, foreboding atmosphere” of a story is due to the threat of “danger hanging over the head of” the protagonist (2013, 424). However, while some dependence relation exists here, a standard view in aesthetics and the philosophy of art is that, per Sibley, “there are no non-aesthetic features which serve as conditions for applying aesthetic terms” (1959, 424). In other words, aesthetic terms—and, by extension, appeal terms—are not condition-governed. There are no sufficient conditions for *Bet Me*’s upbeatness, which is, instead, an emergent property discernible by sensitive and immediate perception alone. This is, I take it, why Saricks speaks of “a sixth sense” for the feel of the book that readers’ advisors cultivate over time (Saricks 2005, 42).

Looking to Saricks’s original vocabulary of appeal (2005, 66) provides more evidence in support of this point. Compelling, engrossing, introspective, realistic, evocative, graceful, unembellished: these are features of works that can be explained with reference to, e.g., syntax, poetic diction, subject matter, or genre convention. Indeed, Saricks herself suggests a number of heuristics for applying these terms. Yet those formal elements cannot guarantee the presence of some appeal.²³ However in-depth the plot summary or extensive the subject cataloging, one still needs appeal terms (derived from direct experience of the literary work) to say anything decisive about the feel of the book.

Once one imports the appropriate philosophical language and background, it appears we can read Saricks as offering a kind of folk account of the aesthetic. Her proposed vocabulary, her efforts to get at the “feel” of the book, her understanding that terms for that feel are context-

²³ See Sibley (1959, 426).

dependent, and her suggestion that the readers' advisor look to professional critics for indications of appeal all count in favor of understanding appeal as something aesthetic. Appeal is powerful, in large part, because it provides us with an indication of the likely aesthetic effects of the book. This is critical to RA because, as has been noted elsewhere, readers select books to read for pleasure with an eye towards (among other things) aesthetic relevance—that is, the likelihood that a particular document will give rise to the desired aesthetic experience (Reuter 2007). This is the user need that aesthetic metadata (that is, appeal) fills in RA.

If we understand appeal as aesthetic, it is no great leap to suggest that readers' advisors must exhibit heightened sensitivity to the aesthetic features of literary works not only to correctly apply appeal terms, but to translate between the statements of their patrons and the appeal terminologies with which the advisor is conversant. The advisor's aesthetic sensitivity sets them apart from many, if not most, of the readers who seek out their assistance. An aesthetic account of appeal thus lays the groundwork for a librarian-reader dynamic that is somewhat less egalitarian than RA scholars and practitioners might hope, for it is readers' advisor's powers of discernment—and not merely, for instance, their extensive knowledge of popular literature—that make them experts in the provision of RA services.

Further, the advisor's desire to train readers up to make them better at selecting books independently (consistent with the commitment to respect for autonomy) necessarily involves improving the reader's aesthetic discernment and, consequently, their powers of prediction. This is part of what we seek to bring about when we engage readers in iterative conversations about what they enjoy. Ross (2001, 21) argues that “the successful matching of book to reader requires a lot of meta-knowledge about books, genres, authors, publishers, etc., that inexperienced readers

lack,” but “at every stage from the acquisition of the book to the readers’ advisory process of getting the book into the hands of the reader, libraries can help novice readers by supplying the meta-knowledge.” I agree with Ross here, but would add that, insofar as appeal is part of “the successful matching of book to reader,” this process of assisting novice readers also requires improving aesthetic sensitivity (among other things) such that they can make their own determinations about appeal. Otherwise, the advisor would be in the business of simply issuing aesthetic recommendations without providing readers with the skills they need (1) to evaluate those recommendations and (2) to independently select books in accordance with their own aesthetic judgments.

3.6 Expanding Patrons’ Tastes

In December 2014, *Book Riot*—a popular book news and review website—debuted its now-annual Read Harder challenge. The idea was fairly straightforward: participants would work to complete 24 reading tasks in the new year designed to “inspire [them] to pick up books that represent experiences and places and culture that might be different from [their] own” (Manwill 2014). Tasks on that very first list included reading “a book published by an indie press,” “a book by or about someone that identifies as LGBTQ,” “a microhistory,” “a book published before 1850,” “a romance novel,” and “a book that you would consider a guilty pleasure” (with the note: “Read, and then realize that good entertainment is nothing to feel guilty over”) (Manwill 2014). Subsequent challenges for 2016 and 2017 have included reading, e.g., “a debut novel,” “a book over 500 pages long,” “a nonfiction book about feminism or dealing with feminist themes,” and “a book wherein all point-of-view characters are people of color” (Manwill 2015; 2016). Participants are encouraged to share reading plans, book selections, and recommendations on

social media, as well as to join a *Book Riot*-administered group on the communal reading recommendation platform GoodReads. However, there are no prizes for completing the challenge. As Manwill has noted in their yearly announcement:

We encourage you to push yourself, to take advantage of this challenge as a way to explore topics or formats or genres that you otherwise wouldn't try. But this isn't a test. No one is keeping score and there are no points to post. We like books because they allow us to see the world from a new perspective, and sometimes we all need help to even know which perspectives to try out. That's what this is – a perspective shift – but one for which you'll only be accountable to yourself.

Some prominent public libraries—e.g., the New York Public Library, the DC Public Library, the Seattle Public Library, and the Richmond Public Library—as well as several smaller community libraries have “accepted the challenge” on their websites. Acceptance can involve a range of activities, including (but not limited to) publicizing the Read Harder challenge on the library's website and social media accounts, producing curated lists of recommended titles for each of the prescribed categories, integrating the challenge into preexisting reading programs for youth, and hosting in-person book discussion and check-in events to encourage readers to continue working through the list of reading tasks.

The purpose of this and other reading challenges is (at least) two-fold: first, these challenges attempt to motivate individuals to read; second, they encourage individuals to read books they might not otherwise choose. In the Read Harder challenge, reading is not just a way to derive aesthetic pleasure: it is an activity that enriches our perspectival knowledge, reveals to us new worlds and ways of seeing. It is important to understand that this is not merely an empirical claim about the value of reading, but a claim about *how we ought to choose the books we read*. Implicit in these Read Harder instructional posts is a further proposition: good readers read

widely. They endeavor to expose themselves to a varied range of books. They stretch outside of their comfort zones—not because of the promise of some external reward, but because this is what they genuinely want to do.

While the literature of contemporary RA typically endorses a pure preference satisfaction model, RA practitioners' recent participation in and advocacy for reading challenges belie that endorsement. It is certainly true that readers' advisors have long since dispensed with the proverbial "reading ladder," a purportedly objective hierarchy of literary value, ascending from low to high quality works (Ross 1987). It is also true that they rarely speak in terms of "taste" or its "elevation" (except, of course, when describing the days of service past). However, in practice, RA continues to concern itself with readers' aesthetic dispositions. As Adult Services Librarian and RA columnist Neil Hollands writes in a response to Dilevko & Magowan's scathing 2007 critique of contemporary RA and its ostensible role in the commodification of literature:

The goal [of Readers' Advisory] is not to provide only books that exactly match every single preference [of the reader], but to make sure that the collection of books we suggest to the reader on the whole will address their interests and needs. A good readers' advisor provides some books that are right down the middle of the reader's interests, and others that *provide room for small stretches in new, but related, directions*. (Holland 2007, 129, emphasis mine)

Here, Holland endorses an RA that exposes the reader to books that may not satisfy their immediate preferences, but which call on them to try something a little different: to engage with art that challenges the reader. This is a conceit reminiscent of Manwill's introduction to the Read Harder challenge: "sometimes we all need help to even know which perspectives to try

out” (2015; 2016). Holland’s ideal RA is one that takes on the responsibility of providing that help.

Anecdotally, RA practitioners seem to accept the idea that advisors give recommendations partly to expand a reader’s outlook. However, an expansion-friendly approach is typically not taken to be in conflict with practitioners’ commitments to maximizing reader autonomy and guarding against the undue influence of culturally elite tastes. This is likely because contemporary readers’ advisors do not see themselves as imposing a full-scale aesthetic project on their patrons: suggesting (often implicitly) that a patron “read harder” is, after all, not the same as forcing them to read particular books or discount others as “trash.” Moreover, the “small stretches” prescribed by the readers’ advisor should—at least on Holland’s view—be grounded in the reader’s established preferences.²⁴ Broadening efforts are not aimed at bringing readers one by one into line with some univocal Ideal Reader.

Admittedly, readers’ advisors might have any number of objectives in mind when they suggest that a patron try reading something new that deviates from that patron’s standing preferences. Perhaps the advisor has good reason to believe that a reader *would* enjoy a particular book if only that reader were willing to venture outside of their genre of choice. Or perhaps the advisor thinks it important for patrons to read books by and about marginalized characters, books they might not otherwise pick up (or indeed even hear about) on their own. Or maybe an advisor worries that a reader will simply run out of books that satisfy their current selection criteria and be left with nothing to read.

²⁴ It is perhaps worth noting that the same could be said for RA service in the 1920s and ’30s, which neither compelled patrons to utilize the service nor provided recommendations without first attending to the reader’s existing preferences. Readers’ advisors of the past formulated reading courses on the basis of an in-depth interview aimed at assessing the patron’s interests and reading level.

Each of these scenarios calls for “small stretches in new, but related, directions” (Hollands 2007, 129), and implicit in each is a story not merely of broadening but of betterment. In other words, even in the absence of a single, universal aesthetic hierarchy, actively exposing readers to different kinds of books is nonetheless aimed at improving their taste.²⁵ Although contemporary RA does not seek to promote a single set of ideal aesthetic preferences, broadening is meant to bring about other salutary effects—e.g., to widen the scope of books from which a reader might derive pleasure, to enrich a reader’s experiential knowledge through exposure to new perspectives, or to increase a reader’s empathy for people whose backgrounds and experiences differ from their own.

Ultimately, broadening is meant to improve readers even though Hollands’s “small stretches” are largely relativized to individual patrons and their interests. Broadening efforts are geared towards transforming readers into better versions of themselves: more open, less provincial or snobbish, willing to embark on a wider array of aesthetic experiences. They become readers who read what they want, but what they want is not constrained by their social location or cultural milieu. In some sense, contemporary RA advances a readerly ideal in stark opposition to the one that once animated traditional RA. Rather than gradually narrowing their taste so as to target a small subset of elite texts, contemporary readers work to expand their literary horizons, to transform themselves into value pluralists and aesthetic omnivores. In the end, taste expansion is a form of taste elevation, even if it differs in character from historical examples of the latter in RA service.

²⁵ Here, as in the rest of the dissertation, I take taste to refer to an individual’s persistent dispositions to find certain aesthetic objects pleasurable or displeasurable.

3.7 Conclusion

Contemporary RA is a robustly prescriptive project. Although the mechanisms and relevant ideals have changed, both traditional and contemporary RA were and are services geared towards improving library patrons. The purpose of this chapter has not been to subject RA's prescriptivism to scrutiny, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which the service remains caught in an enduring ideological conflict between elitism and populism in librarianship. Such conflict is built into the foundations of the profession; it is irresolvable and inescapable. However, as Pawley (2003) argues, perhaps the greatest danger ideological conflict poses is not in the conflict *per se*, but in our frequent "failure to acknowledge and come to terms with it," a failure that can lead us to "unconsciously [subvert] a fundamental belief to which most librarians adhere without reservation: support for citizen empowerment and democracy" (428). This ought to be a critical worry for RA given the state of the relevant scholarly and professional discourse and the degree to which that discourse obscures the services' normative complexity. Ignoring RA's prescriptivism does not make it any less prescriptive, but it does radically limit meaningful dialogue related to conflicting ethical and aesthetic imperatives.

The fundamental belief in democracy to which Pawley refers provides an additional justification for the project at hand, which interrogates theoretical inconsistencies and moral flaws in the dominant approach to Readers' Advisory service. To that end, the next chapter explores contemporary RA's standing moral obligations with respect to diverse books, wading into an ongoing political debate about the librarian's role in promoting narratives by and about members of oppressed social groups. That chapter asks, among other things, whether and when it might be morally permissible—or perhaps even morally required—for the library to intervene in

the tastes of its patrons, thus expanding the conversation around the ethical implications of prescriptivism in RA.

CHAPTER 4: THE PROBLEM OF OPPRESSIVE TASTES

4.1 Introduction

There is much to recommend about the present state of affairs in Readers' Advisory (RA), particularly when the service is considered in its historical context. Eschewing paternalism and cultural elitism, contemporary RA no longer functions as a(n overtly) disciplinary operation, seeking to inculcate in patrons a taste for nonfiction and highbrow sorts of works. Rather, it is a user-centered service committed to the primacy of the reader as an autonomous individual with their own tastes, values, and purposes; one that is dedicated to the idea that it is the "reader, not the critic, educator, librarian or another expert...who decides how 'good' reading material is" (Dali 2015, 485). Librarians are thus called on "to hone their readers' advisory skills so that they can match books to the reader's expressed preferences" (Ross 2009a, 654). Ultimately, these commitments stand in direct service of one fundamental objective: to get and to keep people reading.

As was discussed in chapter two, contemporary RA is thus agnostic with respect to patrons' tastes. Direct articulations of this agnosticism frequently call on readers' advisors to adopt an accommodating posture towards patrons' preferences for popular fiction, fiction in historically-denigrated genres (e.g., romance), and fiction in historically-denigrated formats (e.g., comic books). They argue not only that the librarian has some ethical duty to satisfy traditionally lowbrow taste preferences, but that disparaging attitudes towards such preferences arise not from good taste but from an objectionable elitism that the librarian should strive to correct in themselves.

Claims to the contrary have fallen out of favor not only in library circles but in aesthetics and the philosophy of art as well. The notion that aesthetic merit neatly tracks the high-low distinction is clearly a misguided one, even to those of us who are not committed to steadfast aesthetic relativism (i.e., the view that aesthetic quality is indexed to individual judgments or cultural conditions). As aesthetician David Novitz (1989, 227) puts it, “the distinction between the high arts and the popular arts is a social distinction: one which cannot be wholly located in the intrinsic qualities or the affective dimension of the work itself.” One need only look to the rich heterogeneity of popular literature—in content, structure, and quality—to find myriad counterexamples for the claim that the difference between high and low art is a purely aesthetic one. Ultimately, evaluative heuristics that rest on a robust distinction between high art and popular art are better understood as manifestations of snobbery than of sound aesthetic judgment. In cases where individuals insist that a text’s aesthetic goodness can be determined on an *a priori* basis because it belongs to a particular genre or literary tradition, their “judgement is distorted by social considerations which are extraneous to proper aesthetic appreciation” (Kieran 2010, 244). It stands to reason that RA scholars and practitioners are then correct in supposing that librarians ought to root out manifestations of this aesthetic snobbery in their own reading and recommendation practices.

Yet the RA literature’s persistent focus on (what we might call) blameless differences in taste tends to truncate the debate surrounding potentially problematic aesthetic preferences. After all, only an inveterate snob would have a standing objection to a reader’s taste preference for New Wave science fiction, or gothic horror, or Regency romances. But what of tastes that seem to conflict with our other professed values as members of a shared library profession? Specifically,

I have in mind here those tastes that appear in some sense discriminatory, the product of harmful social attitudes towards marginalized persons. In such cases, RA's pure preference satisfaction approach is potentially incompatible with moral duties arising from our core commitments to diversity and social responsibility. As it stands, the RA literature tends to emphasize the anti-elitist virtues of the contemporary approach, which means it largely omits substantive discussion of that possible incompatibility.

In this chapter, I will interrogate the conflict between moral duties to, on the one hand, give the reader what they want and, on the other, to promote diversity, inclusion, and social justice through library service. To illustrate just what I mean, I make use in this chapter of a dramatization that centers on race and white supremacy. However, my argumentation is equally relevant to tastes that accord with other forms of systematic discrimination. The driving question behind my investigation is this: Must the readers' advisor treat such tastes as essentially benign? Put another way, are we morally obligated to satisfy a seemingly racist preference in just the same way as we are a preference for, e.g., popular romance fiction?

I argue here that the ethics of contemporary RA (as presently constituted) strongly suggest that we do in fact have such an obligation. Moreover, the documented ubiquity of harmful social biases implies that RA cannot endorse a universal policy of promoting diverse books to any and all readers. To do so would be to discount certain (or certain classes of) taste preferences—that is, aesthetic preferences for narratives of “the sociopolitical Euro-American mainstream of the United States” (Dawson & Van Fleet 2001, 250, quoting Corliss 1998, 4). Such a practice would therefore be inconsistent with the moral framework and recommendation model detailed in chapter two.

Yet—as a recent Reference & User Services Association (RUSA)-sponsored online dialogue between readers’ advisors makes apparent—some critically-engaged librarians do in fact enthusiastically support such diverse books policies. The normative debate surrounding the promotion of diverse books thus calls into question the moral correctness of the present model underpinning RA, and the intuitions of critical practitioners give us reason to explore plausible grounds for a duty to promote diverse books to all readers. Importing theoretical insights from feminist aesthetics, my analysis demonstrates how reading tastes can in fact be oppressive, and thus work to maintain unjust power relations. On my view, oppressive tastes function as real obstacles to collective self-governance. Our obligation to advance social justice and democracy thus provides librarians with a crucial justification for recommending diverse books to all readers, even those who actively disprefer them. By amending the theoretical framework underpinning RA to include a new principle of social justice, this chapter ultimately provides the theoretical underpinning for library interventions targeting oppressive tastes.

4.2 A Thought Experiment

Imagine, for a moment, a patron who regularly comes to the public library searching for books to read in her leisure time. Let’s call her Sarah. Sarah is a middle-class white woman in her late-thirties and an avid romance reader. She enjoys historicals—particularly Regency and Victorian-era historicals—though she also dabbles in contemporary romance and a little Romantic suspense around the edges. Sarah prefers character-driven stories with clever heroines and alpha heroes, and she likes her reading experiences to be—in the parlance of RA—“fast-paced,” “engrossing,” “steamy,” and historically accurate (Saricks 2005, 66).

Sarah, as it happens, also has a strong preference for books with white protagonists. Put another way, she has a distaste for narratives featuring characters of color, especially black heroines and heroes, even in instances where these narratives fulfill her other selection criteria.

Now, ideally, if Sarah approaches a librarian for assistance, they will engage her in what is called an “RA Conversation” (Saricks 2005; 2009). This is the Readers’ Advisory analog to the reference interview. The advisor would ask Sarah several open-ended questions—about, for instance, a book or a movie she’s enjoyed lately or perhaps what she likes about a particular author—in an effort to determine what it is that appeals to Sarah as a reader. The RA conversation would typically allow the advisor to make around three to five book recommendations to the patron.

Here, however, we are going to just set aside practical questions pertaining to how the librarian *in this case* becomes aware of Sarah’s particular taste preferences. For our purposes, it makes no difference whether Sarah has explicitly informed the librarian of her tastes or the librarian has inferred them from their conversation. We will simply stipulate that there is *no epistemic uncertainty* surrounding the presence of these preferences: the librarian truly knows that this is what Sarah prefers, and, further, that she truly does prefer it. Put another way: racial diversity does in fact inhibit Sarah’s enjoyment of a story.

Given this, the relevant question becomes whether the librarian is now morally obligated to satisfy Sarah’s tastes—that is, to suggest books consistent with her preference for white protagonists.

This, it is worth noting, would not be difficult to do. Romance (like a number of other popular genres) has a long-standing diversity problem. Indeed, in their annual study of racial

diversity in popular romance, booksellers Lea and Bea Koch (2016; 2017) found that just 7.8% of titles published by leading romance publishers in 2016 were authored by people of color; despite increased awareness of the dearth of diverse representation in the genre, that percentage fell to 6.2% in 2017. The following year, the Romance Writers of America publicly acknowledged that “black authors are significantly underrepresented as finalists” for the genre’s top prize, the RITA award, and, further, that no black romance author had at that point ever won a RITA (Wendell 2018).

The publishing industry has historically used a purported lack of reader interest in diverse titles to justify this state of affairs. My intention here is adamantly not to endorse that claim. In fact, there is an empirically documented emergent younger romance readership that includes more queers and people of color than ever before (NPD 2017). Nevertheless, there are romance readers who—consciously or not—exclusively read narratives by and about white people. Sarah is one of those readers.

So, again, the question all of this raises is this: Must the readers’ advisor treat Sarah’s taste for white protagonists in just the same way they would treat any other?

4.3 Biting the Bullet

Strict adherence to the moral framework detailed in chapter two—including principles of (1) respect for autonomy, (2) egalitarianism, and (3) the value of reading—would seem to require an affirmative answer to the question articulated above. To see why this is the case, let us turn to the consensus view in contemporary RA, which is, roughly, as follows:

P1. We have an ethical duty to promote the good: in this case, the act of reading.

P2. The (empirically) most reliable way to get people reading is to give them reading material they enjoy.

P3. A reader's current preferences are the best available guide to what that reader will enjoy.

C. Readers' advisors should recommend books they believe will satisfy the reader's current preferences.

In short, in order to promote the act of reading, readers' advisors are called on to recommend to a reader those books the advisor has good reason to believe will satisfy that reader's tastes as they are currently constituted. In contrast with RA's early practitioners, present-day readers' advisors do not seek to change the character of readers' preferences (i.e., to elevate readers' tastes). Contemporary best practices are geared towards promoting reading as a valuable activity in itself rather than promoting particular or particular sorts of books. Put simply, if the objective of RA is to promote reading *simpliciter*, then the moral or aesthetic quality of a particular reader's taste is irrelevant. The readers' advisor wants Sarah to continue reading, and the best way to ensure that Sarah continues reading is to give her what she wants to read.

Though I presume that some readers will find this conclusion troubling, there are likely others who will happily bite the bullet. After all, if RA's primary function is to match readers with books for the purpose of promoting reading itself, the character of Sarah's tastes need not pose a problem. To paraphrase Cynthia Orr in the most recent edition of *Genreflecting*, the readers' advisor's job is to emphatically take up the reader's own selection criteria and then to suggest to that reader books that they are likely to enjoy. In contrast, one of the very worst things a readers' advisor can do is issue recommendations with an eye towards improving the reader (Orr 2013, 55). On the mainstream view, this is both morally objectionable (in that it denies the

sovereignty of the reader) and prudentially inadvisable (in that it is generally ineffective and may even drive readers away from the service). It is this same principle that theoretically prevents readers' advisors from guiding patrons away from certain genres or potentially objectionable content.

Surely some of the persuasive power of this contemporary approach to RA is located in its ethical simplicity. The librarian's job is always and only to satisfy the reader in front of them, regardless of the nature of the taste preferences that reader evinces. There is undeniable appeal in this sort of professional absolutism, but it also gives us some cause for suspicion.

In his influential short paper, "Professionalism or Culpability: An Experiment in Ethics," library ethicist Robert Hauptmann (1976) details an experiment in which he asked thirteen librarians at thirteen different libraries for assistance locating information on "the construction of a small explosive device" and whether a particular chemical used in that construction could "blow up, say, a normal suburban house" (292). At none of these libraries was he refused service for moral reasons. Hauptman argues that this outcome is indicative of a troubling tendency on the part of librarians to make ethical decisions by-rote, rather than as "independent thinkers functioning ultimately in a social context" (291). On his view, the librarian's automatic deference to absolute professional principles—in this case, opposition to censorship—constitutes an abdication of their duty to engage in context-sensitive moral decision-making. And though it may strike some readers as counterintuitive to draw an analogy between Sarah's preference for white protagonists and Hauptman's request for bomb-building instructions, I take it the general point still holds: Moral decision-making is not an automated process wherein one simply submits to some ethical principle regardless of the particulars of the case at hand. Robert Wengert (2001,

500) puts it another way: “If your ethical approach comes down to asking the staff in the library to behave toward patrons with the same cooperative nonjudgmental attitude that the library's computer terminals provide, something is missing.”

Significantly, there are in fact critically-engaged RA practitioners who routinely resist pure preference satisfaction as the appropriate approach to the provision of diverse reading materials. A recent Reference & User Services Association (RUSA)-sponsored online dialogue between readers’ advisors bears this out. The participants in this discussion vehemently object to the claim that librarians can dispense with concerns about diverse books—i.e., those that represent the experiences of historically marginalized populations²⁶—when they work in largely homogenous communities. This is both because (a) such communities are rarely (if ever) as homogenous as they may initially seem and (b) readers’ advisors have an ethical obligation to promote diverse books regardless of the composition of their communities. The following quotes regarding (b) come from three different public librarians who participated in a thread titled “Inclusive Readers’ Advisory”:

²⁶ Defining what one means by *diverse books* can be something of a challenge. Just as the term “diversity” is used in a variety of frequently nebulous senses (Hussey 2010), it is often unclear just what conditions must be met for a book to qualify as “diverse.” In this chapter, I deploy a modified version of the broad definition articulated by We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a grassroots organization dedicated to promoting production of and access to diverse books for youth. According to WNDB, diverse books are those that “[feature] diverse characters” from a wide (and indefinite) range of social groups—e.g., “LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” (We Need Diverse Books 2017). Although the organization does not say so explicitly in their definition of “diversity,” they imply through the list of relevant social groups that “diverse characters” are those from historically underrepresented populations. When WNDB appeals to a ‘need’ for diverse books, it is referring to an ameliorative project in which one aims to achieve equitable social representation in the published literature. In practice, this often extends to include the cultural identities not only of fictional characters, but of authors as well, as when we speak of “own voices” diverse books—that is, titles written by authors who share the marginalized social identity or identities of their characters. While WNDB focuses on literature for children and young adults, Alma Dawson & Connie Van Fleet’s (2001) chapter in *The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion*—“The Future of Readers’ Advisory in a Multicultural Society”—offers a precedent for similarly conceptualizing diverse books for adults.

“Once upon a time, we looked at population stats as a way to get people to add ‘diverse’ books to our collections. Because we wanted people to see themselves represented in the collection and all that good stuff. But, I think it’s time (past time) we took the next step and convinced people that you can read books BY anyone ABOUT anyone, no matter who they are or who you (as the reader) are.”

“One thing we stress [at my library] is that even if we were completely homogeneous (which—as [another participant] so effectively argues—is impossible), including broad viewpoints still is vitally important, as they are fundamental to the human condition and to the core values of librarianship. I frequently think of this James Baldwin quote: ‘It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive or who had ever been alive.’”

“I was reminded that our last [annual RUSA RA discussion] included some education for those who thought that the lack of apparent diversity in their communities did not mean they were still required to engage with this question in their work. I hope that there is now consensus on this—supporting diversity and representation is our job no matter where we work. Our default is whiteness in a white supremacist society—and I can admit that I too have created booklists and displays that I thought were fantastic only to realize there were no writers of color, no #ownvoices included in the display or list. As [another participant] mentioned, *Windows and Mirrors*²⁷ are both important.”

These professional readers’ advisors clearly see the work they do with diverse books as ameliorative and perhaps even educational, as they aim to “[convince] people that you can read books BY anyone ABOUT anyone.” They work to expose their patrons to materials those patrons might not otherwise be aware of or choose to read, as well as to combat in themselves (as librarians) an implicit bias in favor of “mainstream” narratives—i.e., those consistent with “the

²⁷ When participant three references “*Windows and Mirrors*,” they are referring to a metaphor famously devised by Rudine Sims Bishop, an influential scholar of children’s literature: “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (Bishop 1990, ix).

sociopolitical Euro-American mainstream of the United States” (Dawson & Van Fleet 2001, 250, quoting Corliss 1998, 4). Participant three’s reference to the previous year’s RUSA discussion indicates that this is not a point of clear consensus in the RA community, as at least some practitioners argued that “the lack of apparent diversity in their communities” means they are not “required to engage with” the question of how to create a more inclusive RA service.

This tension between readers’ advisors should be unsurprising to anyone familiar with the dominant ideology of contemporary RA. One camp advocates a progressive agenda for the service, while the other understands the promotion of reading *simpliciter* as the telos of RA. Membership in this latter camp functionally rules out a universal diverse books recommendation policy; an RA that follows the pure preference satisfaction model (PPSM) must always treat the recommendation of diverse books as potentially defeasible because it cannot justify that recommendation absent patron demand. To put it another way: if they were embedded in a community of Sarahs, it is difficult to see how librarians adhering to the dominant ideological commitments of RA could be compelled to recommend books centering on protagonists of color. And while one could certainly argue that “communities of Sarahs”—literal or figurative—are uncommon, the counterfactual would nonetheless remain intact: “If readers don’t want it, we won’t recommend it.” As RA specialist and columnist Neil Hollands (2017, 21) notes, in contemporary RA, “activism can’t govern every decision, pushing diversity on readers who need something else from their stories right now.”

4.4 Do Librarians Have a Duty to Recommend Diverse Books?

But don't librarians have a higher-level moral duty to recommend²⁸ diverse books irrespective of patrons' tastes? Indeed, this is what several participants in the "Inclusive Readers' Advisory" thread seem to suggest, even though they do not explicitly reference aesthetic taste. But if there is such a duty, from where might it arise? That is, what are the foundations for a moral obligation to recommend diverse books?

4.4.1 Diversity

Perhaps such a duty is grounded in our stated professional commitment to diversity. Since 1999, the American Library Association (ALA) has included diversity among its ten core values (Morales, Knowles, & Bourg 2014, 439), stating that librarians "value our nation's diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve" (ALA 2004). A broad commitment to equitable library service stretches back further, notably inscribed in Article V of the ALA's *Library Bill of Rights*, which states that "[a] person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views" (ALA 1939/2019). So long as the ALA serves as the prime arbiter of professional consensus and standardization in library ethics, these documents and the principles articulated therein will hold considerable moral weight, counting strongly in favor of a fundamentally equitable RA service.

Relatedly, RA's foundational commitments to autonomy and egalitarianism require readers' advisors to issue respectful and attentive leisure reading recommendations to any and all patrons

²⁸ I use 'recommend' broadly here, to include instances of direct recommendation (as when a librarian suggests a book to a patron in a face-to-face or online environment) and indirect recommendation (as when a librarian selects books for a promotional display).

who seek them out, regardless of taste or background. This practice requires not only flexibility and care but sufficient cultural competence. Here, RA can learn a great deal from work that has already been done on reference services to diverse patrons. For instance, in her book *Information Services to Diverse Populations*, LIS scholar Nicole Cooke (2016, 51-62) addresses a number of challenges to the equitable provision of reference services, including, e.g., explicit and implicit biases, stereotype threat, library anxiety, and culture shock. These would largely seem to apply to RA as well, another front-facing library service whose practitioners must “treat all people and queries with respect and seriousness” (Cooke 2016, 52).

The trouble with this line of argumentation—i.e., that readers’ advisors must recommend diverse books as part of their overriding commitment to diversity—is that a duty to administer equitable services does not necessarily give rise to a moral obligation to promote diverse books. It is critical that we disambiguate ‘inclusion’ and ‘promotion’ here. The ALA does explicitly address the former, interpreting Article II of the *Library Bill of Rights*²⁹ as entailing “a professional responsibility to be inclusive in collection development and in the provision of interlibrary loan” and further proclaiming that “collections must represent the diversity of people

²⁹ “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (ALA 1996).

and ideas in our society” (ALA 1982/2014).³⁰ Cooke (2016, 62) is surely not alone in arguing that it is “through collections that the library could make its most significant contribution to diversity, by acquiring materials that accurately represent the cultures and languages of the community.” A collection, on this view, should be representative of the larger community.

However, while the library’s collection certainly informs and circumscribes promotional practices, it does not dictate them. Collection development concerns the creation of a balanced selection of materials reflecting “the librarian’s view of what readers and users want and need, whether the librarian likes it or not” (Asheim 1983, 180). RA, on the other hand, deals with the direct and indirect recommendation of titles generally (though not always) found within the library’s own collection. Put another way, collection development concerns the composition of the library’s collection, but “[it] is through Readers’ Advisory Services that librarians activate [that] collection for readers” (McCook & Jasper 2001, 56). There is some sense in which RA is the practice of determining which bits of the collection to “activate” under widely varying circumstances.

All of which is to say, we cannot merely extend the ALA’s guidance on collection development to RA, not least because the two serve different (if complementary) functions. RA’s

³⁰ The ALA’s *Freedom to Read Statement* (produced in collaboration with the Association of American Publishers) also articulates a professional obligation “to make available the widest diversity of views and expressions” and “to give full meaning to the freedom to read by providing books that enrich the quality and diversity of thought and expression” (1953/2004). These statements and the principles they affirm highlight the classical liberalism that is foundational to modern librarianship. Both the *Library Bill of Rights* and the *Freedom to Read Statement* appeal to a kind of Millian concern for combatting the “tyranny of the majority,” or the ways in which social groups in the cultural ascendancy tend “to impose...[their] own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them” and “fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with [their] ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own” (Mill 1859/2002, 4). Librarians—steeped as they are in classical liberalism and Enlightenment era ideals (Bivens-Tatum 2012)—seek to promote a healthy information ecology where even heterodox views might flourish. I would argue that the perceived value of social diversity in modern librarianship has often been caught up in this foundational desire to promote a fair and productive marketplace of ideas.

main aim is to promote a culture of reading, and it does so by adhering to a pure preference satisfaction model that empowers readers to choose the books that they genuinely prefer. On this model, it remains unclear why a readers' advisor would be called on to promote diverse books absent patron demand.³¹ If an equitable library service is just one that meets all patrons' needs equally well, then RA achieves this end by respecting patrons' preferences and making educated, good faith efforts to satisfy them. In practice, this will sometimes—perhaps even frequently—involve recommending diverse books (as they are defined here), but we would need some further argumentation to justify the claim that readers' advisors have a moral duty to recommend such books irrespective of patron taste.

4.4.2 Social Justice

Another core value of librarianship, social responsibility, provides more promising grounds for such a duty.³² The ALA (2004) cashes out social responsibility “in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society.”

Since its origins in the 1960s and '70s, there has been no shortage of controversy surrounding the social responsibility mandate in librarianship (Samek 1996, 2001). Library historian Toni Samek states that librarians seeking to change their profession “argued that library collections lacked balance, that a purist moral stance on intellectual freedom was an example of hands-off liberalism, and that the library served mainstream social sectors, not the whole

³¹ This is not to say that a readers' advisor who adheres to the PPSM will only ever recommend diverse books to patrons who specifically desire them. There are surely readers who are genuinely agnostic with respect to diversity in their reading materials. Further, one can reasonably expect that there are plenty of cases where a recommended title only incidentally meets our definition of “diverse”—that is, where the fact that the book features characters from historically underrepresented populations is not a determining factor in the recommendation.

³² Values of social responsibility and diversity are, of course, closely linked. Sarah T. Roberts & Safiya Umoja Noble (2016, 514) argue as much, noting that “to be socially responsible is to advocate for social justice and to act for a diverse field.”

community” (2001, 46). Some scholars and practitioners have thus regarded social responsibility and the labor it entails as a breach of the profession’s commitment to neutrality. However, as ethicist Kay Mathiesen points out (2015b), that commitment is in fact an instrumental one, operating in service of values like equality and justice. What this means is that we should maintain a posture of neutrality if and only if it serves these other values, enhancing the free circulation of ideas necessary to collective self-governance. Here, I follow Mathiesen (2015b, 205) in holding that “[neutrality] does not serve those values when we fail to attend to the ways in which libraries and other information services may be reinforcing the exclusion and marginalization of underserved populations.” Neutrality is not, in short, an end in itself, and so we must always account for its actual consequences when we engage in ethical analyses of library services.

While the term “social responsibility” is common in LIS, it is perhaps clearer and more precise to speak of social justice, an ideal in which social relations and the distribution of resources are equitable, individuals’ fundamental physical and emotional needs are met, and everyone is able to meaningfully participate in collective decision-making. For libraries, promoting social justice means developing services, policies, and practices that advance “the ability of all people to fully benefit from social and economic progress and to participate equally in democratic societies” (Morales, Knowles, and Bourg 2014, 440). Social justice, as a value, is therefore inextricably bound up with the librarian’s commitment to fostering healthy democratic functioning.

So in what ways might recommending diverse books work towards social justice? It is undoubtedly tempting to invoke talk of reading effects here: to insist, for instance, that reading

about those who are differently situated than us will necessarily increase our empathic capacity. This is a common way of justifying the recommendation of diverse books in the library field, bolstered by references to Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) classic treatise "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," in which the author argues that literature affords children the opportunity not only to see their own experience reflected back at them (in books-as-mirrors) but also to witness and empathize with others whose life experiences differ from their own (in books-as-windows and books-as-sliding-glass-doors, respectively).

Bishop's metaphor is a powerful one that does indeed capture a phenomenon corroborated by the testimonials of varied readers. Nevertheless, grounding a duty to promote diverse books in positive reading effects poses certain foundational problems for librarians' position on intellectual freedom. Setting aside reasonable concerns about what one means by "empathy" and whether there is adequate empirical evidence to support the claim that reading increases it, recommending particular books for their purported powers to increase our feelings of empathy requires that we subscribe to what Emily Knox (2014) terms a traditional-modernist view of reading effects. On such a view, the effects of reading a certain book can be known prior to the act of reading it. Librarians' position on intellectual freedom, Knox argues, finds its foundation in the opposing agnostic-postmodernist view of reading effects, wherein we cannot know the effects of reading on any individual or group of individuals prior to exposure. To put it another way, reading has effects, we just cannot know what they will be in advance, and this licenses our commitment to providing access to any and all reading material in the library.

In short, recommending—or not recommending—certain books because of their presumed effects on the morality of the reader would undermine this established position on intellectual

freedom, making librarians in some sense morally responsible for the consequences of reading the books found on their shelves. Furthermore, since contemporary RA doctrine holds that reading is a process of active meaning-making with a text (rather than the discovery of meaning *within* the text), such a recommendation practice would generate additional internal tension for the service.

In the following section, I present an alternative means of grounding a duty to promote diverse books in our commitment to social justice, one that does not require us to adopt a straightforwardly traditional-modernist view of reading effects. This is possible because, as I will argue, Sarah's taste preference for white protagonists has moral import that her preference for, e.g., romance does not. I maintain that this moral import generates sufficient justification for the librarian to behave differently towards certain tastes—that is, to deviate from a pure preference satisfaction model when faced with a particular class of reading preferences.

4.5 Some Tastes Are Oppressive

What might differentiate Sarah's white protagonist preference from her preference for, e.g., romance? I take it that the answer to this question is that, while the latter taste preference is fundamentally benign, the former is *oppressive*—it promotes and sustains oppression. Oppression is understood here in the sense first articulated and defended by feminist philosopher Ann Cudd (2006, 23) in her influential account of the subject: that is, as a “harm through which groups of persons are systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened or reduced by any of several forces.” These sorts of harms are the necessarily unjustified and morally wrong products of “the systematic limiting of opportunity or constraints on self-determination” resulting from one's membership in a particular social group (Heyes 2018). It is important to

grasp here that oppression is robustly structural, and that the concept extends past intentional restrictions imposed on societies by fascistic or tyrannical political powers. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, political philosopher Iris Marion Young effectively argues this point:

[Oppression's] causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules...In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of *often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life.* (Young 1990, 41, emphasis mine)

In line with this expanded definition of oppression, I hold that Sarah's taste for white protagonists and corresponding distaste for protagonists of color is oppressive both because (a) it represents an instantiation of a larger, socially-inculcated network of "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols" that bear a causal relationship to the oppression of people of color and (b) it operates, however unconsciously, in support of white supremacy, licensing everyday injustices that harm individuals as members of social groups. Significantly, this is *not* the view that Sarah's taste is the problematic result of antecedent racist beliefs. Rather, it is a view centered on the harms specifically resulting from aesthetic taste as opposed to those generated by certain doxastic commitments. In other words, Sarah may or may not harbor racist beliefs, but in any case such beliefs are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for having tastes that are properly understood as oppressive.

Here, I am importing insights from feminist aesthetician A.W. Eaton's (2015, 2016) innovative work on taste in bodies, in which she argues that our tastes have the capacity to promote and maintain oppression. Taste is understood here in the Humean sentimentalist

tradition: as a disposition rooted in our emotional reactions to things—that is, our feelings of pleasure or displeasure. Taste is thus implicitly evaluative, in the sense that it, as Eaton argues, “[presents] its object as valuable and so worthy of experiencing... (or as disvaluable and so to be avoided or discarded)” (Eaton 2015). This means that Sarah’s taste for historical romance is a tendency to enjoy historical romance, whereas her distaste for protagonists of color constitutes an inclination to experience displeasure reading narratives featuring protagonists of color. Put another way, Sarah’s distaste for protagonists of color constitutes a “standing disposition” to “be displeased by (or to have an aversion toward)” protagonists of color (Eaton 2016, 41).

It is this (dis)taste that is properly understood as oppressive, insofar as it presents its object—protagonists of color—as undesirable, uninteresting, unrealistic, or empathically inaccessible: in short, unworthy or inappropriate subjects of story. These felt responses have the capacity to license everyday discrimination, to provide justification (however implicit) for a myriad of injustices. The fact that such responses are embodied and in some sense “automatic” makes them exceedingly rare objects of critical reflection; our tastes derive power from our sense that they are natural, individual, and inevitable. One simply likes what they like, and that’s that. In her essay on white embodiment and hipness, feminist political philosopher Robin James (2009) describes taste as “one of the most significant yet invisible components of white privilege precisely because it enables normative whiteness to act on and through bodies via notions of pleasure and disgust.” We are not in the habit of questioning the politics of what does or does not give us pleasure, especially when our preferences align with the culturally dominant aesthetic. Oppressive tastes are also unlikely to be met with much pushback in daily life, in no small part because they are widely shared, internalized both by those who stand to benefit from them and,

in many cases, those that they harm. Moreover, taste is commonly taken to be beyond dispute—a matter of mere personal preference—and is thus largely insulated from normative critique.

To further complicate matters, aesthetic taste tends to “[resist] rational persuasion and is often norm-discordant” (Eaton 2016, 48). In other words, one cannot simply decide to prefer or disprefer a particular image, narrative, or performance to another. Rational argumentation is typically not an effective means to modify taste, even when one finds that argumentation deeply compelling or its conclusions obviously decisive. As an example, Eaton (2015) describes her own fraught relationship to high-heeled shoes:

It is really and truly my deeply considered view that high-heeled shoes are bad for women in a variety of ways: e.g., whereas most men’s shoes are grounding, enabling, and relatively foot-friendly, high-heeled shoes are by contrast harmful to feet, legs, and back, and they are hobbling in the sense that they basically force us to take mincing steps and are difficult, if not impossible, to run in (and these effects are all more pronounced the higher the heel). To wear high-heels is to not only participate in, but also to promote, an aesthetic that diminutizes and sexualizes women. For these reasons, I think that we ought not wear heels...

But here’s the rub. While I am fully doxastically committed to this, I nevertheless own several pair of high-heeled shoes that I regularly wear. Why? I’m sure that you can guess: because I think that they make me look attractive and I care about looking attractive (more than I would like; which is yet another thing that I intellectually disavow on feminist grounds yet nevertheless perform and uphold in my daily life). Or, to put the point in a way that connects up with what I was saying earlier: because I have developed a taste for heels. And when it comes down to making decisions about what to wear, my taste often wins out over my well-considered convictions, and so I end up embodying and promoting something that I disavow.

One can—as Eaton herself notes—easily replace high-heeled shoes with something else they find aesthetically pleasing but morally objectionable. I continue, for instance, to think leather jackets look cool in spite of a near-decade of ethical veganism. In yet another example, Eaton

notes that “one can have both the justified belief that fat hatred governs social relations and the condition that this morally wrong *yet nevertheless find oneself disgusted by fat bodies*” (2016, 48, emphasis original). There are many more such instance of norm-discordant taste. Indeed, I suspect that taste’s stubborn resistance to rational modification is in large part responsible for the conviction that readers’ advisors not only should not endeavor to change readers’ tastes, but that it is impossible for them to do so.

To be clear, I am not arguing here that there is anything wrong with enjoying the romance novels that Sarah prefers. The argument I am presenting in this chapter is not about sorting good books from bad books. In fact, there is often nothing wrong with the individual books in question. The point here is that the *taste* for white historical romances is cultivated within and contributes to a system that disenfranchises certain social groups.

I would like to acknowledge here that it may be the case that Sarah subscribes to racist stereotypes or other false beliefs about people of color, and that these could certainly shape or constrain her reading practices. However, on my view, subscribing to such bad beliefs is not a necessary or a sufficient condition for having racist taste. Just as I can both believe that leather production harms non-human animals and enjoy the appearance of leather jackets, Sarah could believe that racism is morally wrong while continuing to prefer white protagonists. Which is to say, her taste is oppressive even in the absence of false beliefs about people of color because that taste promotes and sustains white supremacy *regardless of Sarah’s doxastic commitments*. It is a hegemonic taste for white protagonists that implicitly presents white people as valuable and thus worth reading and writing about while simultaneously presenting people of color as disvaluable. On this picture, it is taste itself that does harm, not the purported effects of reading any particular

book or books. In the next section, I explore the nature of that harm and its implications for the practice of Readers' Advisory.

4.6 Adding a Principle of Social Justice

The oppressive character of some aesthetic tastes is, I take it, what gives the librarian justification for pushing back against or otherwise resisting them. Significantly, the problem of oppressive tastes—while observed in individuals—is a robustly communal one, in that these tastes do harm to the community at large, both in terms of its least advantaged members and, inextricably, in terms of its democratic functioning. This is because democracy demands basic equality between community members and, in the absence of that equality, purportedly collective decision-making processes are fundamentally corrupted. Gut feelings of displeasure and disgust towards one's fellow community members can and do inhibit collective deliberation. Imagine, for instance, a town meeting in which Alex is so bothered by Jenny's vocal tremor that he fails to attend to the content of Jenny's speech. Oppressive tastes like this pose a threat to democratic participation, and thus to the overarching political project of the public library. As library ethicist Charles Bunge (1999, 37) notes,

[By] carrying out their obligations to their clients, [librarians] enhance the functioning of a democratic society without which the client would not be able to use the information provide. It does not make sense, then, that professional ethics would require actions that would be contrary to the values of a democratic society or that would undermine its operation or viability.

It is for this reason that readers' advisors are called on not only to resist, but to seek to change, oppressive tastes through their promotional practices. In their critical interrogation of contemporary RA practices aimed at youth, Michael Widdersheim & Melissa McCleary (2016) observe that standard "approaches [to RA] isolate non-dominant groups as requiring special

needs but do little or nothing to subvert hegemonic cultural practices in the dominant culture” (726). One way of subverting or disrupting oppressive reading practices is to endorse a universal diverse books recommendation policy that deliberately undermines the pure preference satisfaction approach to Readers’ Advisory.

However, because the current principle-based framework underpinning RA cannot account for an obligation to recommend diverse books, we have reason to think that the framework itself is incomplete. I maintain that a fourth principle can make sense of our competing intuitions here: a principle of social justice. Such a principle would hold that the readers’ advisor take considerations of social justice seriously when engaging in their work.

In an ethical dilemma like the one posed by our interaction with Sarah, principles of autonomy and social justice do come into conflict. However, in adding a few “diverse” offerings to a handful of suggested titles, we see that the readers’ advisor is maximizing the principle of social justice while minimally diminishing the principle of autonomy. Because Sarah still gets some recommendations that accord with her current preferences, this practice of suggesting diverse titles *even to readers who actively disprefer them* is—if at all coercive—only nominally so. Notably, the principle of social justice licenses a policy of guiding readers towards diverse works but not a policy of, for example, guiding readers away from the popular romance genre.

Nevertheless, some RA practitioners may object that this new principle amounts to a breach of professional neutrality because the librarian is recommending books in accordance with their own political convictions. However, here I think Bunge’s (1999) critique of Hauptman (1976) is applicable, for the conflict is not actually between professional ethics and personal ethics but rather between special obligations to clients and general obligations to third parties—in this case,

groups whose full democratic participation is hampered by the former's oppressive tastes. Acting ethically in particular instances is a matter of weighing responsibilities between these two so as to produce a balance that most fully enhances the values of a democratic society.

Some RA practitioners may well agree with the above argumentation and yet nevertheless object that taste is resistant to outside change. In other words, there is no point to the kind of intervention proposed here. Readers will simply continue reading what they like regardless of what the librarian suggests. There are a few plausible reasons to suppose that this is the case. As I noted before, taste is sometimes norm-discordant—that is, it does not necessarily track our convictions, even deeply held ones—and can indeed be difficult to alter. Certainly I cannot simply will myself to experience pleasure or displeasure in response to a particular work of art.

This, however, does not mean that some tastes cannot be altered over time. Eaton (2015, 2016), for instance, proposes an Aristotelian project of taste cultivation in response to the problem of oppressive tastes. This form of education would involve guided, repeated exposure to cultural objects so as to habituate individuals into having the right sorts of reactions to them—that is, reactions that veer towards the socially just. We might think that readers' advisors are particularly well positioned to guide this sort of exposure because they often build trusting relationships with their patrons over time. And so even if Sarah does not read “outside of her comfort zone” on the first go, she may well take the librarian up on another diverse recommendation down the line.

I would also argue that diverse recommendations may be valuable even when they do not trigger an act of reading. For instance, a policy of recommending diverse books would force librarians to familiarize themselves with the literature of marginalized persons, and therefore to

combat their own ingrained biases as members of a largely racially homogenous profession. This kind of self-examination on the part of the library practitioner is a critical aspect of any intervention aimed at targeting oppressive tastes. Furthermore, diverse recommendations can model and normalize certain conventions of text selection for patrons. Just as we model good information literacy practices in a reference interview, we could then model analogous skills and dispositions in the RA conversation. And if one truly believes that readers' tastes are impossible to alter, then at the very least we need not worry about coercing patrons into reading something they disprefer. These other good-making features of our diverse recommendation practices may then carry the day.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the dominant ideology of contemporary RA requires librarians to treat all reading preferences as being of equal value, and thus cannot permit taste-based service interventions, including universal diverse books policies that some practitioners support. However, this conclusion would appear to be in conflict with at least some of our shared commitments in the library profession, particularly those to social justice and democracy. This is because oppressive tastes like Sarah's work *against* social justice, where justice "[refers] not only to [the equitable distribution of resources], but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation" (Young 1990, 3). Our obligation to protect and promote democracy thus provides librarians with a crucial justification for recommending diverse books to all readers. By amending the theoretical framework underpinning RA to include a new principle of social justice, my work provides the grounding for library interventions targeting

oppressive tastes. It is important to note that the view I am espousing here is one that makes positive claims about promotional practices but does not seek to curtail access to materials.

On my view, oppressive tastes constitute real obstacles to collective self-governance and full democratic participation, and thus call on us to consider potential service interventions and concomitant modifications to our philosophy of RA. I will further expand on this view in the next chapter, in which I consider the complex relationship between the promotional practices of Readers' Advisory and the democratic project of the public library.

CHAPTER 5: SHOULD THE PUBLIC LIBRARY PROMOTE POPULAR FICTION?

5.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I articulated critiques of Readers' Advisory arising primarily from discord between (a) theory and practice and (b) the principles of RA and those of the profession at large. In this chapter, I will concentrate more specifically on the question of institutional purpose: on how RA-as-theorized furthers or obstructs the overarching objectives of the library. To that end, I begin the chapter by elucidating a longstanding tension between the modern public library's political aims and its recreational function—that is, the ostensible incompatibility between the institutional mission to advance democratic ideals and the practice of promoting reading materials for patron entertainment. I go on to ask whether and in what ways the promotion of popular fiction for adults fits into the larger political project of the public library. Put another way: how is it that encouraging patrons to read, e.g., Harlequin romances and pulpy sci-fi novels serves the guiding principles of the library as a democratic institution?

Following a brief sketch of the purpose of the library, I give an account of the view (or tightly-related cluster of views) that promoting popular fiction subverts the library's purpose. To be clear, few critics now object to the mere inclusion of fiction, or even mass fiction, in library collections. Rather, the live dispute centers on the *neutral provision* and *active promotion* of popular materials. In order to effectively respond to these critics, one must provide some compelling theoretical justification for promoting popular fiction derived from the very democratic purpose this practice allegedly undermines. To that end, I survey several candidate

justifications currently on offer that seek to resolve the potential tension between democratic development and recreational reading. These are: (1) popular fiction entices individuals to use the library; (2) popular fiction has informational value; and (3) popular fiction can augment individual and societal literacy levels. My examination of each of these reveals empirical and theoretical inadequacies that lead me to propose an alternative justification, one that draws on Louise Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) transactional theory of reading in combination with Eamonn Callan's (1997) account of public virtue. In the view I ultimately endorse, popular fiction—and, more precisely, genuine aesthetic experience—serves as a resource for the development of character traits necessary to democratic citizenship.

5.2 Democratic Purpose

Democracy (literally “rule of the people”) refers to a mode of collective, consensual decision-making among free and equal participants. It is through this fundamentally deliberative process that groups exercise self-governance, seeking consensus about the appropriate values and objectives of their society amidst the disagreements that inevitably erupt between members.³³

The democratic process requires a great deal from its participants. In order to engage in meaningful deliberation, competent political subjects need to be relatively knowledgeable about the relevant issues of the day and well equipped to engaged in reasoned debate regarding them. The public library aims to satisfy these requirements, largely by providing free, equal, and equitable access to the marketplace of ideas. This access ideally enables community members to become genuinely informed and, consequently, to act as democratic citizens—or “choosers of the

³³ See Christiano (1996).

aims of society” (Christiano 1996, 10). As Arthur Hafner & Jennifer Sterling-Folker (1993) argue,

The public library assists in the realization and reinforcement of a democratic society by being that society’s storehouse of all knowledge and accessible to every citizen. The comprehensiveness of knowledge contained, its accessibility, and the freedom and equality among citizens to access that knowledge are the characteristics required for the public library to assist a democratic society in realizing its goals. (Hafner & Sterling-Folker 1993, 18)

The public library therefore plays (or, at the very least, endeavors to play) a critical role in “[ensuring] the educated citizenry that is vital to democracy” (Gorman 2000, 27).

The above account is, of course, a simple gloss on the library’s democratic purpose as it is commonly portrayed in the LIS literature. For this reason it is surely vulnerable to John Buschman’s (2007, 1485) trenchant critique of the relative superficiality of democratic theory in the discipline, which he describes as “an unfinished, truncated idea remaining at its Jeffersonian/Madisonian beginnings.” Yet even such a rudimentary understanding of the democratic role of the public library (the belief in which is sometimes pejoratively referred to as “library faith” [Garceau 1949]) helps us make sense of the institution’s other commitments. For instance, the library’s liberal stance on intellectual freedom finds justification in the notion that, as Shannon Oltmann (2016, 162) puts it, “freedom of speech...enables the circulation of ideas and accountability necessary to a healthy [deliberative] democracy.” Moreover, influential historians of the American library—most notably Sydney Ditzion (1947) and Jesse Shera (1949)—have argued that the public library’s founding purpose, its *raison d’être*, was to facilitate proper democratic functioning. In his classic historical treatment of the origins of the American public library movement in New England, Shera (1949) argues that the public library was indeed

intended to function as an agency of democracy, “an outward and visible manifestation of the spirit and ideals of the people” (248). Today, the American Library Association includes democracy among its core values of librarianship, asserting that “a democracy presupposes an informed citizenry” (ALA 2004).

It is not difficult to see how the library’s informational function serves this end. One needs adequate access to information on a variety of subjects and from varied perspectives in order to make informed decisions as a democratic citizen. The library provides that access, in both a physical and intellectual sense, making available the actual materials necessary for self-education and endeavoring to equip its patrons with the skills required to evaluate the accuracy of information encountered in daily life.

The library’s recreational function, however, does not fit so neatly into this established narrative. With respect to that function, I have in mind here the promotion of *popular fiction*—specifically popular fiction for adults—which accounts for a significant proportion of materials circulated at public libraries of all sizes (Hoffert 2017). Andrew Odlyzko (1997, 158) succinctly articulates the central—and longstanding—dissonance between theoretical purpose and actual practice: “While libraries are usually presented as dedicated to uplifting the public, in practice public libraries are primarily providers of entertainment. Most of their lending is of fiction.”

Considered alongside the above account of the library’s democratic mission, this practical reality elicits an important question about justification: How does encouraging patrons to read mass market fiction serve the overarching purpose of the library as a democratic institution? Put another way, if it is indeed the case that the public library “represents the need of democracy for an enlightened electorate” (Shera 1949, vi), if it is at root an “[agency] of education and

enlightenment” (Bivens-Tatum 2012, 133), then why should librarians actively promote materials geared primarily towards entertaining their readers?

5.3 The Case Against Promoting Popular Fiction

Some modern LIS theorists and commentators have suggested that the blunt answer to this last question is that libraries should not promote such materials (Bivens-Tatum 2012; D’Angelo 2006; Dilevko & Magowan 2007; Hafner & Sterling-Folker 1993; Isaacson 2006; Woodworth 2012). “The fact that public libraries are promoting rather than fighting against what Judith McPheron refers to as ‘the rampant anti-intellectualism of American life’ is a frightening development,” write Hafner & Sterling-Folker (1993, 27). They hold that the promotion of popular fiction “signifies an abandonment of serious knowledge and information for the expedient yet ultimately shallow substitute of entertainment and recreation” (1993, 27). On a view espoused by the critics discussed in this section, the promotion of popular fiction clearly conflicts with the institutional mandate to cultivate an informed citizenry.

It is important to see that the debate here is not simply a modern-day rehearsal of the 19th century fiction problem.³⁴ Few contemporary critics object to the mere inclusion of fiction, or even popular fiction, in library collections. The dispute, rather, centers on the neutral provision and active promotion of popular materials. As Andrew Woodworth (2012) advises fellow librarians:

Go on and buy the Snooki book or *Fifty Shades* because of the popular demand for such titles, but there is nothing that says one has to highlight or prominently display the ownership of said items. Inclusion in the collection does not mean it has to be marketed or advertised in light of better options. Such material and its ilk can reside with the rest of collection.

³⁴ See chapter three, section 3.2 for additional historical background on the fiction problem.

The critics cited above are largely concerned with the unreflective promotion of popular materials through contemporary RA service, the institutional privileging of entertainment over education as a reflection of popular demand, and the now-standard refusal among librarians to guide readers towards more edifying works. The main worry is in large part about which sorts of patron preferences are prioritized in the public library and whether popular fiction serves as a distraction from (or perhaps even an obstacle to) the sort of education the library is obligated to provide as a democratic agency.

It is striking that this particularly vehement line of objection to leisure reading for entertainment emanates not from book challengers or cultural conservatives agonizing over the effects of reading “trash,” but rather from critical, largely anti-capitalist scholars and practitioners of LIS. The central motivating concern is always the preservation of democracy and the civic education it entails.

Librarian Ed D’Angelo (2006) presents a particularly clear version of the modern case against promoting popular fiction. His primary focus is on the ways in which consumer capitalism has, on his view, infected the contemporary public library such that it cannot effectively pursue its democratic ends. Consistent with similarly-aligned theorists, D’Angelo maintains that it is the state’s duty to educate the general public so as to develop and sustain an informed electorate. The government, he argues, satisfies this obligation in part via the public library, a state agency committed to providing free education geared towards maintaining a democratic citizenry. One way that the public library does this is by promoting reading for education, which is fundamentally edifying and serves to “improve our understanding...[and our] moral and aesthetic choices” (2006, 27). In contrast, D’Angelo claims that reading for

entertainment “is a passive act of consumption” and thus “a species of consumerism” (2006, 28; 31). On his view, such reading is objectionable because it serves to (1) distract individuals from critical inquiry that might lead to critical action, (2) conflate consumer choice with democratic agency, and (3) aid in interpellating readers as consumers in a capitalist system that does severe damage to (and, on some understandings, actually precludes the possibility of) genuine democracy. The promotion of leisure reading for mere entertainment (as when the librarian recommends or advertises popular titles) is therefore in direct conflict with the overarching mission of the public library as a democratic institution. On the basis of this anti-entertainment view, D’Angelo charges contemporary librarians with “pandering” to their public and shirking their professional responsibility to educate.³⁵

One need not endorse such a strong stance on the effects of reading for entertainment to take issue with the promotion of that reading in the public library. For instance, Hafner & Sterling-Folker (1993) stress that the library is unique in its democratic mission—i.e., “providing free access to knowledge and information for those who want it”—and thus safeguards against both the public’s and the state’s “tyrannical tendencies” (25). Yet by more recently privileging patron demand over and above this political objective, Hafner & Sterling-Folker argue that “increasing circulation statistics” has become “a purpose or end in itself” (1993, 24). On their view, the library has remade itself into something like a private entertainment venue where the only measure of success is use. The worry here is that, as Wayne Bivens-Tatum (2012, 138) puts it in his exegesis of Hafner & Sterling-Folker, “if popularity is the justification for public library

³⁵ It is worth noting that if we accept that most fiction readers do in fact read primarily for entertainment much of the time, then the anti-entertainment view is perhaps at risk of collapsing into an anti-fiction position reminiscent of the sort promulgated in the early days of the modern public library.

collections, rather than some political or moral purpose, then only the most profitable knowledge and information will be available.” The library then no longer stands in the way of social and political tyranny, but rather aligns itself with the same neoliberal or market-driven values that guide most corporate activity (and, I would add, contribute to the overall devalorization of the public library in an age of austerity).

Hafner & Sterling-Folker also note that the going conception of what constitutes “patron demand” is superficial at best. They hold that members of the public may value the library for its advancement of democratic principles, even if individuals’ statements and actions are not always consistent with those principles. “Making decisions about the public library’s future based solely on the consumption of popular entertainment ignores much deeper consumer preferences that are shaped by democratic ideals and are ultimately more powerful” (Hafner & Sterling-Folker 1993, 33). In the end, the authors maintain that “the pursuit of knowledge and self-enlightenment lies at the heart of our democracy,” and that the library ought to stand for those who wish to engage in that pursuit, even if there are significantly fewer of them than those who would use the library for mere entertainment.

The problem, as articulated here, is that there is seemingly intractable tension between the library’s recreational function and its overarching political purpose. There are, however, a few ways that one might resolve this problem without defending a justification for popular fiction promotion arising from that purpose. The first is to deny that the library’s purpose is in fact a democratic one; the second is to endorse the claim that reading is intrinsically valuable and thus worthy of promotion in the library. I will evaluate each of these in turn.

5.3.1 Denying the Library's Democratic Purpose

To resolve this tension between institutional purpose and promotional practice, one might deny that the purpose of the library is in fact democratic.³⁶ Some LIS scholars have attempted to do just that. For example, library historian Michael Harris (1976) famously argues that the founders of the American public library movement conceived of the library not as an educative institution obligated to cultivate a democratic citizenry, but rather “as a deterrent to irresponsibility, intemperance, and rampant democracy,” particularly among 19th-century urban immigrant populations (20-1). Following a somewhat different thread, Wayne Wiegand (2011) has argued that the American public library, rather than being a bastion of democratic ideals, mediates community-based literary values and promulgates social harmony. More recently still, in his historical investigation of the “library in the life of the user,” Wiegand (2015) contends that there is little empirical evidence to support the claim that the public library promotes democratic ideals and citizen engagement. Ultimately, if one believes that the library’s overarching purpose is something other than the advancement of democracy, then promoting popular fiction will not produce the problem associated with tension between democratic ideals and consumer entertainment.

This is one way of dispensing with the putative discord between the library’s democratic purpose and the promotion of recreational reading. However, as a strategy it will do little to convince critics like D’Angelo or Hafner & Sterling-Folker or Bivens-Tatum (or me), because it has no real force for someone who believes that the library’s purpose is democratic—that is, for

³⁶ Critiques of the library’s democratic ends tend to be embedded in historical treatments. As a result, we might argue that, in focusing on what the library has done rather than on what the library *should* do, these arguments actually have very little to do with the question of purpose. That the library has failed to live up to certain of our democratic ideals in the past is no reason to think it should not strive to do so now or in the future. Litigating this point, however, is outside the scope of the present chapter.

someone who does not *already endorse* the presupposition that the library's purpose is something other than the advancement of democratic values. Accepting that presupposition does not resolve the incompatibility referenced above so much as it simply denies the existence of any such incompatibility to begin with.

Bivens-Tatum (2012, 138) makes this point when he says that unreserved populists—those who, in this instance, elevate the desires of ordinary people over the competing political aims of the librarian—might assert that “popular entertainment is what the people want, and libraries should mostly be in the business of providing what people want.” This view implies that the purpose of the library is not, strictly speaking, democratic in the sense that Bivens-Tatum advocates. However, as he points out, the populist's counterargument depends on a particular claim about the telos or purpose of the library, and so it does not address the opposition's claims concerning the ways in which the promotion of popular entertainment undermines democratic ideals. Therefore, if we remain unmoved by the populist's implicit claim that the purpose of the library is something other than the promotion of democratic ideals, then we will remain unmoved by their solution to this problem as well.

5.3.2 Endorsing the Intrinsic Value of Reading

Another way around the incompatibility problem is to argue that all reading has intrinsic value: *that it is good in itself*, rather than as a result of some other good that it brings about (e.g., pleasure, edification). To claim that reading has intrinsic value is to say that reading is good regardless of the quality of the reading material or the (in)felicitous effects it generates. The reading experience may be pleasurable or painful, complex or simple, but reading itself is good all the same.

This is a view sometimes expressed in the literature on contemporary Readers' Advisory services, perhaps most notably by Joyce Saricks (1989/2005), who asserts at the very beginning of her influential book *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* that “readers’ advisors and proponents of the service subscribe wholeheartedly to the philosophy that reading has intrinsic value” (1). Bypassing the problem of purpose entirely, advocates of this view hold that reading is good, and we ought to promote the good. Insofar as many of our patrons are more likely to read popular fiction than other sorts of books, the library ought to promote that fiction (at least contingently³⁷) with the goal of triggering the act of reading. To put it another way, the intrinsic value argument licenses the promotion of whatever materials are most likely to get people reading.

The view seems straightforward enough, but it quickly hits a snag. For even if we accept that reading is good for its own sake, we might nevertheless observe that something could be inherently valuable and yet turn out to be a terrible fit for the library. For instance, philosopher Christine Korsgaard (1983, 185) suggests that mink coats and handsome china are valuable for their own sakes, yet a library service geared towards the circulation or promotion of either would be controversial at best.

Of course, we might think that Korsgaard has simply gotten it wrong: mink coats and handsome china do not in fact have intrinsic value. Reading, on the other hand, does possess such value. Now the onus is on us to (1) defend the view that reading is intrinsically valuable and (2) establish that intrinsic value alone is a perfectly good guide to what the library ought to

³⁷ This view rests on no special allegiance to fiction, popular or otherwise. Whatever materials are empirically proven to trigger the act of reading—e.g., celebrity memoirs, cookbooks, encyclopedias—are, on this view, the materials that ought to be promoted in the library.

promote. This move enters us into longstanding philosophical disputes about whether there is such a thing as intrinsic value, which things have it, and how one can go beyond mere assertion to effectively demonstrate that this is the case.³⁸ This rather arduous exercise is also unlikely to persuade those who do not already believe that reading has intrinsic value. That is, if the goal here is to locate a justification for promoting popular fiction that is persuasive to, e.g., Bivens-Tatum and Hafner & Sterling-Folker, intrinsic value is unlikely to do the job.

Furthermore, (2) sets a particularly high bar, since it all but assumes that the promotion of goods, activities, and states of affairs with intrinsic value will just so happen to align with our going conception of the library. Given the wide range of candidates for bearers of intrinsic value proposed in the philosophical literature—everything from sport (McFee 2009) to genetic integrity (Tanyi 2015) to the natural world (Gruen 2002)—this would seem to be an overly optimistic stance. It appears more plausible that something beyond intrinsic value is needed to justify the promotion of any good or activity in the public library context. If that is indeed the case, then we find ourselves in the same position as folks who do not take reading to be intrinsically valuable in the first place.

5.4 The Case For Promoting Popular Fiction: Considering Candidate Justifications

Because I accept the premise that the library's purpose is in fact fundamentally democratic, this chapter takes seriously the worries expressed by Bivens-Tatum et al. In order to respond effectively to those worries, we must first determine whether a compelling case can be made for how the recreational reading of popular fiction supports the library's democratic ends. The LIS literature currently lacks a clear and convincing argument to that effect. I take it that this failure

³⁸ See Zimmerman (2001).

to provide a satisfactory account of how popular fiction reading furthers the public library's democratic project is partly a result of the profession's legacy of discomfort with recreational fiction reading and the aesthetic pleasure it generates. While we are well past the infamous fiction problem—when nineteenth-century librarians were embroiled in a debate over whether and to what extent fiction even belonged in library collections—the cultural remnants of that dispute remain. Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1987; 2009a; 2009b) maintains that many librarians continue to conceptualize books as existing within a rigid hierarchy of value that situates popular fiction at the very bottom. As Ross (2009b, 4428) notes, “[the] field of librarianship itself has provided a terrain for a more than century-long contest between two opposed views on what to do about people's reading interests”—that is, whether librarians ought to be in the business of educating their patrons or of providing to those patrons what they already want.

Indeed, recreational reading does not have a clear place in the standard vision of the library as a democratic institution devoted to free and equitable information access.³⁹ On the whole, the information-centric approach that now dominates LIS—and the concomitant “exclusionary rhetoric of information” deployed in the discipline (Chelton 1999, 42)—tends to bolster a covertly anti-aesthetic stance, one that takes a rather narrow view of the ways in which the library might go about promoting democratic ideals. This infocentrism thrives in the absence of a solid argument to the effect that popular fiction reading supports (or could support) the democratic aims of the public library.

³⁹ Of the founders of the American public library movement, Harris (1976, 3) notes that “recreational reading was acceptable because it would eventually raise the individual's reading tastes (the uplift theory) or because it was a harmless form of entertainment—it contributed to the maintenance of order.” In other words, fiction was not originally admitted into public library collections to promote democracy. Its early inclusion was more closely aligned with taste elevation and social pacification projects.

The search for a compelling theoretical justification for promoting popular fiction serves as the driving force behind the remainder of this chapter. In the following sections, I consider three candidate justifications that purport to arise from the library's overarching purpose: (1) the need to "get people in the door" of the public library; (2) the informational value of fiction; and (3) the development of alphabetic literacy as a precondition for full democratic participation. I provide a gloss of each of these followed by discussion of some of their implications.

5.4.1 Getting People in the Door

One possible justification for the promotion of popular fiction is that it draws people into the public library where they are more likely to utilize other informational and educational services. This is a rationale with a long history in American public librarianship, appearing as early as 1876 in a report from the Department of the Interior titled *From Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition, and Management*:

The first mistake likely to be made in establishing a public library is choosing books of too thoughtful or solid a character. It is vain to go on the principle of collecting books that people ought to read, and afterwards trying to coax them to read them. The only practical method is to begin by supplying books that people already want to read, and afterwards to do whatever shall be found possible to elevate their reading tastes and habits. (1876, 420)

The justification is not merely an artifact of the early days of modern librarianship, however. Other, more recent defenses exist, as when Odlyzko (1997, 158) asserts that the inclusion of popular entertainment in public library collections is "helpful in developing a wide constituency for libraries and also serves to make people familiar with more respectable information sources that libraries provide." There are essentially two empirical claims here. The first is that popular fiction attracts more people to the library than informational materials do alone; the second is that users who come to the library for fiction also get exposure to the library's informational

materials and services. From both of these, we can infer a justification for the promotion of popular fiction: it gets people through the door, where they are then subject to the library's more edifying services and resources—that is, those that directly contribute to the cultivation of a democratic citizenry.

This justification is, of course, only as good as the empirical evidence. At the very least, circulation statistics do indicate that fiction is indeed frequently checked out, accounting for more than half of public library lending. That said, we do not know what proportion of patrons first come to the library for fiction but go on to avail themselves of the library's other services. As a patron who uses their public library exclusively for access to (mostly popular) fiction, I suspect that there are other fiction-reading patrons who do the same. Moreover, in the age of ebooks, one need not physically go to the library to make use of its collections. A patron can instead check out, read, and return books entirely from the comfort of their own home. The likelihood that such a patron will experience any meaningful exposure to, e.g., information literacy instruction through their library is low.

Empirical worries aside, “getting people in the door” also counts strongly in favor of encouraging popular fiction reading *only* insofar as it entices new users. It then stands to reason that librarians should work to draw these fiction-reading patrons to other sorts of services and aspects of the library's collections. This was indeed the traditional approach to Readers' Advisory service in the library, which aimed to get patrons reading better and better works, and where “nonfiction was the intellectual gold standard” (Crowley 2005, 38). Contemporary readers' advisors vehemently object to this elevationist mode of library service (Lawrence 2017),

rendering the “getting people in the door” justification fundamentally inconsistent with RA best practices.

Finally, we might worry that this justification can be used to support the promotion of a wide range of items and services should the evidence demonstrate that these would persuade people to come to the library. In 2016, the Pew Research Center reported that 24% of U.S. adults ages 16 and older thought that libraries should definitely “move books and stacks out of public spaces to free up more space for meeting and technology areas”; another 40% thought that libraries should maybe do this (Horrigan 2016). It may then turn out to be the case that more people would come to a library if it moved many of its books into staff-only spaces or off-site repositories. The “getting people in the door” justification would support this change, just so long as the new patrons could be shown to go on to use the library’s informational services. It does not afford fiction any special place in the library, only a radically contingent one.

5.4.2 Informational Value of Fiction

A relatively common justification for promoting popular fiction relates to its informational value: much like the nonfiction and non-narrative resources provided by the public library, fiction is a valuable source of factual information. The scope is not limited here only to “serious” literature; mass fiction can have similarly educational benefits. Thus the promotion of fiction reading is a natural fit for the public library, as that reading contributes (or, at the very least, has the capacity to contribute) to the development of an informed citizenry.

Readers of popular fiction sometimes attest to its informational value. For instance, in her influential ethnographic study of a group of romance readers, Janice Radway (1984) states that her interviewees talked at length about the knowledge they acquired as a result of their romance

reading; in fact, they reportedly “spent more time discussing this aspect of romance reading [in their interviews] than any other topic except its escape function and the nature of the romantic fantasy” (107). The women interviewed primarily read historical romances, and so they referenced learning about different time periods and places as a justification for their reading.

Nevertheless, Radway is skeptical of the claim that learning is a primary motive for reading romance.⁴⁰ She interprets her interviewees as engaging in a kind of rhetorical strategy, one that redefines romance-reading “retroactively as goal-directed work, as labor with a purpose, which is itself desirable in cultural terms” (Radway 1984, 107). In other words, the romance readers in the study appealed to a justification that is more persuasive to those in power than, e.g., entertainment value or aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, in another qualitative study of romance readers, sociologist Kim Brackett (2000, 353) describes “citing intellectual validity” as a face-saving strategy commonly deployed to regain or repair credibility when one’s romance reading is made public.

Yet whether a desire to learn genuinely motivates us to read popular fiction, it is surely the case that we do sometimes learn things from that reading. As Thomas Roberts (1990, 129) puts it in his book *The Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, “[none] of us...has ever searched out a science-fiction novel because it has useful information about binary-star systems, but the fact that information of that sort does come our way through science fiction is one of its attractions.” In her influential article “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” children’s literature scholar Rudine Sims

⁴⁰ Radway’s skepticism arises from a marked disparity between what readers reported during in-person interviews and what they recorded on their anonymous questionnaires. While almost all 42 romance readers cited learning as a justification for romance reading in their interviews, fewer than half did so in writing, despite the fact that “learning about faraway places and times” was included in a list of possible reasons for romance reading supplied by Radway. To Radway, this indicates that the power dynamics embedded in a face-to-face interaction with an (academic) interviewer may have elicited what she calls the “reading for instruction” justification from interviewees.

Bishop (1990) speaks to another sort of informational phenomenon, one in which fiction reading allows us to learn about the life experiences of those who are differently situated than us, “[transforming] human experience and [reflecting] it back to us” (ix). More recently, Phil Doty & Ramona Broussard (2017) conducted interviews with eight readers who testified to the various ways in which fiction can in fact be informative *vis-à-vis* the world, human nature, behavioral and social norms, and sympathetic understanding.

However, even if we grant that these reports are true, we do not typically take fiction’s value to be derived from its informational accuracy. A lot of fiction is not factually correct, but may nevertheless be worth reading. Indeed, if we have two romance novels—one that is boring but consistently historically accurate and another that is extremely entertaining but riddled with factual errors—most fiction readers would likely prefer the latter. We might even think the second title is more valuable than the first: that the experience of reading it is qualitatively better.

The informational justification is silent on aesthetic pleasure, functionally reducing the goods of reading fiction to those of reading a newspaper or an encyclopedia. This would seem to get something fundamentally wrong about the nature of fiction reading as a valued and valuable activity. It might also tend to count against the promotion (though perhaps not the collection) of popular fiction titles that include misinformation or lack factual content. As Van Fleet (2008, 226) observes, we ought to be suspicious of justifications that “unintentionally reinforce a hierarchy that values nonfiction reading or information acquisition more highly than other forms of leisure reading.” The informational value justification does precisely that.

5.4.3 Promoting Universal Literacy

The third and final rationale under discussion is one articulated and defended by RA scholar Bill Crowley (2015, 94), who is especially critical of the “intrinsic value” justification previously discussed, or the idea that reading “does not require a higher goal and that it should be valued for itself as a library priority.” Crowley (2014) provides what is perhaps the most promising candidate justification currently on offer, holding that the promotion of books that patrons prefer will increase “simple reading volume,” which will in turn augment individual and societal literacy levels. Alphabetic literacy, he maintains, is a prerequisite for meaningful democratic participation. Thus, encouraging patrons to read what they enjoy stands in service of the library’s political ends. It is “an essential component of the educational mission of the public library” (Crowley 2001, 39).

Crowley cites influential literacy research performed and documented by reading studies scholar Stephen Krashen (2004), who argues that the empirical evidence demonstrates that “more reading results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development” (17). In short, we have good reason to believe that free voluntary reading improves literacy. It is, however, worth acknowledging that the studies Krashen references were performed exclusively on children, whose development of the pleasure reading habit is treated as a precondition on “reading and writing at a level high enough to deal with the demands of today’s world” (Krashen 2004, x). Whether these conclusions extend to adults is something of an open question. Perhaps the library has a moral obligation to provide for young readers that does not translate to an analogous duty to adults, since those who are inclined to

check out fiction at the library have probably already developed the habit to which Krashen refers earlier in their lives.

One might also worry that this justification relies upon a basic “literacy myth,” or a deterministic belief in the progressive consequences of literacy. Harvey Graff (1979) first introduced the concept of the literacy myth as a response to the literacy thesis introduced in Jack Goody & Ian Watt’s (1963) essay, “The Consequences of Literacy.” In that article, the authors famously argue that writing enables historical inquiry, which then gives rise to a whole host of intellectual innovations (e.g., abstract thought, taxonomy, rationality). Ross Collin & Brian Street (2014) counter that “for Goody and like-minded researchers, literacy is a set of technologies that, *more or less autonomous of context*, ignites profound changes in human cognition, social organization, modes of labor, and so forth” (352, emphasis original). While Goody has objected to these charges of determinism (Buschman 2009, 104), it remains the case that literacy is frequently conceived of in this fashion: as a set of skills that necessarily produce positive consequences for individuals and society.

It is this autonomous model that underwrites claims about a necessary relationship between literacy and good social, economic, and moral effects, when in reality literacy—a prime locus of social power—can and has been deployed to maintain systems of social control rather than liberation. This was the case, for example, in the extraordinarily successful literacy campaign launched during the 17th century in Sweden (Graff 1995, 21). The campaign, which centered literacy education in the home and church (in the absence of a system of formal schooling) was largely a conservative, religious effort, one that “marched to its impressive levels of reading diffusion without writing” (Graff 1995, 22). While it may be an old example, the Swedish

campaign illustrates that literacy, in isolation, does not always give rise to increased democratic participation. In fact, it would seem that literacy can be leveraged to do something like the opposite. At the very least, this should make us suspicious of claims that there is something special about literacy such that it *necessarily* transforms individuals into better democratic citizens.

The Universal Literacy justification should thus be formulated so as not to rely upon a myth positing a strong causal relationship between literacy and democracy. Rather than claiming that enhanced literacy will result in increased democratic engagement, it ought to make a yet weaker claim: that alphabetic literacy is a (historically contingent) precondition on meaningful democratic participation, necessary but not sufficient. The view then goes something like this:

(1) Reading what one likes has been shown empirically to increase reading volume. (2) Increased reading volume results in enhanced literacy. (3) Literacy is a prerequisite for democratic participation. (4) The promotion of whatever people like to read (e.g., popular fiction) will enhance literacy, a necessary prerequisite for democratic participation.

Although this version of the Universal Literacy justification is fairly formidable, it is nevertheless vulnerable to a significant objection, which is that Crowley's view only warrants promotion of leisure reading to achieve *the basic levels of literacy necessary to participate in democratic decision-making*. We can understand this as a kind of literacy threshold problem—that is, as a mere prerequisite for democratic participation, we might expect that an individual needs to be “literate enough” to perform certain basic tasks such as reading and comprehending news stories, filling out ballots, engaging in written exchanges with others, and so on. Yet one can also reasonably expect that adults pursuing pleasure reading in the library have already met

this base threshold. To put it another way, reading thirty more romance novels may bring about other benefits for a particular patron, but it is unlikely to make more than a very marginal difference in the alphabetic literacy capabilities necessary to their engagement in democratic processes.

Relatedly, it remains unclear where one can (or ought to) mark out such a literacy threshold. As philosopher of education Amy Gutmann (1999, 276) argues, we are unable to precisely identify “any necessary or sufficient standard of functional literacy”—that is, a minimal level of literacy needed for democratic citizenship. She argues that this is the case “not because citizenship is educationally undemanding, but because it is so demanding... Were the only goal of a democratic state to prepare its members for citizenship, its maxim would be, ‘Mandate the maximum education’” (1999, 278). Any individual needs a complex array of skills (and, as I’ll argue in the next section, characteristics) to effectively exercise democratic citizenship. Given this, Crowley’s justification—and its goal of increasing alphabetic literacy to some unidentifiable but ostensibly necessary standard—would seem to require some additional modification or defense to withstand sustained scrutiny.

5.5 An Alternative: Practicing Democratic Citizenship

In the previous section, I reviewed three potential justifications for the promotion of popular fiction in the public library, identifying theoretical concerns and problematic implications for each. My treatment of these views has been admittedly quick, and therefore leaves open the possibility that one or more of them might yet be recoverable. That recovery is outside the scope of the present chapter, and so I leave the task of rehabilitating the other candidate justifications to their respective advocates.

Here, I wish to propose an alternative justification for promoting popular fiction, one that draws on the reader-response theory of Louise Rosenblatt and Eamonn Callan's conception of public virtue. On my view, fiction reading (and its attendant constellation of individual and social activities) functions as a form of practice for democracy. Through critical reflection and deliberation on *genuine aesthetic experience*, readers cultivate character traits necessary to democratic citizenship. If this is right, then the promotion of popular fiction is—or can be made to be—in direct service of the democratic ends of the public library.

My exegesis of this view begins with Rosenblatt, who was an early practitioner of what came to be called reader-response criticism, an umbrella term for “the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation” (Tompkins 1980, ix). At a time when New Criticism⁴¹ was starting to gain traction in the academy, Rosenblatt proposed a pragmatist theory of reading that would ultimately undermine traditional reader/text dualism. For Rosenblatt, meaning is neither *in the text* nor *in the reader*; instead, “the literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings” (1938, 24). Rosenblatt rejects the notion that there is one true or correct reading of a text waiting to be uncovered by an appropriately trained or engaged reader. Rather, the reader evokes the work of art in the *aesthetic transaction*, or the qualitative experience of reading through the text. The reader subsequently responds to their memory of this “ephemeral personal evocation” rather than to the text itself (Rosenblatt 1978, 132). “The

⁴¹ New Criticism was a school of mid-century literary formalism that advocated textual close-reading as its primary methodology of literary analysis. New Critics (in)famously discounted both authors' and readers' contributions to meaning (see Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, 1949).

transactional view accepts into the aesthetic realm all readings in which the reader attends to the lived-through experience engendered by the text” (Rosenblatt 1978, 155).

Perhaps most famously, Rosenblatt holds that readers take on different stances: efferent (from the Latin *effere*, “to carry away” [Rosenblatt 1938, 32]) and aesthetic. The former characterizes reading for information, while the latter entails “attention primarily to what is being lived through” (Rosenblatt 1978, 185). The aesthetic is what accounts, among other things, for the feeling of being lost in a book: we experience it when any distinction between reader and text melts away. The reader typically moves between aesthetic and efferent reading, for “the transaction with any text stirs up both referential and affective aspects of consciousness, and the proportion of attention given to these will determine where the reading will fall” on a continuum (Rosenblatt 1938, 33). While readers may respond to cues about how to read a text, it is theoretically possible to read any text in a way that is primarily aesthetic or efferent. Furthermore, there is no need to adopt a single stance for the entirety of one reading experience. The reader can—and usually does—move between the “two poles” of the efferent and aesthetic continuum.

Although Rosenblatt is occasionally referenced in LIS—either obliquely or by name—considerations of her theoretical work typically do not go much deeper than this. More often than not, Rosenblatt’s transactional theory is used to defend the view that every reader experiences texts differently and thus we have no grounds for criticism of a particular reader’s interpretation, affective response, or aesthetic taste. As Ross puts it, “if reading is a meaning-making transaction to which the active reader brings half the meaning, then it makes sense to trust and support the reader’s own choices” (Ross 2009a, 653). This, however, treats Rosenblatt’s theory as merely

descriptive, a collection of empirical classroom observations about how people read that ultimately counts in favor of a kind of interpretive agnosticism. The explicitly prescriptive aspects of Rosenblatt's transactional theory are typically ignored in favor of a resolute relativism about both aesthetic quality and literary interpretation—the sort of relativism that Rosenblatt herself vehemently denies, arguing instead that her transactional theory does not devolve into what she calls “evaluative chaos” (Rosenblatt 1978). While, on Rosenblatt's view, there is no single correct reading of a text, different readings can in fact be better or worse than one another, inasmuch as they “do justice” to the original text.

This is key to Rosenblatt's “deliberate social agenda,” which stresses that the “active process” of critical dialogue is a “prerequisite for reaping the rewards of a democracy” (Pradl 1991, 26). Rosenblatt is particularly concerned with the cultivation of sound literary judgement, which begins with “a free uninhibited emotional reaction to a work of art” (Rosenblatt 1938, 72). That reaction can only occur when we engage with a text aesthetically, attending to the qualitative experience of reading it. However, contrary to the going wisdom in some corners of LIS, the existence of an authentic response is not a sufficient condition on sound literary judgment; the reader must also develop “an emotionally organized or reasoned approach to literature” that allows them “to make each literary experience the source of enhanced capacities for [their] next experience” (1938, 72). This requires not only personal response, but considered reflection on that response. The reader can be said to possess sound literary judgment once they develop a disposition to seek “to understand what in the work and in himself produced his reaction, and when he thoughtfully goes on to modify, reject, or accept it” (1938, 72).

Here, Rosenblatt incorporates a notion of public reason, or a mutually acceptable reason to accept as true a given proposition. As Mathiesen (2015a, 437) explains, in a deliberative democracy “we appeal to public reasons when in discussion with fellow members of the political community...we appeal to shared principles, rather than to our own comprehensive conceptions.” On Rosenblatt’s view, the fora in which we discuss literature operate in much the same way: one cannot simply assert that their particular conception of a work is correct; they must appeal to shared principles of interpretation in order to justify that conception to a community of readers. It is each reader’s job both to effectively present their own reactions and interpretations and to listen to and attempt to understand the reactions and interpretations of others. Sometimes we will be moved to alter or refine our own conception of the work, sometimes we will move another to do the same. Rosenblatt’s “transactional program of teaching/learning” thus “reinforces one’s faith in one’s own judgments, even as these judgments are open to question” (Pradl 1991, 33). It is through this dialogic process that readers practice democratic citizenship.

That practice is key to the cultivation of public virtues, or those character traits that citizens (ideally) possess in a liberal democracy. Callan’s (1997) influential account of public virtue includes, for example:

...a lively interest in the question of what life is truly and not just seemingly good, as well as a willingness both to share one’s own answer with others and to heed the many opposing answers they might give; an active commitment to the good of the polity, as well as confidence and competence in judgement regarding how that good should be advanced; a respect for fellow citizens and a sense of common fate with them that goes beyond the tribalism of ethnicity and religion and is yet alive to the significance these will have in many people’s lives. (Callan 1997, 3)

On Callan's view, one is not a democratic citizen merely in virtue of the knowledge or technical skill they possess, but because of the kind of person that they are. They exhibit virtues like those described above. Virtue should be understood here as "the disposition to do the right thing for the right reason, in the appropriate way—honestly, courageously, and so on"; "it is built up by making choices and exercised in the making of future choices" (Annas 2006, 516). To put it another way, one must practice doing the right things for the right reasons in order to develop a standing inclination to do so (i.e., to act virtuously).

This is just what Rosenblatt's educative program is meant to accomplish: we practice Callan's public virtues—critical reflectiveness with regard to the good life, respect for fellow citizens, willingness to be proven wrong, reasonable cultural pluralism—in the course of contemplating and discussing literature, which offers us the opportunity "to think rationally within an emotionally colored context" (Rosenblatt 1938, 217). But it is worth reiterating that this educative process begins with a genuine aesthetic experience, and such an experience can only be had with a text that actually does engage a particular reader. This feature is crucial to the view's justificatory power, for it is what licenses the promotion of popular fiction with which we have good reason to expect readers will transact aesthetically. Further, popularity may widen the scope of readers ready and willing to discuss their responses to a particular book, thereby increasing the likelihood that library patrons can locate diverse interpretations and evaluations of that book (whether in person or online). In other words, the promotion of fiction that engages our patrons—the reading of which gives rise to genuine aesthetic experience—provides the raw materials needed to practice democratic citizenship with literature. This promotion is therefore in direct service of the library's overarching democratic mission.

5.6 Conclusion

If the public library is dedicated to cultivating and sustaining a democratic citizenry, why should it bother promoting popular fiction?

This chapter has presented a new justification for the practice in question, one which should be compelling to critics like Bivens-Tatum and Hafner & Sterling-Folker. On my view, the promotion of popular fiction encourages patrons to have genuine aesthetic experiences with literature. These experiences form the jumping off point for emotionally-colored, critical deliberation through which individuals practice democratic citizenship. The public library is thereby justified in promoting those literary texts they have good reason to believe will engage their patrons aesthetically.

This view, incidentally, is not meant to deny that there are benefits of reading which may or may not be directly democratic, such as relaxation, catharsis, instruction, identity formation, or the development of social connections with other readers.⁴² People read fiction for a variety of reasons, many of which have little to do with becoming a better democratic citizen. It should go without saying that this is not cause for concern. Fiction reading can serve as an ideal forum for the practice of public virtue in large part because readers are diverse in terms of their interpretive dispositions, meaning-making capacities, and motivations for reading. The undeniable plurality of experiences and reasons is a resource for the Rosenblattian justification rather than a hindrance.

Significantly, one's underlying justification for the promotion of popular fiction will inevitably influence the mode of promotion itself. Although this chapter presents a justification

⁴² For foundational research in LIS on the topic of readers' motivations, see Ross (1991; 1995; 1999; 2001).

that—unlike, e.g., *Getting People in the Door*—does not radically conflict with current best practices, it nevertheless implicates Readers’ Advisory in a kind of virtue education with which it has not historically been affiliated. If the promotion of popular fiction is to be geared towards facilitating the cultivation of virtues necessary for democratic citizenship, it stands to reason that readers’ advisors will adopt certain practices in support of that aim (such as, for instance, encouraging patrons to discuss literature with each other in particular ways and to particular ends). In the next and final chapter, I will investigate how this new justification—along with the revisions laid out in the previous two critiques—produces an alternative recommendation model for Readers’ Advisory. Among other things, the ensuing discussion will demonstrate just what the effects of this paradigm-shifting justification ought to be on the practice of Readers’ Advisory.

CHAPTER 6: AN AESTHETIC EDUCATION MODEL FOR READERS' ADVISORY

6.1 Introduction

In the last three chapters, I have articulated critiques of the pure preference satisfaction model (PPSM) currently underpinning Readers' Advisory best practices. The first of these critiques, the prescriptivist challenge, centered on inconsistencies between the model's intended purpose and its actual functions. Although the core practical literature typically presents RA as a resolutely populist and value-neutral matchmaking service, I demonstrated how it remains robustly prescriptive in several key respects.⁴³ In the second critique, I illustrated how RA's contemporary commitment to pure preference satisfaction and corresponding regulative ideal of aesthetic agnosticism systematically prevent it from actively intervening in or disrupting tastes that are themselves constitutive of oppression, a social phenomenon that (among other things) inhibits full democratic participation. Finally, the third critique charged that the promotion of popular literature—a central practice of RA—presently lacks a compelling theoretical justification rooted in the foundational political project of the public library.

Taken together, these three critiques present significant problems for contemporary Readers' Advisory. RA is revealed to be much more normatively complex than the practical literature presently allows, implicated in a project of taste elevation in leisure activities and conceptually bound to issue aesthetic verdicts *contra* best practices. RA also finds itself in conflict with other core library values—namely social responsibility (or social justice) and democracy—and increasingly out of step with compelling practices arising from critical librarianship.

⁴³ See chapter two for a full account of these.

Furthermore, the present lack of theoretical justification for popular fiction promotion renders RA's place in the library precarious, feeding into the services' marginalization among library administrators and educators who persist in treating it as a mere "add-on" to reference.

Of course, each of the preceding challenges concludes by articulating theoretical and practical revisions aimed at responding to (and mitigating the potential harms associated with) the critiques themselves. In response to the first critique, RA could embrace its unavoidably prescriptive role and begin developing more robustly action-guiding theories of practice—by, for instance, acknowledging the degree to which RA functions as a normative project of taste elevation and consequently clarifying the acceptable aims of that elevation. In response to the second critique, RA could incorporate a new principle of social justice into the moral framework that forms the basis for contemporary leisure reading services. And, finally, in response to the third critique, RA could adopt a new justification for the present-day promotion of mass fiction, one in which reading and reflecting on popular literature serve as practice for civic participation, gradually cultivating public virtues necessary to democratic citizenship.

Individually these changes may appear unproblematic. However, the trouble comes when we seek to make more than one of them, only to discover that their effects are not merely additive. With a new theoretical justification, a new social justice principle, and a range of modifications made in light of RA's irrevocable prescriptivism, it seems fair to say that we are now looking at a radically different service, one for which the pure preference satisfaction model can no longer account. To put it another way, the previously recommended changes are, in combination, transformative. In their wake, RA becomes a new sort of service, geared towards novel and explicitly political objectives. An RA that is revised in accordance with each of the three

critiques is clearly operating as something other than a matchmaking mechanism between readers and books. So then what, we might wonder, is it doing?

To answer that question, we need some unifying account of the new approach to RA that these revisions ultimately generate. This is the project of this final chapter, in which I will propose an alternative model for Readers' Advisory that provides a theoretical explanation and rationale for the revised service. The new aesthetic education model (AEM) that I explicate—constructed in part from the response theory of Louise Rosenblatt⁴⁴—seeks to develop in library users certain epistemic and perceptual virtues required for democratic citizenship; it does so through guided book selection, aesthetic reading, critical reflection, and engagement with other differently-situated readers. The second half of the chapter will take this new model “from print to practice” (Smith 2000, 137), elucidating how an RA underpinned by the AEM would function in the library itself. Finally, I will address how the proposed model resolves the challenges raised by the three critiques articulated in chapters three through five. In its entirety, this chapter paints a picture of RA *qua* aesthetic education: of what it is and what it aims to do within the larger political project of the public library.

6.2 The Aesthetic Education Model

The new model proposed in this chapter is one geared towards a special form of *aesthetic education*. Aesthetic education refers, generally, to “deliberate efforts to foster increasingly informed and involved encounters with art” (Greene 1995, 138). It is important to distinguish aesthetic education from arts education; whereas the latter focuses on artistic production in different media, the former centers on developing both our appreciative capacities and our ability

⁴⁴ See chapter four for an in-depth discussion of Rosenblatt's theoretical insights.

to engage in the critical evaluation of artworks, with the larger objective of “[educating] individuals toward the recognition and enhancement of the role that aesthetics can play in human wellbeing” (Dhillon 2009, 114). In the Rosenblattian formulation endorsed here, aesthetic education involves the guided selection of literary texts and critical engagement with them as practice for democratic citizenship.

The aesthetic education model for Readers’ Advisory seeks to promote a robustly participatory process through which individuals develop civic virtues, or those dispositions necessary to full and meaningful participation in a democratic community (traits like, e.g., responsiveness to reason, testimonial justice, and critical reflectiveness). The AEM takes as its overarching objective the cultivation of these virtues as a means of sustaining healthy democratic functioning. In other words, the model aims to train up democratic citizens. It does so by (a) guiding readers to a rich array of texts with which they can have genuine aesthetic experiences and (b) facilitating readers’ engagement in critical dialogue about those experiences.

This is a process that necessarily involves the development of readers’ appreciative capacities, “enabling [them] to notice what is there to be noticed” such that they experience works of art as “variously meaningful” (Greene 2001, 175). Such enhanced appreciation is both a prerequisite for having aesthetic experiences—for attending to varied texts as aesthetic objects—and a result of productive deliberation with other readers, whose diverse perspectives call on the reader to try out other perspectives and interpretive strategies. Significantly, because the AEM aims to catalyze a dialogic process analogous to democratic deliberation, it also provides a key heuristic for determining when critical interventions in patrons’ tastes are warranted and appropriate. Under the AEM, such interventions are justified only if they target practices,

preferences, or norms that impede the civic process RA seeks to foster. Oppressive tastes—as discussed in chapter four—serve as a paradigmatic example of one type of preference for which librarians’ efforts at modification would thus be warranted in this model, but there are likely others.⁴⁵

In the AEM, the primary user need being served, the method(s) of fulfilling that need, and the ancillary services required for fulfillment differ from those of the pure preference satisfaction model (see Table 2).

	Pure Preference Satisfaction Model (PPSM)	Aesthetic Education Model (AEM)
User Need Identified	Identify leisure reading materials consistent with current preferences	Identify leisure reading materials with which the user can have genuine aesthetic experiences
Method of Fulfillment	Librarian provides nonjudgmental reading recommendations that match the patron’s preferences	Librarian provides reading recommendations that are likely to afford the patron a genuine aesthetic experience.
Justification for Method	To promote reading <i>simpliciter</i>	To promote the cultivation of virtues necessary to full democratic participation
Ancillary Services Required	Direct and indirect recommendations	Direct and indirect recommendations; fora for critical dialogue; facilitation of critical dialogue

TABLE 2. PPSM VS. AEM

While the PPSM aims to help readers find books consistent with their established preferences, the primary user need the AEM seeks to fulfill is for the identification of leisure reading materials with which the patron can have genuine aesthetic experiences. These experiences—or evocations of the literary work of art—will eventually serve as the raw material

⁴⁵ See section 6.4 for a discussion of future research into instances where such interventions are justified.

required for practicing democratic deliberation: for testing out ideas, considering alternate interpretations, and adjusting one's views in light of new evidence. The educative objectives RA serves under the AEM thus require that readers first locate texts that will engage them aesthetically—that is, texts that will elicit an experience that “closes the distance between the person who has the experience and the work of art, which becomes no longer just one object in an external world, but for a time the person's world itself, the world of [their] fully absorbed experience” (Goldman 2006, 334). Assisting in that identification is the job of the readers' advisor, whose conversation with the reader, extensive knowledge of the literary landscape, and sound aesthetic judgment means that they are ideally equipped to guide the patron in the identification of such texts. This guidance is justified on the grounds that genuine aesthetic experience is a prerequisite for critical dialogic processes through which individuals cultivate the virtues necessary for full democratic participation. Finally, the AEM entails broadening the scope of RA services to include the creation and facilitation of fora for critical dialogue about literature.

Table 2 above illustrates the ways in which the PPSM and the AEM differ with respect to the user needs they identify, the prescribed methods of fulfilling those needs, the justifications for these methods, and, finally, the ancillary services required. The PPSM takes users to need assistance identifying leisure reading materials consistent with their current preferences. In order to satisfy that need, the PPSM advocates the provision of nonjudgmental reading recommendations that match the patron to books that accord with the patron's current preferences. The justification for this method is that it is the most effective way for RA to promote reading itself rather than reading of a particular sort or for a particular purpose. In contrast, the table indicates that the AEM takes users to need help, first and foremost, locating

leisure reading materials with which they can have genuine aesthetic experiences. The AEM thus calls on librarians to provide reading recommendations that are likely to afford the patron this kind of experience. Instead of the promotion of reading *simpliciter*, the approach mandated by the AEM seeks to promote the cultivation of virtues necessary to full democratic participation.

An adherent of the PPSM might object that the AEM treats the value of reading as instrumental rather than intrinsic, since the latter model holds that the practice is valuable insofar as it provides opportunities to further another end—in this case, practicing democratic citizenship. However, it is important to note that one need not endorse the claim that this is the *only* value reading has in general. My view is silent on other ways in which reading might be intrinsically or even instrumentally valuable. We can therefore accept the account of reading's value articulated above without ruling out any other possible values. Indeed, reading is clearly a source of goods apart from the development of civic virtue, such as pleasure and information acquisition. The AEM does not deny that this is the case—in fact, these other goods are sometimes quite relevant to the process of aesthetic education outlined later in this chapter, as when differently-situated readers compare their favorite scenes or characters in a work of literature.

6.3 From Print to Practice

The AEM supports an iterative process of aesthetic discovery, one in which selection serves as a necessary prerequisite to critical reflection and critical reflection subsequently informs the next instance of selection. These two stages—one at the point of selection, the other at the point of reflection—are both underpinned by Rosenblatt's reader-response theory; they also make differing demands on the readers' advisor. In this section, I will (a) explicate the Rosenblattian

theoretical foundations of each of these stages of RA under the AEM and (b) illustrate how the proposed model might look in practice—that is, what all of this theory means for the actual day-to-day work of RA practitioners.

6.3.1 At the Point of Selection

In Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) transactional theory of reading, literary works are not synonymous with texts but rather are 'evoked' by a reader in an aesthetic transaction with a text. In the aesthetic transaction, the reader attends to the qualitative, lived-through experience of reading, and it is this—i.e., aesthetic attention in the presence of the text at a particular time and place and under particular circumstances—that generates the literary work of art. On Rosenblatt's view, texts themselves do not have meanings; they are rendered *meaningful* to and by individuals embedded in certain forms of life. As Alan Purves puts it in his exegesis of the transactional theory of reading, "texts become alive only when they are read, and they become literary only when a sufficient body of readers chooses to read them as aesthetic objects rather than as informational documents" (1990, 87). Here, the qualitative, spatiotemporal experience is itself the literary work of art: it "comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and 'the text'" (Rosenblatt 1978, 14). The work is a concrete event in time, the outcome of a number of varied, contingent elements (e.g., the reader, the setting). "Change any of these," Rosenblatt holds, "and there occurs a different circuit, a different event" (1978, 14).

As I argued in chapter five, this event—or what Rosenblatt sometimes refers to roughly interchangeably as the "poem," "literary work," or "aesthetic experience"—is a prerequisite for using literature to develop civic virtue, and this is what grounds the promotion of popular materials in the library's mission to promote and sustain successful democratic functioning. If

what we want is for readers to engage in critical discourse geared towards the cultivation of public virtue, we must work to facilitate genuine aesthetic experiences with texts. This is because, before they can engage in critical dialogue with other readers, an individual must evoke a literary work and experience their own rudimentary response to that work; this is the necessary starting point, “no matter how imperfect or mistaken” the response itself may be (Rosenblatt 1938, 50). The RA practitioner’s first goal must then be “the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature” (Rosenblatt 1938, 58).

We might think that this counts in favor of simply giving the reader recommendations for books that accord with their established preferences, but this is not quite right. While the central imperative of the PPSM is to “give the reader what they want,” the AEM holds that librarians are called on to “give the reader those texts with which they are likely to have genuine aesthetic experiences.” There is a nuanced distinction here. Of course the readers’ advisor must still be sensitive to the patron’s particular taste preferences, but also to other factors that bear on one’s capacity or inclination to evoke a literary work from a particular text—factors like, e.g., the reader’s background, capabilities, and reservoir of experience. After all, as Rosenblatt notes, “[an] intense response to a work will have its roots in capacities and experiences already present in the personality and mind of the reader” (Rosenblatt 1938, 41).

Existing taste preferences—that is, tendencies to experience dis/pleasure in response to certain aesthetic properties—are therefore only one (albeit significant) factor in the selection and recommendation of texts under the AEM. Whereas adherents of the PPSM hold that a “major goal of librarians must be to increase the number of...positive responses to texts” as a means to promote reading itself (Shearer 2001, xiv), an advocate of the AEM would counter that this goal

should be replaced with a subtly different alternative: to increase the number and quality of aesthetic responses to texts. Such responses are not always pleasurable, at least not in the typical sense. Disgust, after all, is (or can be) an aesthetic response, sometimes itself functioning to “[promote] understanding of the meaning of a work” (Korsmeyer 753-4, 2012). In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes famously distinguishes between texts of pleasure (*plaisir*) and texts of bliss (*jouissance*). A text of pleasure “contents, fills, grants euphoria”; it is “the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading” (Barthes 1975, 14). A text of bliss, on the other hand, “imposes a state of loss... discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 1975, 14). Texts of pleasure are predictable, oriented towards familiar and pleasing patterns, whereas texts of bliss are uncomfortable, disruptive, and sometimes in conflict with one’s stated preferences. As children’s literature scholars Perry Nodelman & Mavis Reimer (2003, 24) note, this distinction does not on its own count in favor of reading one sort of text over the other; rather, “it seems preferable to celebrate both and to enjoy both—to acknowledge and indulge both the *plaisir* of expected patterns and meanings and the *jouissance* of unexpected disruptions and resistances.”

The librarian issuing recommendations under the AEM will take seriously the merit in different sorts of aesthetic responses to texts—the value of both *plaisir* and *jouissance*—and, further, will seek to expose the reader to a range of books that are likely to elicit new or novel responses (and therefore provide good fodder for critical dialogue that enhances appreciative capacities). The readers’ advisor will aim to increase the patron’s aesthetic autonomy by

empowering them to choose among these options, but would also model good norms of selection through the systematic inclusion of books from a variety of perspectives, particularly those written by and about individuals subject to institutional oppression. This work should be performed—at least in the case of direct RA—in the context of a conversation where patrons share with the librarian the details of their past aesthetic experiences and what they are currently seeking out of new ones. Indeed, Duncan Smith (2001) has argued that empirical research—like Kenneth Shearer’s (1996) “secret shopper” study of RA service in several North Carolina public libraries—indicates that patrons are hungry for just this sort of conversation:

Discussions of readers’ advisory service have tended to assume that, like reference, the product of the service is an answer. In the case of reader’s advisory service, the answer is frequently a specific suggestion or a list of authors and titles. One of the interesting implications of Shearer’s work is that it suggests that this view is too narrow. Readers apparently want an opportunity to share their personal reading experiences. This sharing seems as important as a reading suggestion, if not more so. Shearer’s study seems to indicate that readers may value the conversations they have with staff as much as the reading suggestions themselves. (Smith 2001, 61)

In these conversations the AEM decouples aesthetic taste from aesthetic choice, acknowledging that “[aesthetic] choice sometimes [leads] us beyond our taste” and “sometimes [helps] us to remain within its bounds” (Melchionne 2017, 298). In other words, the new model does not understand current taste alone as the sole determining factor guiding aesthetic choice. As a result, it frees the librarian up to promote a wider range of reading projects and practices geared towards enhancing patrons’ aesthetic lives. For instance, a librarian might recommend a book club selection to a potentially interested patron in an effort to facilitate that patron’s critical engagement with a community of readers, or they may create book displays that provide guided exposure to #ownvoices titles, thus targeting oppressive tastes. The readers’ advisor might also

promote participation in established aesthetic projects like *Book Riot's* Read Harder challenge, where individual's read (and have the option to discuss) books in an annual list of categories that include things like, e.g., an Oprah Book Club selection, a book of colonial or postcolonial literature, a book with a cover you hate, or a mystery by a person of color or LGBTQ+ author. This sort of challenge encourages patrons to seek out novel aesthetic experiences and to share them with a community of similarly invested readers.

It is important to note that these are not—and are not intended to be—entirely original or unorthodox suggestions. Some library practitioners already engage in just the sorts of activities mentioned above. However, these activities are not supported by the going theory of best practices in RA—that is, they are inconsistent with a pure preference satisfaction approach to the service—and so are not always understood as aspects of a single cohesive pedagogical project. The AEM, on the other hand, provides these promotional practices with a theoretical underpinning and justification that unifies them under the umbrella of RA-as-aesthetic-education. The overarching goal of selection in this model is to guide patrons to texts that are likely to elicit genuine aesthetic experiences, and not merely to those texts that suit their preferences as they are currently constituted. This provides the necessary antecedent experience (or literary work) on the basis of which critical dialogue can ensue.

6.3.2 At the Point of Reflection

Under the AEM, selection is geared towards eliciting aesthetic experiences with texts. It is these experiences that we refer back to when we discuss books with others. Such discussions require that readers recreate the literary work from memory for the purposes of interpretation, weaving together affective and cognitive responses, painting a picture of the lived through event

for others. In the sort of aesthetic education Rosenblatt endorses, one must learn to “[bring this] re-creation of what is read out into the open,” where our “public articulations” of that re-creation stand alongside—and inevitably come into conflict with—competing evocations (Purves 1990, 89). In other words, we must articulate a re-creation of an aesthetic experience to which we do not have direct access, negotiating and renegotiating meaning in conversation with other individuals who evoked differing works from the same text.

For Rosenblatt, this dialogue with other readers is just as educationally significant as having evoked the literary work in the first place. This is because, on her view, the “active process” of critical dialogue is a “prerequisite for reaping the rewards of a democracy” (Pradl 1991, 26).⁴⁶ Rosenblatt argues that literature provides us with a special forum for challenging one another’s views, for testing out and refining ideas, for “[developing] the ability to think rationally within an emotionally colored context” (Rosenblatt 1938, 217). In fact, discussions of literary experience are particularly valuable to civic development precisely because they call on participants to negotiate meaning amid (sometimes quite strong) affective reactions and intuitions, arising both in themselves and in others; here, Rosenblatt takes a page from Dewey, who maintains that “rationality does not exist in opposition to emotion but rather represents the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires” (Rosenblatt 1938, 227).

Rosenblatt is largely concerned with how this all plays out in the classroom context, within which the instructor’s job is to facilitate deliberation among students while simultaneously “[participating] as one of the group” (Rosenblatt 1938, 68-9). Because some interpretations of

⁴⁶ More recent editions of Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* deemphasize the political agenda to which I refer here, removing a number of references to the cultivation of democratic citizenship through engagement with literature. For a fuller discussion of this editorial shift, see Pradl (1991) and Dressman & Webster (2001).

literary works are more plausible than others—that is, are better supported by the relevant text—students are called on to offer up their own readings and to consider competing ones. Throughout this process, readers return time and again to the text in order to try out differing interpretive strategies, to persuade other readers and to be persuaded by them.

Some might object, as reader-response critic Stanley Fish famously has, that this sort of return to the text is nothing more than a “rhetorical ploy” (1982, 354). This is because, on Fish’s account, we do not read a text and then interpret it. Rather, the interpretive strategies that we deploy produce the text itself; within a given interpretive community “there is no core of agreement *in* the text, there is a core of agreement (although one subject to change) concerning the ways of *producing* the text” (1982, 342, emphasis original). If “the text is always a function of interpretation” (1982, 342), then disagreements about interpretation are fundamentally disagreements about how we generate meaning. From this it follows that, “[strictly] speaking, getting ‘back-to-the-text’ is not a move one can perform, because the text one gets back to will be the text demanded by some other interpretation and that interpretation will be presiding over its production” (Fish 1982, 354).

Yet even if one grants that this is the case, it does not make any serious trouble for Rosenblatt’s political agenda. This is because the democratic value of critical dialogue concerning literature is not located just in the weighing of different interpretations against one another but in the identification of mutually acceptable norms of textual interpretation. That is, even if Fish is right that directing another reader back to the text is “merely” rhetorical, the ensuing communal process of agreeing upon *ways* of interpreting is still pedagogically productive. In fact, it is a process that would seem to closely mirror collective deliberation in the

political realm, where individuals collaborate to identify mutually acceptable justifications for particular interpretations of events and courses of action. The Rosenblattian literature classroom thus functions as a special kind of interpretive community, establishing shared norms of textual analysis and engaging in “the free exchange of ideas [that] will lead each student to scrutinize [their] own sense of the literary work in the light of the others’ opinions” (Rosenblatt 1938, 104).

I have observed this process as the instructor of a course on the popular romance genre, for which students read and discussed Courtney Milan’s novel *Hold Me*. The book chronicles the developing relationship between the heroine Maria Lopez and the hero Jay na Thalang—the former a returning college student who writes a popular apocalypse blog pseudonymously, the latter an ambitious young physics professor on the tenure track. The two maintain an anonymous friendship online (Jay is a fan of Maria’s blog) but clash in spectacular fashion when they unknowingly meet in person. Maria bristles at Jay’s rigidity and pretension, while Jay struggles to take Maria seriously as an intellectual equal. This being a romance novel, heroine and hero eventually discover one another’s true identities and subsequently fall in love, but not before Jay embarks on a project of self-improvement that involves, among other things, grappling with the sexist nature of his initial reaction to Maria.

Despite the hero’s personal transformation, my students’ positions coming into the classroom were sharply divided on the character. Some held that he was appropriately repentant and that his backstory went some way towards softening, if not refuting, charges of misogyny leveled against him. Others were so appalled by his behavior early in the book that they were unable to accept him as a worthy romantic partner for Maria. What ensued was an often impassioned debate about whether Jay did enough in the end—or *could* do enough—to “earn” his happily ever after with

Maria. Students on both sides referred back to the text, citing different scenes and bits of dialogue as evidence in support of their respective positions. One pro-Jay student drew an analogy between Jay and Mr. Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, an intertextual move that proved compelling to several heretofore unsympathetic readers; another asked their fellow students to consider aspects of Jay's cultural and professional background and the degree to which these informed his comportment towards Maria. As the conversation evolved, one student drew a connection to the #metoo movement, ultimately asking a larger question about what we ought to require of offenders before we consider them to be adequately morally rehabilitated.

Over the course of this conversation, some students appeared to be swayed by their peers' arguments and adjusted or reformulated their own positions. Others remained unmoved. In both cases, readers (students *and* instructor) presented "public articulations" of their aesthetic experiences with the text, detailing their affective and cognitive responses to Jay as a character and offering (re)interpretations of scenes relevant to the debate. And while the discussion was at times heated, it never devolved into a screaming match or recalcitrant factionalism. Rather, students worked through issues related to, e.g., gendered power asymmetries, intersectionality, everyday misogyny, and the limits of forgiveness in a context one step removed from contemporary events. And by the time the conversation turned to an explicit consideration of #metoo, the group had already developed facility with the literary work that allowed them to continue to use it as a communal touchpoint: a shared reservoir of experience on which to draw.

We might wonder whether discussions like the one described above are likely to occur in the context of the public library, which is a qualitatively different context from the literature classroom. Library patrons, after all, are not required to show up weekly having read the same

book, prepared for a critical discussion of it. Yet I maintain that the library is in some ways an even better venue for the critical discussion of books than the classroom, in part because it is a lower stakes environment and so less likely to trigger the kind of efferent reading to which students often default in an effort to answer an instructor's questions "correctly." The impulse to try to produce an accurate interpretation—as if there were only one available—can be quite strong in formal academic environments and sometimes quashes bolder or more creative interpretive practices. The public library, on the other hand, is strongly associated with leisure reading and the provision of popular literature, features that mark it as more open to informal conversation about books. Furthermore, the library often serves a more varied community of readers than any single classroom, and is therefore well-positioned to put quite differently-situated readers in contact with one another, prompting "situated encounters" with literature wherein "the perceivers of a given work of art apprehend that work in the light of their backgrounds, biographies, and experiences" (Greene 2001, 175).

Still, surely Rosenblatt's educational project will look somewhat different in our own institutional context. How does the AEM alter or reimagine RA at the point of reflection—that is, once a reader has had a genuine aesthetic experience with some text?

The AEM takes critical discourse geared towards democratic development as a unifying objective for RA, and this in turn shapes what the library is called on to offer its patrons. On this account, book clubs become a particularly significant form of library programming. Sociologist Elizabeth Long (2003, 74)—who has argued that reading is a robustly social (rather than merely an isolated) activity—concludes in her ethnographic study of white women's book clubs in Houston, Texas that, "at their best, such groups provide their members with a compelling

synthesis of the pleasures of reading and sociability, revealing the book through the lens of other people's perception and illuminating other people's experience through the lens of the book.”

Empirically, we see that reading groups offer voluntary opportunities for just the sort of critical discourse previously discussed, and so are a natural fit for an RA service underpinned by the AEM.

Of course, book clubs are also relatively time- and labor-intensive affairs. They are also, for these and other reasons, unlikely to reach a significant proportion of the library's leisure-reading community. There are a number of other ways, however, to expose these patrons to the aesthetic experiences of their fellow readers and thus to elicit critical reflection of the kind I have described above. The library catalog, for instance, provides several such opportunities through, e.g., user tagging and the ability to add and read other patrons' reviews. Initiatives that allow patrons to recommend books to others can serve a similar purpose, as can the promotion of book discussions hosted online through GoodReads or another platform. While in-person book clubs may offer something like the “gold standard” for Rosenblattian civic discourse, they should be conceived of as part of a larger project of aesthetic education through which a culture of reading and critical interpretation comes to flourish in the library.

One might yet object that there are more direct ways to accomplish the ends supported by the AEM. If the overarching goal is to enable full political participation, why not simply run civics classes out of the library? Such classes serve as a venue for learning about the intricacies of democratic citizenship and one's own duties with respect to it, and so could be a useful addition to a library's repertoire of programs and educational initiatives.

While this is certainly true, civics courses typically target students' epistemic states rather than their dispositions, and therefore do not offer what Readers' Advisory (under the AEM) is positioned to offer. That is, whereas civic education focuses on knowledge acquisition, Rosenblattian aesthetic education aims at virtue cultivation. It is one thing to learn about democratic citizenship; it is another to practice it with others. Furthermore, in the context of RA, there are features of that practice that undermine tribalism and dogmatic adherence to previously-held beliefs. As with the #metoo example described earlier in this section, readers engage in critical discourse within an "emotionally-colored context" (Rosenblatt 1938, 217) but at one step's removal from the events of the real world. Further, as literary scholar Thomas Roberts (1990) has observed, popular fiction affords those of us wearied by the exigencies of daily life the opportunity to "think with tired brains," to work through problems and concerns arising in a narrative that entertains us; it is, in short, less cognitively depleting and more psychologically satisfying than sitting in a classroom. And so while formalized civics courses can still prove valuable, they are a poor substitute for the guided, critical discussion of fictional works.

6.4 Where do we go from here?

The critiques of contemporary Readers' Advisory articulated throughout this dissertation do not present problems for the alternative aesthetic education model proposed here. However, this does not mean that there are no other critiques available, nor that the AEM will not at some point require revision either in theory or in practice. Reimagining Readers' Advisory as aesthetic education resolves some of the inconsistencies between going best practices and the work currently being performed by critical practitioners, but it certainly does not represent a definitive

resolution to any and all problems relevant to RA service. Indeed, there remains much scholarly work to be done on RA. To that end, in this final section I will suggest some potential avenues for further conceptual and empirical research.

6.4.1 Taste-Based Interventions

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that the AEM provides us with a rule of thumb for determining when it is permissible—or even morally required—to intervene on the tastes of library patrons. That rule holds that such interventions are only justified if they target practices, preferences, or norms that tend to impede democratic deliberation. My work in chapter four has identified a special class of tastes about which librarians have reason to be particularly concerned (i.e., those tastes that are constitutive of oppression) and holds that such tastes are both harmful and pervasive. Oppressive tastes pose a special threat to democratic participation and so we as promoters of democracy are called on to remediate these tastes in particular. However, my view is silent with respect to the wider class of harmful tastes, generally, or any types of taste that call on us to intervene. There may be others of either of these sorts, there may not be, and it remains an area worth investigating further. The central question here is whether and what other aesthetic practices, preferences, or norms tend to hamper the civic processes that RA seeks to promote.

In any case, taste-based interventions bring with them reasonable concerns related to cultural imperialism and coercion. It is worth acknowledging here that the identification of oppressive tastes in particular can be difficult and only made more so by the complexities of social identity (both the patron's and the librarian's). Future research on RA should look to the feminist literature on intersectionality as a resource for examining the complex power dynamics at play here. Oppressive tastes are oppressive in as much as they serve to sustain unjust power

structures, and so it would seem that anyone can develop this sort of aesthetic preference, even those who are themselves discriminated against on other grounds (or the same grounds, as in cases of, e.g., internalized homophobia). This does not mean, however, that the way in which one challenges such tastes should not vary with the identities of the actors involved. That librarianship remains a predominately white profession renders worries about cultural colonialism in RA especially urgent.

Finally, determining that *some* taste-based intervention is called for is not the same thing as identifying the sort of intervention that will prove effective. In terms of implementation, there is a need for empirical research to establish what kinds of interventions bring about the desired consequences in particular contexts. As I noted in chapter four, *vis-à-vis* the problem of oppressive tastes, A.W. Eaton (2015) proposes an educational project of Aristotelian taste habituation that would guide individuals in more socially just forms of aesthetic appreciation. The success of such a project in the library will almost certainly require some empirical testing with actual human participants, and a similar claim can be made for most any proposed intervention.

6.4.2 The Hermeneutics of Readers' Advisory

There is presently a dearth of research on the hermeneutics of RA labor—that is, on the ways in which actual readers advisors understand and meaningfully interpret the service they provide. While I have utilized practitioners' testimonies at various points throughout the dissertation, a fuller picture of RA practice calls for sociological and ethnographic investigations of readers' advisors themselves. Further, phenomenological treatments of the service could shed light on the experiential quality of patron-practitioner transactions, particularly the RA conversation.

On the patron side, we know fairly little about how library users make sense of readers' advisors and the (explicit and implicit) leisure reading recommendations they offer. Among other things, such research could help us to grasp whether patrons harbor any expectation that librarians will direct them towards high quality fictional works and, if they do, what implications this might have for how we do RA.

6.4.3 Critical Analysis in the Communications Circuit

As we move towards a future where automated recommendation increasingly guides our everyday aesthetic practices, questions about the value of human recommenders will only increase in frequency and intensity. LIS scholars must therefore make a concerted effort to attend more closely to the theoretical underpinnings and ethics of the library's own recommendation practices. To that end, we are overdue for critical analyses of the ways in which the library operates as part of a larger "communications circuit"⁴⁷ that includes, e.g., authors, publishers, booksellers, and readers. RA frequently utilizes heuristics of aesthetic value generated elsewhere in that circuit (such as book reviews and literary prizes), and so runs the risk of inheriting and perpetuating structural discrimination that harms marginalized authors and readers alike.

Critical interrogations into inequitable and exclusionary publishing practices are very much within the domain of LIS and, further, ought to inform the ways in which libraries go about selecting and promoting leisure reading materials. One possible area of inquiry centers on mainstream publishers' heavy reliance upon so-called "Comp Titles" (i.e., comparable titles) when deciding whether to acquire a book. Editors appeal to such titles to justify acquisitions (and, later, promotional and editorial) decisions, arguing that a particular manuscript under

⁴⁷ See Darnton (1982).

consideration resembles this or that other successful title and so ought to be acquired.

Computational research conducted by Laura McGrath (2019) of Stanford's Literary Lab has shown that the most frequently cited comp titles are disproportionately by white authors—in fact, just 22 of the top 500 comps were written by authors of color—and thus “codify the discrimination that writers of color have long faced, perpetuating institutional racism through prescription: *this should be like that — if you want to be published — if you want to be well paid*” (emphasis original).

Beyond being an appropriate subject of investigation in its own right, this phenomenon should be of particular interest to RA scholars and practitioners, who will surely recognize the obvious rhetorical similarities between comp titles and read-alikes. Whereas the former is used to justify acquisitions and advertising decisions, the latter is used to justify leisure reading recommendations in virtue of similarities between titles. McGrath's treatment of comp titles is instructive in that it points the way to a similar analysis of popular read-alikes. Further, reports of institutionalized bigotry in the publishing industry give us reason to suppose that librarians may have some ethical obligation to explore and support more equitable alternatives to mainstream publishing, such as indie and self-publishing. With respect to discrimination in publishing, we might ask how far our moral duties extend past the walls of the library itself and into other areas of the communications circuit.

6.4.4 Values in Recommender Systems

My research on Readers' Advisory paves the way for future work on automated aesthetic recommendation. The practice of recommending cultural objects (e.g., books, movies, music) is one that is changing radically and rapidly. For that reason, I am preparing to pursue a project that

extends my work on the ethics of RA to the study of information retrieval and algorithmic recommendation. More specifically, the project I am developing will interrogate the values and perspectival differences embedded in Netflix, the popular recommender system and streaming service.

I hold that systems like Netflix are playing an increasingly significant role in our aesthetic lives. However, at the same time, fully personalized interfaces make the mechanics of recommendation less and less visible to users. Netflix users are grouped into “taste communities” that affect not only what items are recommended to them but how those items are marketed and categorized (Adalian 2018). I take it that this shift towards complete customization—along with the aura of scientific legitimacy surrounding algorithmic recommendation—tends to obscure the ways in which recommender systems operate as rhetorical artifacts.⁴⁸ The recent elimination of Netflix user reviews signals a further move away from communal aesthetic assessment and towards a model in which systematized recommendations are (intended to be taken up as) definitive.

As a researcher, I believe that automated aesthetic recommendation is overdue for philosophical interrogation. To that end, I have devised a conceptual project with two main aspects. The first of these operates at the conjunction of modern recommendation technologies and *aesthetic autonomy*, understood here as the free exercise of one’s own aesthetic judgment. This is particularly critical in an information ecosystem that furnishes each of us with an overabundance of possible aesthetic choices and often seeks to guide our consumption in ways that further corporate interests rather than our own (Melchionne 2017). A number of web-based

⁴⁸ See Lawrence (2015).

recommender systems are implicated here, though I take Netflix to be a particularly complex and culturally significant case. The work that I do in this area will ultimately provide an inventory of those mechanisms that hinder the free exercise of aesthetic choice by Netflix users. Among these are the elimination of user reviews and star ratings, the de-emphasis on search functionality, the grouping of users into self-reinforcing “taste communities,” and instances of corporate surveillance that threaten to chill free expression.

The second aspect of this larger project takes as its primary influence the burgeoning body of literature in the field of critical algorithm studies.⁴⁹ Here, I will focus on identifying biases embedded in the Netflix recommendation algorithms and interface. This is an issue that has only recently received mainstream attention when major news outlets reported on how Netflix’s promotional imagery appeared to target users by race.⁵⁰ The project will explore other instances wherein Netflix’s classificatory and recommendation practices are indicative of potentially harmful social biases.

6.5 Conclusion

I began this chapter by arguing that RA was in need of a new unifying account that would make sense of the revisions recommended throughout the dissertation. The first of three critiques articulated in the previous chapters holds that RA, under the pure preference satisfaction model, is a fundamentally prescriptivist project aimed at elevating individuals’ tastes in leisure activities. The AEM embraces prescriptivism of a different sort (geared as it is towards civic development rather than reading for its own sake) but because the model’s purpose is fundamentally

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Bozdag (2013); Edelman (2011); Hazan (2013); Noble (2013; 2018); O’Neill (2016); Rieder & Sire (2014); and Roberge & Melançon (2015).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Bradley (2018); Iqbal (2018); and Zarum (2018).

educative, this is not a point of internal conflict. That is, the AEM does not reject the notion of RA as a normative project, and thus largely mitigates any tension between its overarching aims and its stated principles, paving the way for the development of a critical RA praxis.

Relatedly, and with respect to the second critique, the AEM incorporates a commitment to social justice in service of democratic participation. The model therefore provides the moral underpinning for some taste elevation efforts—namely those that target oppressive tastes—but not others. To put it another way, the new model supports those taste improvement projects that promote its primary political objective. This is what makes a universal diverse books recommendation policy not only permissible but obligatory under the AEM.

Finally, the third critique maintains that the promotion of popular literature is in need of a theoretical justification grounded in the overarching purpose of the public library. The AEM resolves this critique by providing one such justification, maintaining that selecting, reading, and engaging critically with popular literature is a valuable way of practicing political participation and developing the requisite civic virtues for democratic citizenship.

Too often we have painted a picture of the library as existing outside the aesthetic realm, as if the institution plays no role in the formation and maintenance of its patrons' tastes, appreciative capacities, and selection practices. But in truth the question here is not *whether* the library has some role to play in these things, but *what* role it ought to play. To that end, what I have argued for in this dissertation is a Readers' Advisory service that takes as its core mandate the cultivation of virtues necessary to full political participation. This is a proposal that feeds directly into the library's mission to educate a democratic citizenry. Ultimately, a critically-engaged and

politically-coherent RA service is one that finds its justification in the overarching democratic project of the library.

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