

Discovering the ALA Annual Conference

By Sarah Kortemeier

This year, I attended the ALA Annual Conference for the first time; I was there to present my winning Miriam Braverman Memorial Prize paper to the Progressive Librarians Guild (officially) and to explore the wider world of librarianship (unofficially, and always). I want to express my deepest thanks to the Progressive Librarians Guild for selecting my paper, and for their sponsorship of my trip; many thanks as well to my home institution, The University of Arizona Poetry Center, and its parent department, The University of Arizona College of Humanities, for additional support of this professional development opportunity.

I wasn't completely sure what to expect at ALA. On one hand, I'm familiar with the physical marathon that is the Big National Conference experience; my home institution regularly sends staff to these as well as to smaller, regional conferences, and we've all learned the importance of things like water bottles, healthy food, and rest breaks. (I was particularly tickled by the signs scattered throughout the convention center that read "Get Your Steps In": no kidding!)

On the other hand, I'm always curious about how my own library work fits into the larger context of the LIS field. This is because I work in a highly specialized environment—a special-collections library dedicated to contemporary poetry—and professional gatherings of librarians are generally full of interesting discoveries and surprises for me, since the work of libraries is so broad. I arrived at ALA looking forward to everything I knew I was about to learn.

One of the discoveries I made at ALA was directly related to the sheer size of the conference: I realized very quickly that this gathering is big enough to

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■ KEYWORDS: American Library Association; Library conferences.

accommodate some extremely specific concerns in library work, which made me feel right at home! One of my favorite panels, for example, was titled “Diverse and Inclusive Metadata: Developing Cultural Competencies in Descriptive Practices.” The specialized cataloging issues raised in this session correspond with some of the issues I worked on in the project described in my Braverman paper: how do we describe materials for maximum discoverability, and do this in a way that is culturally responsive and respectful? The panelists asked us to consider some thorny and important descriptive problems; for example, when we are trying to help students find indigenous poetry for a class assignment and “indigenous poetry” is not included as a subject term in LCSH, what action do we take? Do we attach additional terms to an existing controlled vocabulary? Do we work to invent wholly new controlled vocabularies? How usable are these new systems and terms outside our local context, and what are the social implications of the answer to that question? In my own project, I had wrestled with very similar questions as I worked on subject analysis for a number of anthologies of poetry written by female and female-identified authors, and I came away from this session feeling as though I had a more thorough grounding in both theory and practice in my cataloging work. In this session particularly (and others more generally) I also felt very strongly that I was witnessing a continuation of the conversations that are currently happening among students in LIS programs: my own program requires its students to discuss inclusivity, cultural competence, and social justice-oriented praxis very regularly, and I was fascinated and delighted to see how the librarians on the panel and in the room carried those ideas forward in their daily work.

I also sought out new ideas and discoveries in the areas of library/information literacy pedagogy and preservation, both of which are areas of professional interest and specialization for me personally and for the work of my home library overall. I came away from the sessions on pedagogy and digital preservation, in particular, feeling excited about potential future intersections between the work of archives and the work of educators; my professional experience outside libraries lies mostly in education, and the longer I work in the LIS field, the more enthusiastic I get about the use of archival collections and primary sources in the classroom. This is an area I hope to work on as my own career develops—particularly in terms of helping students evaluate sources, access voices they might not otherwise encounter, and think critically about archival silences and what those silences mean for our society. The sessions on digital preservation, information literacy instruction, and subject-area library instruction all helped me think about new ways to deliver that content to students in a variety of formats and settings.

Of course, not all discoveries are pleasant ones: I did have one opportunity to watch a colleague absorb and be galvanized by an unwelcome surprise during the conference. In a discussion group for women’s issues, I observed a

young woman hear for the first time that United States law does not currently guarantee paid parental leave to workers. Incredulous, she sat up straighter; there was electricity in the room. I carry that electricity forward with me, deep in the gut. It was, for me, a powerful moment, and a powerful reminder of how much progressive work remains to be done.

And the work of social justice is urgent. It is all too often a matter of life and death, as we saw with horrific clarity in the Pulse nightclub shootings, the brutal attack on the LGBTQ and Latinx communities that happened two weeks before ALA in Orlando. It was easy to see that those shootings were uppermost in many minds at the conference; there were Pride pins everywhere and a blood donation initiative; the memorial service for the victims at the beginning of the conference was packed and included a very moving surprise speech from Civil Rights Movement icon and Congressman John Lewis. I keep returning, in my own mind, to the scrolling list of the victims' names that closed the memorial—those beautiful, precious lives. We cannot continue to make these lists. There is so much work to be done.

But in the serendipitous conversations that popped up all over the conference, I felt hope and great energy for that work. I found warm human connections everywhere: early in the conference, for example, I had an entertaining chat with a librarian who had held a job at Eureka College, which is located in a small town in Illinois a couple of miles from my mother's family's farm; I also had a wonderful conversation with Julene Jones of the University of Kentucky and the Progressive Librarians Guild, who generously took time from her busy schedule to show me around the exhibitors' hall. I very much enjoyed conversing with Progressive Librarians Guild members before, during, and after my presentation; there was an especially robust discussion during the Q&A period after I outlined my project, in which we considered how efforts to promote greater visibility for marginalized voices could (and must) be adapted for different library contexts. And, finally, I was delighted to find that I was able to make many connections and new acquaintances at this particular conference over food. Because this year's conference occurred essentially next door to Disney World, restaurants tended to be packed with hour-long waits each evening; to skip the lines I frequently just went to an open seat at the bar, where I invariably ended up sitting next to other ALA attendees. I talked to people from all over the country and had an opportunity to marvel once again at the humor, warmth, and generosity of my colleagues. This happens at every single library conference I attend, and I'm always amazed and grateful. Librarians are a huge part of what draws me to this profession, and I'm looking forward to seeing what we can accomplish for social justice together in this generation.