

Work/Cited Episode 1 Transcript

Ian Fowler: Thank you, everyone, for coming. My name is Ian Fowler. I'm the curator of maps and geospatial librarian for The New York Public Library. We are here for the inaugural episode of Work/Cited, which is a new program series that showcases the latest scholarship supported by the rich collections of The New York Public Library with behind the scenes look at how the finished product was inspired, researched, and created. In this episode, Meredith Mann, a specialist in the Library's Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, is joined by Alicia Cheng, an independent researcher, educator, graphic designer, beloved researcher and author of the recently published *This Is What Democracy Looked Like: A Visual History of the Printed Ballot* which I will put in the chat in a little bit. It is the subject of today's discussion which will be quite fruitful. And if you're around New York City, you can see some of the ballots. We'll talk about today supersized in the Cooper Union outdoor exhibition curated by Alicia at the Foundation Building. And our guests will speak for about 30 minutes, and then we'll open up the conversation for Q&A. Please use the Q&A feature, not the chat feature throughout the program if you have questions for our panelists, and I will moderate those at the end of the discussion.

If you'd like to chat during the program, please use the chat program, the chat feature, not the Q&A program. And right now, I'm going to launch our poll. So if you wouldn't mind filling that out, it'll help us tailor the program in the future and learn a little bit more about all of you in attendance today. And that's it for me. Meredith, please take it away.

Meredith Mann: Great. Thanks, Ian. And Alicia thanks so much for joining us today for this very first episode. We're really happy to have you here to talk about your book which I have at the ready, *This Is What Democracy Looked Like* that -- so I thought that we could get started by looking at a ballot that you did not look at here at the library, but that our viewers and in -- on the information superhighway are probably very familiar with, which is this one --

Alicia Cheng: Yeah.

Meredith: -- in an annotated version. So the butterfly ballot of the 2000 election. Just because I feel like this shows the importance of -- there are a lot of factors that you're weighing when you're designing a ballot, and this kind of shows how that works, and how that doesn't sometimes. So maybe we could take a look at this, and you could -- tell us about what inspired you to start your research and maybe, you know, what did this come from, an interest in contemporary politics, or was this more of a historical perspective that you wanted to explore.

Alicia: Well, I'll start with that one in terms of the inspiration. It was an awareness, certainly, of this ballot in 2000, the butterfly. And I don't know if many participants may know, but sort of that

yellow strip in the middle was sort of a punch card that you put underneath the sort of like two-sided frame, and then there's this little blue like stylus, like a little hole punch that you sort of poke through, and like, you know, punch through your chad. So if the chad is hanging or pregnant or halfway on, that's how that thing was marked. So, you know, this one in particular is always seen as the example of sort of like, you know, sort of dysfunction par excellence. But I would say that a lot of the book revealed so much more dysfunction, historically, which was something I didn't expect at all to discover, because the first impulse was really reading a *New Yorker* article by Jill Lepore, who talked about early voting practices, and that people were wielding like colorful ballots. And, you know, I'm a graphic designer, not a historian, or really a researcher formally, but I was like, "What does that look like?" And there was some on the internet enough to pique my interest, she actually met with me. We had coffee. She was like super sweet and like encouraged me to pursue it. And it was more than, you know, that was in 2008. But in 2016, I kind of really doubled down to sort of like read about history because it was such a traumatizing election year, sort of like wondering how our republic had survived in the past. So that really inspired and sort of deep dive into the context within which ballots and voting was happening. And it revealed so many larger issues that not just about the design of the ballot, but how you cast your vote, the size of the electorate, voter suppression, like all these other major issues that really turned into like a pathology of democracy. So that is something I'd never really expected with my initial curiosity.

Meredith: Yeah, I like that idea of -- I mean, I think there's a lot of historical dysfunction. I like that term to uncover how the form of the ballot evolved over time in the United States. So maybe what we could do is take a step back and -- and you could kind of trace some of the major trends, so that we could get a feel for how the -- you know, what we started with, the changes that were made. I would imagine -- it seems from your book that some of these -- some of these adaptations were kind of progressive in intention, but not necessarily in practice. So maybe we can talk about kind of the -- the influences on ballot form.

Alicia: Yeah, and I think through this particular plan, kind of a useful swirl from like a material culture standpoint, so -- and then, NYPL had such a great range within their own collection, too. So I think that's a useful lens.

Meredith: Yeah. And how did you -- so you started with the idea, you were talking to Jill Lepore about it. What a -- what a great mentor for a project.

Alicia: Yeah.

Meredith: And then, how did you -- you found your way to the library for this project. I feel like this was maybe like three years ago. Does that sound right?

Alicia: It was a very fast thing. And I looked back at it a lot, you know, this wasn't like a Robert Caro style volume, but it was still like -- so I could appreciate when people take years to develop their research. But I had visited different collections, just sort of, opportunistically, if I was like in

L.A., I visited the Huntington which was like a huge eye-opener. I did the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass. And, you know, clearly, NYPL had a lot to offer, I just wasn't quite sure how to get at it. So I met, you know who, and sort of introduced my project and, you know, sort of the general theme of it. But at the time, I was, you know, taking an afternoon from work and like running up to the Rose Reading Room, getting books, and just sort of like -- I felt like a snake. I was just sort of like devouring them within the time I had, and just sort of trying to aggregate enough information. So, definitely, it was a revelation to me. Melanie, who told me about the [inaudible] fellowship and the idea that you could be an occupant in a study room which felt like such a gift, so that was where I really appreciate NYPL. It's like a wonderful home base for the research because not only was it a space to sort of think and focus, but I got to know you and Kyle, and all your great colleagues there, and found some just magnificent things that I don't think would have been obvious to me that first day that I walked through your doors.

Meredith: Well, and you kind of touched on one of the challenges that people can have when they're starting at the library is that we organize our reading rooms a lot of the times by format. So like Ian mentioned in the outset, I work with our manuscript collections and our rare book collections. But if you're looking at ballots, you're -- you've got such a time frame, and you're looking at different types of materials, so you are kind of hopping, you know, research room hopping to get a full view, you know. I'm sure you were looking at stuff in our art collections and our general research. So you got to get like a tour of the full -- the full library.

Alicia: Because I was formally academic, per se, in terms of like I wasn't looking for a specific year or specific ballot, it was really open to sort of whatever kind of -- it was relevant to the theme and kind of like looked cool. So I felt you guys were super generous also. I would just show up to Ian's department, and be like, "What do you got in the long lines of like electoral mapping and gerrymandering, or whatever?" So that's what the dynamic and the engagement aspect of the libraries, and not just NYPL, but all the others as well. It has been just an incredibly fruitful and generous relationship, so --

Meredith: Okay. We like to tell people that, you know -- I think that regardless of your research project, it's really an iterative process. So like you start out with one focus or one idea, but then when you start looking at the material, it's -- you're learning as you're going, and you're revising what your question is. And I know for you -- I don't know. Let's look at a ballot.

Alicia: Let's look at that.

Meredith: Let's look at maybe this early ballot, and we can talk a bit about what this is and also about the ballot box at the -- ballot boxes in an archival sense, the boxes that we have filled with ballots, and how you kind of came across those unexpectedly, and it proved to be this big, you know, trove for your research.

Alicia: I mean, it was really nice of you and Kyle because -- I mean, also, NYPL has a huge volume of material. I don't fault anyone for not knowing it, you know, categorically. But I think it

was, you know, the old *KVA boxes, I like to call them, one and two. But I think it was Kyle, he was like, "You should just take a look." It was -- maybe it was labeled like ephemera. Often times, ballots are nested within political ephemera which is why -- and going back to your earlier observation, sort of like knowing, not -- and being an iterative process, but also for me, not really knowing what I was going to find, so it was like this kind of awesome combination of like treasure hunt and Christmas morning.

I was just sort of putting that slip in and be like, "What is it going to look like?" and it could be -- not a dud, but like not -- it's so interesting or it could be something amazing.

Meredith: Right.

Alicia: So these are one of the *KVA boxes, and they're notable because they're quite early. 1818 is one of the earlier examples that I found in the research, but this is what they call a ganged ballot. So it's like all printed on one sheet, then would get trimmed out afterwards. But, you know, you didn't have boxes to check, oftentimes like this whole ticket was the whole party. So it was all a straight party ticket. There was no sort of split voting. So I mean, we're -- with our obsession about choice and freewill, it's always interesting to note that, you know, this was really the prevailing system up to the late 1800s, which is quite late, like we are a young country.

Meredith: Yeah, and so I feel like I should explicate the *KVA reference. So Alicia is such a -- like she's like so hip to the slang of the library that she's quoting our class -- our internal classification system. So that is the classification number for our ballot collection. And, you know, in your book, you talk about -- so there's ephemera, right? We have collections of ephemera of material that was printed, but it wasn't intended to be kept for a long time, you know. It had a particular use and the idea was that, you know, it's like a -- it's a poster or it's a flyer, and you use it, and then it's done. And you're kind of -- you don't plan on keeping it. You call these fugitive ephemera. So it's even a step beyond where you're not supposed -- where, legally, you're not supposed to be keeping this material which means that it ends up being quite rare, because either it's a sample ballot that you happen to have because someone is involved with some sort of election commission, or someone has secretly absconded with their ballot and kept it for posterity.

Alicia: Yeah, I would say the ephemera phrase is not mine, sadly. It was a collector who did have one of the largest troves. It was at the Huntington. But, yeah, I mean, it was anecdotal, like maybe it was somebody who was in charge of vote counting, and then sort of tallied on the back of an existing ballot, and put it in his pocket. It wasn't really clear how the larger collections came to be, but there are significant ones. But, again, they're often framed within sort of like the broader political ephemera framework. But the fact that they are not supposed to be in existence, also sort of helped make it even more exciting when you did find some evidence. I remember grabbing your arm at one point. I think it's in here somewhere, but it was particularly exciting or maybe I'm just like a very reactive researcher.

Meredith: It can be two things. I think I know what you're talking about. Well, and then also because -- since it's ephemera where, as a library, you know, libraries typically don't describe those items individually, so you -- the description is just, you know, ballots, box one, or, you know, campaign buttons, or what have you. So it really -- it really creates a lot of opportunity and potential to find -- to like uncover something, but then also -- and so, you know, depending on how much certainty and rules you like in your life, it can either be a generative thing or a stressful thing to not know what you're going to find before you get it.

Alicia: And with a lot of anticipation and sort of not knowing is part of the -- such a thrill for me, for like, say, the Griffin Papers, like there was some citation, and he was like a civic activist and did know a lot about ballot reform. So, you know, I didn't expect to see ballots per se, but all of his papers and his writings, and different pamphlets promoting different kind of ballot reforms, and even his sketches showing like different formats of ballots were just so edifying to sort of see the context in and around, how these things lived in the world. And so, that I think it can totally credit, you know, just sort of the ambiguity of the category of being like ballots or political ephemera to help, you know, sort of help my brain sort of frame out the sort of context.

Meredith: Yeah. So going back to the toleration ticket, you know, when you were talking about the -- like the florid design and the exuberant design of ballots, we're not quite seeing that yet, and that's because of the technology that they were using, right?

Alicia: A lot of that is -- you know, letterpress printing with black ink, it was the most straightforward kind of method of production back then. But, again, the sort of beauty of the ballot as an artifact is that, you know, it timed with the Industrial Revolution, steam power, and the fact that every small hamlet ended up having a press. So, literacy rates were rising. People were no longer like farming to stay alive. All of these factors sort of came together, such that gradually you do see, like, say, maybe by the 1850s, '60s for sure, you know, paper is much more readily available. It was no longer made from rags, but from wood pulp which was plentiful. You know, inks became more stable and more vibrant due to petroleum inventions. So all of that culminated, and the fact that the parties were the ones that produced and distributed the tickets. That's a factor that I think that many people don't maybe know or can't even fathom. I mean, if you can imagine like the Republicans and Democrats like producing their own tickets. And so, it was sort of in their interest to make it distinctive, or make it look like another party, so you could sort of mess with people's, you know, expectations, and maybe do a little counterfeit action. So, just to say that it became this artifact that was just super ripe for all sorts of abuses. But as a sort of visual artifact, it also became a reflection. I'm just sort of like the crazy -- I wouldn't say celebratory, but this is sort of like carnival of graphics which is a great lead up to another ballot that probably looks more exciting. You can't take my word for it.

Meredith: Let's say, you -- we've got some -- so this is one of the party ticket ballots, right, or three examples of a party ticket.

Alicia: Three tickets.

Meredith: So you would like -- you would get the whole ticket, and then just put it in a box, and then you voted for the entire Free Soil Ticket, for example.

Alicia: Correct. And these are notable because the Free Soil, like I love this one, because it looks like this crazy Dr. Seuss' tree. But, you know, having emblems on ballots, too, became, you know, kind of a useful tool for people who may not be as literate either, so you could say vote for the chicken versus the ship. That aided voters in terms of casting their ballots, too.

Meredith: And I think that we have -- yeah, so this is an even more comprehensive -- exhaustive example of the emblem voting. So the logos at the top are emblems for the different parties, and then you've got -- and this is a -- this is a straight ticket -- this is a straight ticket optional ballot.

Alicia: Yeah. This is -- leaping ahead in time a little bit to what they call the blanket format which is based in Australia. So that was radical because, finally, parties became just so rampant in corruption and practices, such that, you know -- plus they're managing an incredible scale with all the population explosion that's happening everywhere, too. So it became clear that the government needed to step in and apply some regulations which they hadn't before. So this format of it being all on one sheet that was produced by the government, and it should be noted cast in secret. Those were like radical shifts which radically change what ballots look like. So this is an early example of -- actually, formally, they would not have any of the ballot emblems at the top. It was really just meant to be a list by office. And here, it starts evolving into a list, you know, all in ballot, but in column form, so people could still vote down a straight ticket, but you had the option to go split. So, I think fundamentally, though, the idea that, you know, suddenly, it was a lot easier before, you know. You can get a slug of whiskey. You could take this one ballot and put it in a box, pretty easy peasy. This one, you had to work. You had to spend time with it. You had to kind of know, for this one maybe, which party or for a particular candidate. So it put a lot more burden on the voter, so it wasn't a huge hit at the beginning, even though I think it's a -- there are many conditions that seem very natural to us now.

Meredith: Yeah. And I think that one of the --

Alicia: These are all so cool.

Meredith: Yeah, we can go back. I was trying to find -- I don't know if it's in the slideshow, but there was a ballot that you included that had explanatory text about a candidate. So it was kind of like a one-liner about their stance on a particular issue that was actually included on the ballot. And I'm just trying to think of, you know, in today's political context, having all the candidates agree on what their description is on a ballot.

Alicia: Having that, you know, little play space where they have a little slogan of who they are. It was a -- for the Taft, like "Vote for a farmer, I am one." It was sort of these very simple kind of

stalwarts next to their names. Yeah, that was in Oregon in like 1912, I think or so.

Meredith: Okay. Did you get a sense that that was a particularly -- was that kind of a flash in the pan reform, or did that have some legs to it? Did it work for a while?

Alicia: So state by state, municipality by municipality. So, I mean, the broader question that I've been getting a lot with this book is like, "Why isn't it more standard? Why can't we all wear masks? It's like we are, you know, the American can-do independent spirit." You know, I think is evident here where it's -- it was not easy to sort of create standards in that way. So by having a space for the politicians and the candidates to express themselves was prevalent in some states, and then that fell away. I mean, the conditions and the specifications by which you design a ballot right now if we're leaping to the present, you know, it's really restricting. They have to -- their limited page size for what the scanner can read.

They, you know, have a huge list of candidates, often a huge list of safe propositions. There's a lot to fit in. So, not to excuse, you know, bad ballot design. But understand that, you know, it's often not a designer doing it, it's somebody who's just trying to get all these names on a ballot, and not have it be super huge size which a lot of these early ones actually really were. So, there's a lot --

Meredith: I feel like -- I feel like it's jumping ahead a little bit. But with that, I mean you've given such a glorious segue. We have to talk about the mega ballot.

Alicia: Oh, yeah, the mega ballot. That's a good one.

Meredith: So we'll come back to these but --

Alicia: Cool. Okay.

Meredith: So for this ballot, we actually have a video, instead of an image, and I think you'll see why once we start playing it.

Alicia: Roll tape. With some sound effect with this. So this is a 14-foot ballot for New York Democratic -- I'm sorry, it's the primary in 1912. And, you know, it was in one of the boxes as a scroll. And I had -- I had seen it in the Huntington before, so I don't think I unfurled it. But one other day that I came back to visit you and Kyle, you're like, "Check it out," and it was like the whole of the table, which is where this video was from --

Meredith: Yeah.

Alicia: Another picture I have, and you and Kyle were like, "Oh, my god." But, yeah, it was like officially ridiculous. I mean, how do you mark that? And I've asked a lot of different people about why this ballot is, and there is no clear answer except for maybe it was just more of that, you

know -- they weren't making it easy for the voter. They certainly were fulfilling all the parameters, and maybe they were asked, too, in terms of listing everybody, but it was absurd.

Meredith: Do you think it was a suppression tactic? Like could it be the kind of thing where they're just drowning people and candidates? Or do you think it was a -- or it was just an ill-advised attempt to be as inclus -- you know, to include as many names as --

Alicia: I think probably the former, but, you know, with this period, you can't underestimate sort of the mechanisms going on behind it. So, you know, I -- that's another thing with history I found is that it's very speculative, so I can have some theories of other people can do, but will never exactly know why this thing is so damn long, and like how -- I would like to see another sample, maybe this is something I can specifically hunt for, as like one of these that are actually marked or cast in some way.

Meredith: Yeah, I suppose the holes in the record, too, pose a real challenge because -- and this happens a lot with people doing archival research. You're trying to learn. You're learning from what is there, but then you're also learning from what is not there, and trying to gauge if that's a function of the people who have been collecting, you know, of the librarians and the people who have been collecting this material, or is it a function of the creators themselves, not feeling -- not being able to retain it or, you know -- there are so many -- there are so many stages at which primary sources can be lost.

Alicia: Yeah.

Meredith: So, how do we -- how do we engage with that and learn from it?

Alicia: Yeah. Know it for sure.

Meredith: Did you -- I mean, I guess, in general that's kind of -- that's kind of framed a lot of your project, but are there specific instances of this? I think maybe in your book, you refer to some ballots that are apocryphal or mythical, but that you couldn't find.

Alicia: Well, there was one -- I mean, certainly, there was many that I didn't know were there and that I found, like one called the tapeworm ballot, which sounds disgusting, but it was in the California Historical Society, as an example. And it was like a sort of this big, like bigger than a fortune cookie, but if they were able to get like 26 names on it in like four-point type which is insane. So that was an actual legitimate used ballot. But I think one of the ones that I heard -- read about was something called the tissue ballot that was in South Carolina where, apparently, I'm imagining sort of like an onion skin type of deal where you would write -- you would cast it, and then you would put it into the box. But then when you shoot it in the box, it would sort of explode into multiple ballots. But I mean, clearly, if that did exist, then it was obviously going to be too fragile to survive. So, yeah, so these are sort of the holy grails in a way. But I mean, the beauty of my -- and I don't mean to portray myself as sort of this happy-go-lucky, you know, I

didn't know what I was looking for, but it kind of was like that. So it wasn't like I was aware of too many gaps in the research per se, but I will say that when I ended up doing more research formally at NYPL, that filled a huge gap where I was seeing so much of like pre-1900 ballots, like the really awesome super colorful ones. But that transition into the early Australian ballot format, and the bigger ones, that's where the NYPL collection really complemented everything that happened before, and that's when I was like, ha-ha, maybe I do have a book, more of a sort of timeline, loosely speaking. So that was a really great moment for me.

Meredith: Yeah, and you know different institution's focus, they have different collecting strategies, or they focus on different time periods. I'm guessing that, you know, the fact that the library, you know, opened in 1911 was helpful, because we were collecting things as we existed as an institution. So I'm still like stuck on that tissue paper ballot. It just sounds like -- like, you know, Boss Tweed mixed with Looney Tunes, just the idea that you would shake it in the box, and then it would explode into 20 different ballots.

Alicia: The ballot box also, you know, there wasn't just always one. There was one called the -- a ballot box where you could put pressure at different points, and it would pop open. This was -- and then there was a ballot box that was glass that is a -- had sort of like iron frame. There's one in the Museum of the City of New York, actually. But that was an intent to sort of make the whole process more transparent and more, you know, try to tamp down the ramp in fraud that was happening around the sort of gangs in New York type --

Meredith: Yeah.

Alicia: -- but that certainly precipitated reforms such as the Australian layout, so --

Meredith: So when you were talking about the tapeworm ballot, you mentioned in your book that this was sort of the -- this was in part an attempt to prevent people from amending their ballots. So the idea is that the type was so small that no one could change anything on it.

Alicia: Right. There was opposite before writing or anything --

Meredith: Yeah.

Alicia: -- which I think we should go to the paster thing, too, because I would see ballots that had very curvy type, and it was all really, you know, odd and sort of like -- sort of idiosyncratic, and then that was sort of like a separate track. And then, when I saw these at the New York Library collection, I hadn't seen -- these are called pasters. There's tiny gum slips that have adhesive on the back. And, you know, apparently, there were paste pots at the polls. But if your name didn't make it on the printed ballot, you could take one of these little guys, and paste it on -- I don't know if we have another slide showing it on top of -- or the attempt.

Meredith: I don't think so, but we'll -- we'll post it in the blog, so people can see what it looks like.

Alicia: Yeah, so they can see the curvy type name, and then you have this one like tape over the top. And seeing these, though, in this form, you know, not applied, was something I found, and that's when I was like -- I was extremely excited.

Meredith: Yes.

Alicia: But in terms of manipulation, that was another way where you could, you know, try to exercise voter intent. It really all comes down to that even today.

Meredith: Well, this is sort of -- so this is kind of like a write-in candidate, although, since it's a paster, and it's printed and kind of provided to the voter, would the -- you know, would the parties be producing these or would individual candidates take it upon themselves or --

Alicia: I think it depends on the scenarios. I wasn't exactly clear how they were formally distributed. I know they were sometimes available at the polls. I know they were sometimes mailed to people. This comes with a letter that's sort of extolling the virtues of this candidate with these pasters, sort of like stapled to the bottom of the letter. But just I think that the idea that you have to sort of manipulate and sort of like go through the effort to sort of go, you know, apply something to that ballot, it's really significant. This could be a good segue to the Mississippi one, this one here, which was another one from the NYPL collection. You know after Lincoln was assassinated, it was sort of Reconstruction period, this is from Mississippi. And this voter was like putting a line through every option afforded to him, so it's like for a constitution against constitution, like every candidate is lying through. So, you know, talk about sort of free will and sort of like a message to the administration, he was having none of it. And, you know, in a way, I could see this as sort of an early indicator. You know of that funny, kind of like "write in" area that is rarely kind of used, although, it can be used to great effect, like in Alaska recently? It's sort of a measure of an earlier time when this is -- that form of like write-in ballot, like write-your-own ballot.

Meredith: And it also shows that -- so on the left here, this is the ballot, and then on the right, this is the opposite verso.

Alicia: Yeah.

Meredith: And so, this is another trend that you pointed out in your book is this using the -- you know, using the opposite side of the paper to create something colorful and vibrant and almost an advertisement for the ballot itself, another opportunity to kind of show off and --

Alicia: Yeah. The voters were sort of their own walking billboards for the parties. And, again, I mean, not to focus on the sort of literacy part, but it's very easily identifiable, both by the poll worker, and by the voter casting the vote, too. And, you know, there's a funny -- another kind of really cool part about this particular archive is that there would be sometimes captions that were

in that length at the time of submission or when they were getting archived.

So this one talks about how people would give this -- mark up this ballot, and then give it to an unsuspecting voter who would only know to identify it by, say, the colorful flag on the back, and cast the vote. So there's all sorts of ways where we can't assume that the voter is, you know, in complete control of their ballot at every moment. There are many different frauds that are described, and people like, you know, create this daisy chain of like handing a clean ballot, and it just keeps getting voted over and over. I mean, to me, broadly speaking, the mechanics behind all these maneuvers made what we're doing now, not at all to discount it or undercut its seriousness, it's just like it's been going on for a while. So not solace, per se, but my goodness, if there's any number of ways to mislead, defraud, suppress the electorate.

Meredith: And I think that I -- yeah, I think that that's the -- the takeaway from so much -- from so many projects that use our division is just noticing a tradition of something, and noticing a historical record of something that is still present in contemporary life. And so, you know, getting that -- like understanding that context in that trajectory, so -- and I mean, even when we were looking at the butterfly ballot, comparing the butterfly ballot to something like this which looks to me pretty inscrutable when I first open it up, you know. I'm just like, "Oh, my god. What are these?" Like playing card symbols and --

Alicia: Yeah.

Meredith: -- how exactly would I fill out this ballot. I think it's -- it's a struggle that has lasted for, you know, 200 -- you know over 100 years. So --

Alicia: Yeah, you know, perhaps to work for it. I mean, even though it does kind of make sense that William Strong is represented by the star and the club, and the big L, like -- yeah, where it's a complex electorate, an electoral profile.

Hi, Ian.

Ian: Why, hello there. This has been a fantastic presentation. I know that we could go on for at least the rest of the afternoon, but I do want to open it up to our wonderful participants. We already have a couple of questions. The first one is "Could you say something more about the secret ballots that you mentioned in the beginning?"

Alicia: Well, that -- you mean, the very early voting practices, you think? Sorry.

Ian: Yeah.

Alicia: Well, then it wasn't a secret at all in terms of like being able to sort of show up at sort of your schoolhouse and, you know, small communities would know all the voters, so -- you know, voter identification was not such a thing. But, you know, that system was not sustainable for a

growing population in a more urban population, so -- but throughout that whole early period, say, like 1800s through 1880s or so, it was a very public act, you know, and it was meant to -- it was sort of seen as sort of cowardly to hide your vote in any way. So this sort of transition into, you know -- also, you know, election fever ripped people for far more than we have now, where many more elections are happening, many more candidates for office, many more offices are now elected and not appointed, you know, universal manhood suffrage. So it's all happening, the sort of fever of it all is really quite heightened, so that the transition, too, something that was privately marked was so radical. And like, radically, also changed the tenure of the environment, whereby there was less violence which is -- you know, there was less electioneering that was when that first rule of "no electioneering within 100 feet of a polling place," which we still have today, that wasn't in effect before. It was like all in your face like up to the box moment. So those are pretty radical reforms that happen. So the sort of secrecy and sort of, I would say, more privacy that happened within that transition and the adoption around the 19 -- 1900s, 1908, was so insignificant, and it just seems like a very radical shift that also changed the way the ballot format looked. But it's something that -- it's just hard to fathom within even our short sort of history of our democracy. So, sorry that was a long answer.

Ian: That's fantastic. A two-part question here, one for Alicia and one for Meredith. Starting off, "Any advice about how -- when you look historically at ballots and how the design is relevant then to how we might perceive of digital ballots going forward, is there some way once we get passed the constrictions of paper size, and those kinds of things that we could get back to an era of, let's say, mid-late 19th century design?"

Alicia: Well, I'll address more of the technology part, and then you can remind me to talk about the design part, too. But it was interesting, too, because the research sort of brought me -- you know, I didn't want to do voting machines that would have been a whole other volume, but that sort of embrace of technology, you know, everyone -- but the telephone was getting invented, the typewriter, the automobiles, their homes like -- the machine is the thing, like, you know, it's a way to sort of counter, the sort of messy human factor that was like causing so much fraud. But the machines were like heavy, expensive, they would break all the time, and they were also super prone to fraud. So even back then, people began to really request sort of verification as a paper receipt. So paper becomes a sort of recurring theme that even we are demanding now with our QR code verification, and all that. Certainly, the technology with the sort of touch screen, you know, has great potential. But as we're seeing now, so -- you know, contemporarily speaking, that the sort of -- the opportunity for fraud and hacking is so tremendous. And even the layout of the screens, you know, if you -- there's a very good example of further voter, bad ballot practices, where you put multiple races on one screen, and then people get confused, and they're not -- they're skipped to be -- skipped that race. So, it's fraud all over the place. And certainly, it may help to make them look prettier. But I started to see the ballot very much, it's such a -- such a functional tool that it's critical that it functions for the user and the audience, and sort of all this UX/UI applies to the ballot now. So, you know whether that is attractive in terms of making people more engaged with it, that's all fine, but we need to take some -- make some direct steps and, hopefully, get funding to improve the whole process. So that's designed

with a capital D.

Ian: Fantastic. And Meredith, the other half for you is "How is the library thinking about archiving of digital manuscripts, even ballots going forward?" So I believe this is born-digital manuscript material.

Meredith: Okay. Let's see. Well, I think that the way that we would -- so the challenge in collecting, we wouldn't be collecting ballots because of the legality, I think, nature of it, in terms of us going to -- going to a polling place. But we're -- you know a lot of times, we acquire collections that have already been aggregated by individuals. So, you know, a -- an enterprising collector might have amassed their own collection of ballots. And then, we would acquire that from them once it kind of existed as a substantive collection of material. That being said, we do a lot of collecting of born-digital material in terms of web archiving. We've collected individual's papers, and when we get their papers, they will have emails as well. So we'll collect their emails and migrate them into an accessible format. So in our reading room, we have a computer with some of our born-digital files. So if you are consulting a collection that has emails or has electronic documents, you would come in and sit at that console to review those materials. So it is something that the library is getting.

Ian: It's wonderful, and as well we should. Kind of a question, I think, for either of you or both of you. How can this work, this kind of historical analysis of ballots help with the history of maybe parties we don't understand or know about, like Free Soil or a lot of these other 19th century parties, early -- late 18th century parties? And is there a way to explore U.S. history through these ballots, as both like party design, party affiliation, municipal state, federal versus state, all those kinds of questions?

Alicia: That's a lot. But, yes, I mean there was -- there's one amazing timeline from the Smithsonian. Oh, that's me in the room.

Meredith: I was trying to go back the other way.

Alicia: Go back to that long thing on my desk. That's actually what I was talking about.

Meredith: Oh, great, perfect.

Alicia: Volume has this amazing timeline. And this is another version of that timeline, just sort of showing the presidential administrations. But there's one that shows, basically, a history of political parties from like 1790 to like 1880, and it just looks -- it's all color-coded and, gnarly, it looks like this big colorful spaghetti. But it just shows how, you know, we think, obviously, parties today, a two-party system. But back then, it was just this crazy crush of, you know, maybe major platforms that began, but then factions that splintered off, and all of these people had their own ballots. So I think the study of political parties is a deep one, and one that I didn't even try to embark on. But that's the beauty of this topic is that it sort of spawned all these other, you know, deeper dives that can be done through history political parties, history electioneering,

history of campaigning, not just sort of the graphic design and production aspect, too.

So it is a pretty potent tip of the iceberg.

Ian: That's great. And I have a question. So, obviously, this presentation, due to the time limits and everything, focused on kind of this 19th century, some early 20th century. Are there -- does the ballot design going forward in the 20th century mimic design trends overall, especially United States? For example, is there like a brutalist ballot in the 1950s that looks very beautiful to some people, but maybe --

Alicia: That would be a great independent project that, as a graphic designer, maybe I should take that. Yeah, it sort of have sort of an expressive stylistic ballots, for sure. No, you know, I -- and people can say like, "Oh, ballots are so bureaucratic and boring," but now, my appreciation of the journey that it has taken, you know, I say that it's taken a hundred years to be this boring, and that's progress, you know. So, in a way, it's fun to sort of play around with the sort of stylistic presentation of it. But, fundamentally, as an operational form, it's such a critical thing to afford to function it well. So --

Meredith: We can shift the aesthetics maybe to the sticker.

Alicia: Sure. Yeah, if you get like massive bling after you submit, that would be, probably, a better use of time and money.

Ian: And that ties into another question we had. Have you seen any examples, or can you talk about any examples of ranked-choice voting? And how that kind of ballot differs from something that the rest of us might be more used to?

Alicia: Yeah, ranked-choice is I think the last ballot I included, the one from Maine. Just to say that there are definitely jurisdictions and states, you know, making great inroads in terms of introducing different methodologies and systems that are -- that work very well, for example, like I know Oregon and Washington in particular have taken -- you know, they're all mail-in and their ballots look, you know, more functional and more appealing. A lot of this stems from the Help America Vote Act in 2000, from the butterfly, the outrage, and the public awareness of that debacle inspired, you know, political money to be funded for improving the system.

So in terms of like the "hopey" [phonetic] part, you know, let's -- God willing, this will all go smoothly. Doubtful. But the fact that the incredible awareness that we're sensing from everybody in terms of what the ballots look like, how they are cast, what obvious, you know, obstructionary tactics are around us, can help hopefully motivate an awareness of how the whole process needs to be improved, you know. It's systematically underfunded. There's like so much wrong with it. So, you know, it's sort of -- that is the sort of going back to the sort of cycle, sort of like before great reform, comes great -- not-so-good situations.

[Brief Laughter]

Meredith: Well, I think that we're seeing some transparency, you know, in, you know, the earliest stages of the ballot. The transparency was there because an individual's privacy wasn't protected. But now with, you know, the prevalence of social media, people are able to -- you know, I feel like there's a lot of like citizen advocacy for how to fill out an absentee ballot, or how to fill out a mail-in ballot, and getting images of what that ballot looks like, because people are sharing it. You know, you can take your cell phone with you into your ballot box and take a picture, so like we're getting -- we're getting that evidence, and we're getting that push for a clear visual design from individual voters, perhaps, as well as people who are designing these ballots, and distributing these ballots.

Alicia: And also that sort of awareness of what to expect when you go, and what you're voting on, and then who the candidates are, so all of that -- you know, it's our responsibility as citizens, but -- you know, we're also like busy people, and sometimes you just get there, and then, you're like, "Oh, I guess I'm just going to vote this whole column because I don't know -- I only know the top of the ticket." So, you know, it all sounds very like you're a good citizen, but it does, you know -- and I had an interview, a question from a French journalist who was so mystified by -- you know, in France, when you're voting for the prime minister, apparently, it's like one piece of paper with one name, and then another piece of paper with another name, and it's like one or the other. And she was like, you know, "Why are your ballots so complicated?" I'm like, "I'm not going to get into it," but we ask a lot of our citizens, you know. So, I think, well, it can be a burden, it's like something that we need to kind of like embrace and own up to. And I'm hoping that with the energy and the momentum now, people are more aware of that, also, not just for a presidential election year, sort of off-season attention that it's going to take also, so that's the hope.

Meredith: I should also -- so we're getting comments in the chat. I'm not advocating that people take photos of their ballots, and we should respect election laws and -- so please don't collect your ballots in some -- in some places, it is illegal to take photos of your ballots. So I just want to make sure that --

Alicia: I kind of have to overweigh my -- kind of like, I want to build a collection legally, but if anybody wanted to accidentally send me a picture of their ballot --

Meredith: No, that was not a wink-wink, nudge-nudge collection strategy at all, so --

[Brief Laughter]

Ian: Yes, please do abide by all state and local regulations in the collection of your archives, and then submitting them to your [inaudible] Well, I think we're just about out of time. Is there any wrap-up comment, Meredith or Alicia, that you'd like to leave us with before I wrap it up?

Meredith: Well, this isn't quite on the topic, but I will say on -- in terms of born-digital collecting that the library is currently doing, our Pandemic Diaries Project is out, and you can go to The New York Public Library website, nypl.org, to learn more about it and submit a recording of yourself discussing your experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, which will become a part of our research collections and publicly available to scholars like Alicia who want to someday make sense of this cultural moment and use it to inform their research. Thanks, Ian. Okay.

Ian: And then -- there is the link in the chat for everyone. And, yes, please do, and pass those out in your communities. The more responses we get, the better and bigger and more wonderful an archive we can create for the future and for understanding our present. That is our program for today. Our next program will be Wednesday, November 10th, also at 1:00 p.m. where I will be speaking with Eric Sanderson, a former Coleman fellow, we will discuss The Welikia Project which aims to discover the original ecology of the five boroughs of New York and compare that with today's built environment, getting a better understanding of the progress and devastation that was part of that, and also our indigenous heritage in this land. And please stay tuned for the blog post of this episode, it will be out soon. And there will be links to related resources, everything Alicia's done, everything we're doing. Thank you all so much for coming. And we will see you again next week.

Alicia: Thanks for having me, guys. It's great to see you. I hope to see you in person soon.

Meredith: Yes, next project.

Alicia: Yes. Yes, for sure.

Ian: Thanks, everybody.