

## *To Tweet or Not to Tweet, That is the Question ... Or is it: The Case of Emily Drabinski*

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**Abstract:** Emily Drabinski found herself embroiled in scandal after securing her position as American Library Association (ALA) president and celebrating with a tweet identifying herself as a “Marxist lesbian.” Many state library commissions throughout the United States decided to cut ties with the Association, citing Drabinski’s identity as their reasoning for doing so. The discussion surrounding Drabinski grew into a larger argument about queerness and socialism in America’s libraries, with Drabinski as the rather unfortunate scapegoat of the issue. Her brief presidency and the backlash it inspired offers us a glimpse into decision-making as leaders of organizations that represent a multitude of different perspectives and opinions. How was Drabinski able to move forward as ALA president amidst constant opposition? Are we able to stand by our values and identities, even when some of our constituents are vehemently opposed to them?

### **Introduction**

On April 13, 2022, Emily Drabinski, the newly elected president of the American Library Association (ALA), shook the world of libraries throughout the United States, with a now-deleted tweet declaring herself a “Marxist lesbian” (Drabinski [@edrabinski] 2022, n.p.). The ALA elects candidates to serve for what is essentially a three-year term: one year each as president elect, president, and immediate past president. In each position, the candidate acts as an ALA Executive Officer and member of the Executive Board (ALA 2024c). Over a year after Drabinski’s election, when she officially entered the spotlight by assuming her position as incumbent president, constituents in states including Arizona, Illinois, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Idaho pressured their state libraries to cut ties with the ALA, blaming Drabinski’s tweet and identity. This movement was first successful on Tuesday, July 11, 2023, when the Montana State Library Commission voted to leave the American Library Association (Yurcaba 2023b). Alabama, Wyoming, Missouri, Texas, and Florida eventually followed suit (Atterbury 2023). The last time states had pulled out of the ALA had been during the Jim Crow era, when two southern states, Louisiana and Mississippi, chose expulsion from the organization rather than desegregation (Kingkade 2023, Lipscomb 2005). Drabinski was stunned by the backlash. As she watched this all unfold, she had to think of her next steps. Although ALA presidential tenure is short, with each president only serving a one-year term, Drabinski recognized that, for the moment, she represented this organization. She could either remain president or step down from the position. She understood that her decision held weight, as it would not only influence the public perception of the ALA, but also the organization’s ability to provide crucial resources to constituents in states that rescinded their membership. As she deliberated, she weighed what this presidency meant to

her, given her lifelong desire to take her love for libraries and their communities to a national scale, and the best interest of the ALA.

### **From Magazine Writer to Librarian to Labor Rights Organizer**

Emily Drabinski became a librarian somewhat by accident. Born in Boise, Idaho in June 1975, Drabinski dreamed of being a writer in New York City, which she said was probably “every Idaho queer kid’s dream” (Crane 2023, n.p.). Drabinski has the look of a classic butch lesbian—she sports a short, spunky haircut, square glasses, and lots of funky, patterned button ups. She moved to New York for college, earning her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Columbia University. She graduated in 1997, and tried to fulfill her authorial dreams by working for lifestyle magazines and writing about summer smoothie trends (Drabinski 2024). She quickly recognized that she was not happy with these small writing jobs. In 2000, while working as a fact-checker for the shopping magazine *Lucky*, Drabinski made a mistake; she accidentally printed bargains for one department store on a two-page photo spread featuring a different department store. The magazine was furious and Drabinski’s guilt and anxiety about the incident led to a week of sleepless nights, which helped her decide that “if [she] was going to get in trouble, [she] wanted to get in trouble for work that matters” (Crane 2023, n.p.).

Drabinski decided she wanted to stir up trouble as a librarian instead, after a friend of hers encouraged her to apply for a job at the New York Public Library (NYPL) (Drabinski 2023). Not only did she get the NYPL job, she also started the Master of Library and Information Science program at Syracuse University (Syracuse University 2022). She loved library school and loved working as a librarian, being able to give people access to the resources they need to “live full lives” (Crane 2023, n.p.). She joined the American Library Association (ALA) after finishing library school, in 2002, enticed by the organization’s values; the ALA is a staunch defendant of civil liberties and is public in their advocacy work. Drabinski was particularly impressed with how the ALA had taken a strong stance against the 2001 Patriot Act, a post 9/11 act that greatly enhanced and expanded law enforcement’s surveillance and investigative powers, posing a huge threat to intellectual freedom. Drabinski cites this as her reason for joining the ALA, because she wanted to be “part of a profession that takes difficult stances in difficult political moments” (Crane 2023, n.p.). Now, in 2023, Drabinski, is a critical pedagogy librarian at the Graduate Center of City University of New York (Drabinski 2023).

Drabinski has always been open and loud about her political beliefs. As a child, she campaigned against the use of Styrofoam cups at a local frozen yogurt joint, highlighting her early commitment to speaking out about what she perceived to be unjust (Shure 2022). She was an early member of Radical Reference, a collective of library workers, students, and other information activists that come together for various social justice issues.<sup>1</sup> As a part of Radical Reference, Drabinski protested the 2004 Republican National Convention and organized fact-checking workshops for independent journalists and worked to provide education on gender and sexuality in information studies (Radical Reference 2004). Drabinski also strongly believes in intellectual freedom and fighting book bans, claiming that “every challenge to a library book is an attack on our freedom to read” (ALA 2024b, n.p.). Furthermore, Drabinski wrote and edited many journal articles and collections, including *Valuing Professionalism: Discourse as Professional Practice*, in which she critiques the ALA’s ideas of professionalism—she did not shy away from calling out institutions, even ones of which she was a loyal member (Drabinski 2016). Drabinski was also a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “library worker” instead of simply “librarian” as it includes a range of different library jobs. This includes, but is not limited to, librarians, library technicians, and library managers.

part of the labor movement. She participated in a 2011 strike as a faculty librarian at Long Island University and was active in workplace unions, which helped her gain experience in organizing people and movements (Shure 2022).

Libraries and librarians are known for providing community building spaces: yoga classes, cooking workshops, meeting areas, and more are all activities hosted at and services offered by public libraries throughout the country (Nicodemus 2023). Drabinski helped to build these community events, especially amidst the loneliness and despair of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Karen Miller, Emily Drabinski's partner, ran the online site Home School Co-op 2020, for children to tune into Zoom for live video classes. Although there was a multitude of sessions and things to learn about, the most popular session was one led by Drabinski five mornings a week: Cat Chat (Kamenetz 2020). For this wholesome endeavor, kids would log on to Zoom—with their cats, of course—and talk about their pets with Drabinski and the other children (Noyes 2020). Community building and educational support were some of the important skills and passions that Drabinski brought to the table as a potential president of the ALA. After her library began functioning again after the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of running for president began to percolate in Drabinski's mind (Crane 2023). She wanted to take the organizing power she had gained from her experience with workplace unions and strikes, as well as her love for creating and aiding community through libraries, to a national level. She saw the ALA presidency as the perfect opportunity to do so.

### **A Brief History of the American Library Association**

On October 6, 1876, the American Library Association, the world's oldest and largest nonprofit library association, was founded in Philadelphia. Library associations, not to be confused with state library commissions, which are governmental bodies, are professional organizations that unite librarians and provide them with various resources (Librarianship Studies & Information Technology 2020). As of 2023, the ALA has over 50,000 members of librarians, publishers, trustees, and other library supporters (ALA 2015). Upon establishment, the ALA aimed “to enable librarians to do their present work more easily and at less expense” (ALA 2008, n.p.). The current mission statement of the ALA is “to provide leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all” (ALA 2023a, n.p.). As a not-for-profit educational organization, federal law prohibits the ALA from participating in partisan politics, but they have expressed their political values through other means (ALA 2010). In the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement, the ALA amended their Library Bill of Rights to include that segregation was not allowed in any libraries (ALA 2006). Additionally, the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the ALA, founded in 1969, helps to promote a progressive agenda. SRRT “believes that libraries and librarians must recognize and help solve social problems and inequities in order to carry out their mandate to work for the common good and bolster democracy” (ALA 2024d, n.p.). SRRT and the ALA encourage social responsibility as a core value of librarianship.

The ALA has had an early and long-lasting commitment to diversity. One of its eight key action areas is, in fact, diversity (ALA 2023a). Of the 103 founding members, 13 were women, all white. In 1911, 19 years before women were granted the right to vote, Theresa West Elmendorf secured her role as president of the ALA, the organization's first woman to hold this position. Ten years later, an ALA round table met to encourage library patron diversity and examine the state of equitable access to library materials for Black Americans. In 1970, the ALA formed its Black

Caucus and six years later, the organization elected Clara Stanton Jones, an African-American woman, president. She was the first Black president of the ALA (ALA 2008).

The American Library Association is also explicit about supporting sexual & gender diversity and uplifting LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, etc.) people in libraries and beyond. In fact, the ALA's website includes a page called "Libraries Respond: Drag Queen Story Hour" (ALA 2018). Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH), a national 501(c)(3) non-profit where drag queens read stories to children in libraries, is one of the most contested organizations in the United States. Dante Moretti captures the polarized nature of DQSH: "Those on the Left speak of it like a sacrament, a human right, a necessity. On the Right, it's a byword for depravity" (Moretti 2024, n.p.). Conservatives often attack DQSH, claiming that it is a coercive ploy to indoctrinate and sexualize children; Moretti goes as far as to say that DQSH is a "creepy death cult" and the "rainbow Leviathan" (Murray 2023; Moretti 2024, n.p.). The ALA's page about DQSH responds to this pushback and provides a collection of resources. These resources explain what DQSH is, how to defend it, and, more generally, how to support LGBTQ+ people and material in libraries (ALA 2018). The ALA's unabashed support of Drag Queen Story Hour and sexual/gender diversity indicates their political leanings without a direct partisan stance.

The ALA is a steadfast supporter and defender of intellectual freedom, the right of every person to have unrestricted access to information from all perspectives and sources. The organization lists intellectual freedom as one of its core values (ALA 2023a). In 1967, the ALA established its Office for Intellectual Freedom as a part of the civil rights movement (ALA 2008). Part of their fight for intellectual freedom includes education about book banning and censorship. Every year, the Office for Intellectual Freedom publishes a list of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books to bring awareness to issues of book banning and censorship in libraries, schools, and other educational spaces. These lists also include the cited reasons that the books were challenged/banned, including LGBTQ+ content, being sexually explicit, writing about racism, and/or having other EDI content (ALA 2013). The ALA hosts several other programs to educate the public on issues of censorship and intellectual freedom, including Banned Books Week, Choose Privacy Week, and Banned Websites Awareness Day (ALA 2008).

Membership of the American Library Association is open to anyone, from individual people to state libraries, and offers a wealth of benefits (ALA 2023b). The ALA provides various services and resources for libraries, including funding sources, education, and professional development opportunities. Specifically for state libraries, ALA membership grants access to library data, policy and advocacy support, technical assistance, discounts on job postings, media subscriptions, and product purchases (ALA 2023b).

The ALA elects presidential candidates to serve, essentially, a three-year term, with the president elect serving for one year as president elect, incumbent president, and immediate past president. The president elect, president, and past president of the American Library Association are all members of the ALA Executive Board, who are the presiding officers of the ALA Council (ALA 2024c). The ALA Council comprises representatives from the various members of the association (ALA 2007). The ALA outlines three broad areas of responsibility for the president: leadership, administration, and presiding officer (ALA 2024c). As leader, the president must act as a unifying force, helping to rally members behind plans, anticipating constituents' needs, and crystallizing the group's ideas. The president as administrator acts as a representative for the ALA, speaking about the association to other organizations and the public, as well as appointing committees and presiding over Executive Board and ALA Council meetings. Third, the president as presiding officer facilitates meetings, encouraging open, inclusive, and safe discussion in which

each voice is valued and protecting the group from improper conduct, while being firm yet not dictatorial (ALA 2024c).

### **The Path to Presidency**

When her library finally reopened after the COVID-19 pandemic, Emily Drabinski had almost 20 years of librarian experience under her belt and an itch to work on a larger scale. Drabinski's history as a union organizer gave her experience that would lend itself well to the role as ALA president. While Drabinski was working as a library coordinator at Long Island University, the university management decided to lock out its faculty in a union-busting measure. Drabinski, secretary of the library's union, put her organizing skills to work to plan the needed countermeasures. She rapidly filed for a bullhorn permit, disseminated the university president's contact information, answered frantic questions from all sides, and mobilized students, faculty, and other allies to the cause. In just twelve days, Drabinski and the rest of the union's efforts forced university management to end the lockdown (Shure 2022). Drabinski understood how to work under pressure, bring people together, and meet the needs of the people looking up to her. In addition to union organizing, Drabinski felt that her years working as a librarian, author, and theorist gave her invaluable knowledge about library science. She had her eye on the presidency.

At the time, she was working as interim chief librarian at City University of New York (CUNY), and had extensive experience working within the ALA. Notably, Drabinski had served as chair of the International Relations Committee from 2020 to 2021, ALA councilor-at-large from 2018 to 2020, and chair of the Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Frameworks and Standards Committee from 2019 to 2020 (ALA 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused devastating economic and social disruption generally, and libraries were no exception (World Health Organization 2020). Like many other fields, libraries and librarians were struggling with the effects of the pandemic. COVID shut people inside their houses and forced a redirection of resources to the most pressing issues; as a result, libraries were left behind (Bennett 2023). Drabinski saw her fellow librarians working to reintroduce libraries back into the world while also navigating the new post-pandemic reality. Libraries, especially public libraries, were trying to "solve problems as the world was sort of collapsing around them. Problems like figuring out Wi-Fi, figuring out Broadband, figuring out homework help, and how [to] meet the needs of [their] communities," as she mentioned in an interview with Douglas Crane (Crane 2023, n.p.). In the wake of the pandemic, Drabinski thought it necessary to give library workers as much structural support as possible, ranging from up-to-date certification programs to resources on union organizing (Crane 2023). She wanted to bring a much-needed library worker-focused perspective to the ALA, in part by continuing the projects of past president Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada, as opposed to a more institution-focused approach, and decided to act upon these desires by running for president of the association (Crane 2023). Her opponent was Kelvin Watson, the executive director of the Las Vegas-Clark County Library District. Watson ran on a platform that called for increased marketing of library services and public-private partnerships (Shure 2022). Drabinski made her perspective on Watson's platform clear, stating:

I believe the way to get people to understand why libraries are important is by engaging people in a struggle for the fair share of the social wage. It isn't a matter of better advertising. It's a matter of sort of stronger connections between libraries and our

communities and the communities we serve, and the shared struggles that we all have--- because we are all suffering from the maldistribution of wealth. (Shure 2022, n.p.)

On Wednesday, April 13, 2022, the results were in: Drabinski received 5,410 votes while Watson received 4,622 (ALA 2022). The ALA publicly announced that Emily Drabinski had been elected president for the 2023–24 year. An elated Drabinski provided the following statement soon after her victory:

As we face an uncertain and challenging future, I know this: we have each other, and we are enough. I am ready to get to work with all of you to strengthen our association and our field to support library workers and the communities we serve. Thank you for your confidence and support of my vision for ALA and your role in that vision. We have a lot of work ahead to build collective power for the public good. I can't wait to get started with all of you. (ALA 2022, n.p.)

When speaking about her intentions for her presidential tenure, Drabinski described her style as “radically collaborative” and emphasized her commitment to library workers, union organizing, and intellectual freedom (Crane 2023, n.p.). More specifically, she discussed her plans to prioritize sustainability and create climate strategies for libraries, which would give people the necessary resources to research, understand, and manage various climate and environmental issues. Drabinski also mentioned her determination to provide resources for library workers on how to start and organize unions and other ways to assist library workers with whatever issues they confronted (Crane 2023).

Her excitement, however, proved to be short-lived. Drabinski also released her fateful tweet shortly after the ALA's announcement of her soon-to-be presidency. Wanting to share her excitement about her victory with the world, she tweeted, “I just cannot believe that a Marxist lesbian who believes that collective power is possible to build and can be wielded for a better world is the president-elect of @ALALibrary. I am so excited for what we will do together. Solidarity! And my mom is SO PROUD I love you mom.” (Drabinski [@edrabinski] 2022, n.p.). Drabinski has since deleted this tweet. Although there was seemingly no malicious intent behind her posting the tweet, the backlash she received was intense and vicious. Many attacked Drabinski for posting the tweet, critiquing her for going against American values because of her identity as a queer Marxist. One such critic, Joy Pullman, the executive editor of *The Federalist*, an online conservative magazine, made specific reference to Drabinski's research surrounding queer theory and passionately exclaimed that “it's no surprise that a woman who opposes truth, and instead deifies self-created and unnatural identities, calls herself a Marxist” (Pullmann 2022, n.p.). Although many critics, like Pullman, villified Drabinski for both her sexuality and her politics, Montana's official reason for withdrawal cited Drabinski's Marxist politics (Kingkade 2023). Drabinski's consistent outspoken queerness and stance on socialist politics, even before the release of her tweet, provided ammunition to the sudden wave of retaliation against her. Drabinski couldn't help but wonder if she had just made a potentially career-ending mistake.

### **America's Triple Threat: Queerness, Marxism, and Queer Marxism**

It is difficult to understand the complexities of Drabinski's predicament without a thorough grasp of the larger historical and political significances of her self-identification as a Marxist lesbian and the response it incurred. To begin, Marxism, in simple terms, is a mode of political thought that critiques Capitalism. While it is primarily a social and political theory, it has also

influenced a plethora of literary theories and analytical frameworks. Karl Marx, its founder, objected to Capitalism on the basis of its concentration of the means of production, property, and wealth in the highest class, the bourgeoisie. Due to this consolidation of wealth, the working class, the proletariat, is consistently oppressed and exploited, reduced to a commodity which only exists to benefit the bourgeoisie (Singh n.d.). Marxism is thus used to analyze texts, or whatever else, through the lens of economic systems, class, and power dynamics.

Drabinki's critics painting her as anti-American follow a long history of socialism, communism, and Marxism being regarded as dangerous to American culture and ideals. From the late 1940s through the 1950s, the second Red Scare, popularly known as "McCarthyism," permeated American politics, society, and culture. This era, the early years of the Cold War, was defined by an anticommunist fervor that swept through the nation. McCarthyism comes from Senator Joseph McCarthy, who claimed that "large numbers of Communists had infiltrated the U.S. State Department" (Storrs 2015, 1). During the second Red Scare, both government and nongovernment actors defined communism as a serious threat to American security and thus developed methods for identifying and punishing alleged Communists and their sympathizers (Storrs 2015). Therefore, McCarthyism "remains an apt label for the demagogic tactic of undermining political opponents by making unsubstantiated attacks on their loyalty to the United States" (Storrs 2015, 1). The legacy of McCarthyism lives on today: communism, in any form, is often considered the antithesis of America. James Joski, writing for *The Collegian*, declared, "To think that there can be America and Marxism is a fallacy: it is either Marxism or America" (Joski 2025, n.p.). This way of thinking is reflected in many of the remarks made about Drabinski's character and Americanness (or lack thereof) post-Tweet.

At the same time of the second Red Scare, another wave of repression was making its way into public consciousness: the Lavender Scare. During this movement, thousands of gay federal employees were purged from their positions because of their sexuality (Adkins 2016). Increased public awareness of homosexuality led to growing unease and anxiety about queerness, which fomented governmental investigation and criminalization of LGBTQ+ people. The Lavender Scare and the perception of queerness as a lurking subversive threat were intimately bound up with anti-Communist sentiments. Senator McCarthy explicitly related Communists and gay people, feeding and mixing these twin anxieties felt by much of the American public (Adkins 2016). The Lavender Scare's afterlives are present in conservative beliefs about LGBTQ+ people as groomers looking to sexualize children and anti-LGBTQ+ fear, more generally (Block 2022).

Situated within these American historical events, queer Marxism is somewhat of the ultimate threat to a certain sect of American ideology. Queer Marxism is a politicized sexual identity that combines anti-capitalist politics with LGBTQ+ liberation. It responds to the depoliticization of the lesbian and gay movement, which queer Marxists claim, "leaves many queers out in the cold" (Sears 2005, 93). This demobilization occurred as a result of civil rights policies and frameworks meeting the political goals of some lesbians and gay men. However, queer Marxists assert that those who benefit from these civil rights policies are the most privileged in the LGBTQ+ community: "Those who have gained the most are people living in committed couple relationships with good incomes and jobs, most often white and especially men. At the same time, queer people of color, street youth, people with limited incomes, women, people living with disabilities and transgendered people have gained less or in some cases even lost ground" (Sears 2005, 93). As such, queer Marxists understand their sexuality in terms of larger societal contexts and fight for liberation from capitalism and homophobia (Sears 2005; Lewis 2016). Conservatives, on the other hand, understand queer Marxism to be both dangerous and destructive, especially for

the “formative and impressionable psychologies of children, whom it targets in particular” (Lindsay 2022, n.p.). Drabinski, however, embraced her queer Marxist identity in her Tweet and beyond, underscoring in an interview with Brooke Gladstone (2022) that queer Marxism shapes who she is and how she thinks about social change.

### **I’m Here and I’m Queer!**

Emily Drabinski had by no means hidden her queer identity. She had been open about being a lesbian long before her 2022 tweet. Emily Drabinski and her partner Karen Miller had been together, quite publicly, for years (Noyes 2020). Much of Drabinski’s existing research focused on gender and sexuality, specifically within the realm of library studies (Drabinski n.d.). In 2013, Drabinski published an article titled *Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction*, critiquing hegemonic library structures and urging librarians to diversify catalogs and rethink organizational systems from a queer perspective. She has consistently transformed her queerness into a radical political identity—not only is she queer, her politics are as well.

Drabinski also emphasized her commitment to supporting the LGBTQ+ community as president of the ALA, both in her campaign and after her election. She expressed that her plan for her presidential year was to “bring awareness to LGBTQ+ library issues both for library workers who are queer, but also the communities we serve,” underscoring her own queer identity as her motivation (Crane 2023, n.p.). She also hoped to improve representation of LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities in the materials that ALA libraries shelved (Kingkade 2023). Drabinski was not at all silent about her queerness or her queer political identity in her platform or in her life, and thus it was not out of the ordinary when her ALA victory tweet reemphasized her politicized lesbian identity. However, Drabinski’s new position of power gave way to a wider body of constituents, who received her queerness and its politics very differently than the smaller, localized library sphere, igniting a wave of backlash.

On June 26, 2023, the evening before her inauguration, Drabinski addressed a crowing of supporters, declaring, “Tonight we’re celebrating library wins, ... In our communities, against censorship, and for the common good” (Kelley 2023, n.p.). On the first official day of Drabinski’s presidency, she held an inaugural luncheon. There was a celebratory atmosphere at the luncheon, with a packed room full of people welcoming Drabinski into her presidency. Queer joy abounded as the room danced along to the lively performance given by the Chicago Gay Men’s Choir, who sang a variety of upbeat tunes (Kelley 2023). However, this jubilant mood was distinctly *not* shared by many of Drabinski’s constituents.

### **Your Perfect Un-American Bitch**

Emily Drabinski assumed her position as incumbent president of the ALA in July of 2023. In response, many conservative lawmakers in states such as Louisiana, Idaho, Illinois, Georgia, Arizona, South Carolina, and Wyoming pushed for their states’ libraries to withdraw from the association, citing both her queerness and her Marxism as reasons (Kingkade 2023). While Montana framed their separation as their Constitutional duty, which “forbids association with an organization led by a Marxist,” other states, like Wyoming, claimed that the ALA was endorsing “sexually graphic books for kids” (Kingkade 2023, n.p.; Wyoming Tribute Eagle 2023, n.p.). Public commentary loudly supported these motions. The response was drastic, painting Drabinski and the ALA as a threat to American culture and as a predator looking to expose children to sexually explicit material. David Ingram, a board trustee at ImagineIF Libraries in Kalispell, Montana, passionately advocated for a withdrawal from the ALA, framing his opinion around the



idea of “culture wars” (Sakariassen 2023). He specifically pointed to the ALA’s support of critical race theory policies and claimed that the organization uses public funds to “undermine truth and natural law” (Sakariassen 2023, n.p.). Montana constituents placed considerable emphasis on the fact that the ALA is funded by taxpayer dollars, implying that constituents were essentially paying out of pocket for the ruining of their country and children (Stapp 2023). The last time the ALA faced this issue of states ending their affiliation with the organization was during the Jim Crow era, when two southern states, Louisiana and Mississippi, objected to the desegregation efforts of the organization and chose to relinquish membership rather than integrate their state library associations. (Kingkade 2023; Lipscomb 2005). However, the association remained steadfast and stood up for desegregation, even in the face of a mass exodus.

Within the states considering withdrawal from the ALA, the debates were heated, as many constituents, libraries, and library workers opposed the motion, mirroring the intensely divisive political landscape of 2023. The year marked the beginning of a presidential campaign and followed the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, which many liberals and leftists saw as part of a larger effort to crack down on marginalized people’s rights (Housman 2022). In 2023, states legislatures introduced more than 500 bills targeting LGBTQ+ people, 75 of which became law, making it a record year for this sort of legislation (Yurcaba 2023a). The ALA found that the number of book titles targeted for censorship in 2023 surged by 65%, the highest levels ever documented (ALA 2024b). Liberals described the era as “fraught with MAGA-inspired battles over LGBTQ+ content, ‘woke ideology’ and ‘parental rights’ in libraries and classrooms,” MAGA being president Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again” (Owen 2023, n.p.); conservatives illustrated their fear of an emerging wave of liberalism, explaining that “Marxists are committed to overthrowing the West, including all of its organizing ideas and accomplishments” (Pullmann 2022, n.p.). Therefore, these states’ responses were at least in part fueled by the current climate of the nation.

Additionally, Marco Rubio, Kevin Cramer, and Mike Braun, senators from Florida, North Dakota, and Indiana respectively, demanded a halt of federal fund allocation to the ALA and a government investigation into the organization for “allegedly advising librarians to discriminate against a Christian book publisher” (Kingkade 2023, n.p.) Former adviser to Pres. Donald Trump and local Republican leader in Florida, Mike Flynn, launched an attack against the ALA for being led by “Marxist thugs” (Kingkade 2023). Representative John Bear of Wyoming publicly pushed for his state to leave the ALA, because he believes the organization is “full of Marxists who promote books that ‘create a sexualized child at an earlier age’ and are ‘turning libraries into activist training grounds’” (Kingkade 2023, n.p.). These various indictments of the ALA seem to be direct responses to Drabinski’s tweet and demonstrate the severe threat many conservative Americans consider anti-capitalism or communism to be.

Montana was the first state to successfully withdraw from the ALA. On Tuesday, July 11, 2023, former Montana state representative and current commissioner Tom Burnett motioned the Montana State Library Commission to immediately withdraw from the ALA (Yurcaba 2023b). Many Montana commissioners and residents painted Drabinski as un-American, given her political beliefs. Burnett also motioned to send the ALA a letter explaining that Montana’s “oath of office and resulting duty to the Constitution forbids association with an organization led by a Marxist” (Sakariassen 2023, n.p.). Elsie Arntzen, commission superintendent of public instruction in Montana, stood vehemently in favor of withdrawing from the ALA. She argued that by electing Drabinski, a Marxist, as president, “the ALA has not only turned its back on families, parental

rights, and American values—it has turned its back on America itself” (Lee 2023, n.p.). Arntzen’s assertion is in line with McCarthyism-esque ideas of Marxism as a threat to America.

One anonymous Montana constituent passionately declared their support for the State Library pulling out of the ALA, writing:

Is this the future of American libraries? Feeding children to predators and giving them money for the effort? I have witnessed this once honorable profession descend into ruin. I implore the State Commission and the State Library to sever ties with the Marxist ALA that is hellbent on destabilizing and abusing children in the hopes our local libraries follow their lead.

Sincerely, A Montana librarian in fear of violent, aggressive coworkers further radicalized by the ALA who are targeting children to deliver them to predators. (Stapp 2023, 8)

Commissioner Tammy Hall, in reaction to this comment, expressed that it was telling that this constituent chose to remain anonymous “because of the personal attacks this person would be open to if they didn’t follow what [she] would call the woke agenda being promoted by the ALA to our librarians” (Girten 2023, n.p.). Many other residents submitted written declarations in favor of the Montana State Library pulling out of the ALA. Almost all of them highlighted youth exposure to sexual material in libraries and framed the Association as a pernicious organization looking to push a political agenda onto others (Stapp 2023).

However, some high-powered library workers did publicly declare their opposition to pulling out of the ALA. Many people framed this around the fact that the role of president was only a yearlong position, and therefore did not pose a threat to the organization as a whole. Brian Rossman, a Montana commissioner who voted against the motion, argued that the ALA presidency was largely a ceremonial role and that Drabinski was simply a figurehead of the organization (Sakariassen 2023). His counterpoints did not necessarily support Drabinski but rather, served to assuage worries that her Marxist lesbianism would infect the ALA. Rossman encouraged the committee to send a letter expressing their disapproval of Drabinski’s politics, instead of pulling out of the Association (Girten 2023).

Susan Gregory, the director of the Bozeman Public Library in Montana, also opposed the motion to withdraw from the ALA. She pointed out that in her 40 years working with the ALA, she had never seen evidence of the organization promoting Marxism (Yurcaba 2023b). In her written commentary, Gregory highlighted numerous benefits of ALA membership including educational and networking opportunities. Furthermore, she emphasized that the presidential tenure is only one year long and that although the president serves as a speaker for the ALA, their power is constrained by the decisions and actions of the ALA Executive Board and ALA Governing Council (Stapp 2023). She finished off powerfully, writing, “We don’t leave the United States because we don’t like or agree with whomever the sitting President of the United States is. We are still loyal Americans despite not agreeing with the President at times” (Stapp 2023, 1). Despite Gregory’s attempt to soothe anxieties about the “un-Americanness” of Drabinski, she maintained that it was unfortunate that Drabinski inappropriately inserted her political beliefs into the situation (Girten 2023).

Slaven Lee, the executive director of the Missoula Public Library, similarly wrote in support of the Montana State Library’s continued membership in the ALA. He explained that the “ALA’s stance on issues like privacy protection and advocacy for education aligns with Montana

State history and values, which prioritizes personal freedom and autonomy,” countering claims that, because of Drabinski’s presidency, the ALA was now in opposition to both Montanan and American values (Stapp 2023, 5).

Ultimately, on July 11, 2023, the committee voted 5-1-1 in favor of the Montana State Library Commission withdrawing membership from the American Library Association. Commissioner Brian Rossman cast the sole opposing vote. The Commission Chair, Peggy Taylor, abstained. While Rossman was vocal about his vote and the potential consequences of the withdrawal, Taylor refused to comment on her decision (Girten 2023). Effective immediately, the Montana State Library would no longer be a member of the ALA. However, several supporters of the motion suggested a revisit to the topic of ALA membership once Drabinski’s tenure ended (Sakariassen 2023).

Wyoming, Alabama, Missouri, Texas, and Florida soon followed in cutting ties with and pulling funds from the American Library Association, reporting their perception of Drabinski—and as a result, the ALA—as a threat to American values and to the safety of children (Atterbury 2023).

### **After the Bomb Drops**

Drabinski was shocked by the domino effect of Montana’s decision. She explained that she hadn’t anticipated “these kinds of targeted attacks being used as a bludgeon against library workers across the country” and called the backlash “regrettable” (Kingkade 2023, n.p.). She faced the challenge of deciding how to proceed in the face of such vicious attacks against her identity and the organization that she now represented.

Immediately after the Montana State Library Commission made the decision to end its membership with the ALA, the Montana Library Association (MLA) put out a statement expressing their disappointment with the decision. They announced that the decision runs counter to their mission and “undermines the shared goals of Montana libraries” (Vriesman 2023, n.p.). MLA urged the commission to reconsider membership. Drabinski probably found some solace in the fact that the library association of the very state that withdrew from the ALA was not happy with their library commission’s decision.

Two days later, the American Library Association’s Communications Specialist, Raymond Garcia, also put out a statement responding to Montana’s decision. The statement detailed the benefits that Montana libraries received from the ALA, including greater than 200,000 dollars in program grants (ALA 2023b). The association also made it clear that despite the state’s decision, they remain “committed to providing essential support, resources, and opportunities for every library worker in every state and territory across the nation to help them better serve their communities” (ALA 2023b, n.p.). Drabinski knew she had the support of the American Library Association, even amidst the character assassination she faced from conservative lawmakers throughout the nation.

Even former President Barack Obama subtly expressed his support for Drabinski and the American Library Association in an open letter he wrote on July 17, just days after the Montana verdict. In the letter, which he addressed to the “dedicated and hardworking librarians of America,” Obama underscored the harm of book banning as a silencing tactic, especially for marginalized communities (Penguin Random House 2023, n.p.). He thanked librarians across the nation for protecting the freedom to read, providing community spaces, and helping people be informed and active citizens. With a nod towards Drabinski, he added: “And you do it all in a harsh political climate where, all too often, you’re attacked by people who either cannot or will not understand

the vital—and uniquely American—role you play in the life of our nation” (Penguin Random House 2023, n.p.). Drabinski likely felt immense gratitude for such a powerful figure to champion libraries and librarians in such a public way.

Nonetheless, pushback against both Drabinski and the ALA continued. In addition to other states joining Montana in severing ties with the association, the World Library Association (WLA) announced that it would be opening on July 24 (Reese 2023). Dan Kleinman, founder of the WLA, launched it with the specific goal of being a competitor to the American Library Association, highlighting the organization’s political neutrality (Reese 2023). Kleinman proclaimed that the organization sought to “provide some kind of counterbalance to this big group that has been pushing these inappropriate books that they have been for decades” (Reese 2023, n.p.). Some conservatives, like Mark Herring, expressed interest in the WLA as a replacement for the ALA. Herring urged states “seeking a new library association as they begin to jettison the American Library Association [to] look to WLA as a refreshing alternative” (Herring 2023, n.p.). However, the organization does not provide information about their membership statistics, so it is difficult to say whether it truly poses a threat to the ALA, in terms of poaching its members.

Conservative voices were not the only ones critiquing Drabinski. While some liberals joined in disapproval of her tweet, others simply stressed that this was just “one’s individual politics” and that she was not the sole representative of the ALA (Marcetic 2023, n.p.). Branko Marcetic speculated that, in McCarthy era fashion, “the safer option for liberals fearing right-wing attack on their values seems not to stand in solidarity with leftists, but to signal their, at minimum, tacit approval of this kind of reactionary hostility to anti-capitalist politics” (Marcetic 2023, n.p.). Essentially, liberals were seemingly encouraged to join in on the criticism against Drabinski in order to save themselves from similar backlash, a fear tactic often implemented during the second Red Scare (Marcetic 2023). In fact, the ALA announced that they would host an Intellectual Freedom Summit in January 2024 (ALA 2023c). The ALA has only held these summits two times prior, during the McCarthy era, since “authors and teachers were singled out and accused of communist subversion, and libraries faced demands that they label books considered ‘un-American’” (Kingkade 2023, n.p.). These sentiments are eerily similar to the accusations thrown at Drabinski and the ALA by constituents of states considering withdrawal. Drabinski represented the ALA for the time being—as outlined in her duties as president—and therefore the organization faced the possibility of critique from both liberals and conservatives as a result of Drabinski’s tweet, identity, and politics. The organization was already losing membership throughout the nation and more consequences, like diminished resources for libraries and library workers, further polarization, increased negative perception of the ALA, and even book banning, could very well follow if Drabinski stayed on as president (Atterbury 2023).

Emily Drabinski, in her victory tweet, had been excited to “highlight and celebrate” her queerness and her socialism, two aspects of her identity that are very important to her, and, as she said after the tweet’s backlash, “are often under a lot of scrutiny” (Kingkade 2023, n.p.). She had never before faced such backlash for disclosing these facets of her character, yet the conflation of these two identities and her presidency evidently caused an uproar. In the wake of the vitriol her critics hurled at her, Drabinski was forced to confront how to balance her political identity as an openly Marxist lesbian with her leadership status as president of the American Library Association. This brought her to an important decision point in her career. Should she give up her long-awaited position as president in the hopes of maintaining the image of the organization? Or does she stand by her identity and remain president, even if it causes the ALA to lose membership?

## Conclusion

Emily Drabinski's ALA presidency and the opposition she received in response to her infamous tweet are exemplary of the difficulties of balancing leadership and personal identity. Her situation brings to light various questions: Is it possible to be an effective leader while maintaining a radical identity? How does one manage their political identity while governing a constituency that may not all hold that same identity? Do identities that mainstream society considers "extreme" have to be hidden if in a position of leadership? Would Drabinski have received the same backlash even if she hadn't been so open about her Marxist lesbianism? At the same time, Drabinski's life and story, as well as the American Library Association's history, reveal that public libraries often are spaces of community building, safety for marginalized communities, and union and labor organizing. Therefore, the organization Drabinski is leading is already very much in line with her own politics (after all, it isn't as if Drabinski said she was a Marxist lesbian in response to winning the presidency of the National Rifle Association...). Leadership is dependent on the organization one is leading, and thus, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. How should one's leadership strategy change according to the association they are heading?

## Epilogue: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Emily Drabinski chose to remain president of the American Library Association. After Montana's decision, she recognized that her "own personal political viewpoint is a target right now, but [her] personal agenda doesn't drive the association" (Kingkade 2023, n.p.) She announced, "It's the agenda of all of us together," remaining positive in the face of such extreme backlash (Kingkade 2023, n.p.). Drabinski also did not stop being open about her political or personal beliefs and identities. She attended the Socialism 2023 Conference in September and spoke about how both libraries and public education need to be "sites of socialist organizing" (Borysenko 2023, n.p.). In March 2024, The Publishing Triangle, an association of LGBTQ+ people in publishing, awarded Drabinski the Torchbearer Award, an accolade granted to "organizations of individuals who strive to awaken, encourage, and support a love of reading, or to stimulate an interest in and an appreciation of LGBTQ literature" (ALA 2024a, n.p.). Drabinski remains active on X (previously known as Twitter), posting about the ALA, libraries, her various identities, and, of course, her cats (Drabinski [@edrabinski] 2024).

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