

Discovering the American Literary Translators Association through its annual conference

Many of us who practice literary translation on the European side of the pond have long viewed the [American Literary Translators Association](#) (ALTA) as a rather queer beast, one that is quite hard to pin down. It is not quite a trade union like the [Society of Authors](#) (of which the [Translators Association](#) is a sub-group), neither is it a wholly academic outfit (even though that is where its origins lie), nor is it fully focused on the promotion and development of literary translation and international writing, like those vibrant twins, the [British Centre for Literary Translation](#) and [Writers' Centre Norwich](#). Yet it performs many of the roles of the above UK organizations, to a greater or lesser extent, and is currently undergoing what is perhaps the most exciting transformation in its nearly forty year existence, as it moves from its original home at the University of Texas at Dallas to pursue a future as an independent, non-profit arts organization, buoyed by partnerships, both formal and informal, with the likes of [PEN America](#) and the [Authors Guild](#) (which plays a similar role and offers similar benefits to the Society of Authors/Translators Association).

Very few members of the Translators Association (TA) are members of ALTA, even though many UK-based literary translators will find their work published Stateside, be it directly through a US publisher or indirectly through sublicensing. This is a pity, because in addition to coordinating several literary translation awards, and publishing its own scholarly journal (*Translation Review*), ALTA runs a huge annual literary translation conference, which takes place in a different US city each year (Tucson in 2015, Oakland in 2016, Minneapolis in 2017), drawing hundreds of literary translators, academics and students.

My curiosity about this annual gathering had been growing for a while, having heard so many good things about it from visiting US colleagues and the odd UK-based translator who had made the trip. And after a fantastic first visit to the United States a year before for a book tour (see issue #47 of *In Other Words*), I needed a pretext to return! So while many of my colleagues flocked to the British Library for the International Translation Day jamboree, I was on a plane to the West Coast for ALTA39 (the first was held in 1978).

ALTA Conference runs for three full days every fall, from Friday to Sunday, plus an opening drinks event on the Thursday night. At ALTA39 there were two morning slots and two

afternoon slots each day (except for the last day when the first morning slot was taken up with the ALTA AGM), and each slot had seven different panels and two different curated readings (many of them bilingual) running concurrently, making a total of around 70 panels to choose from, with such varied titles as: Translating Difficult Poetry; Editing Translations; Conundrums of Cuban History for Readers in English Translation; Translating the Body: The Language of Illness; The Mystery in Translating Crime Fiction; Translation as Communing with the Dead and the Living; Translating Comics; Just Do It: Practical Training for Literary Translators. If you're curious, you can download the [Schedule-at-a-Glance](#) and the official [ALTA39 Conference Program](#). I had some concern that most of the panels might be too academic and theoretical for my taste (though if that's your thing you'll be spoiled for choice!), but in each slot I found at least a couple of panels that really tweaked my fancy, including several that in themselves made the entire trip worthwhile, such as the wonderful "Translating the Oulipo" and the fascinating "The Chosen Language? Audience, Choice, and Change in Yiddish Translation".

But as is always the case with such events, the networking and socializing aspect is just as important, whether over coffee, lunch or at one of the evening parties hosted by publishers or local bookshops. There were quite a few friends and colleagues I only ever see when they come over for London Book Fair, and several more with whom I had been Facebook "friends" for a while, perhaps even interacted with quite a bit online, but never actually met, not to mention people whose names rang a distant bell. As for publishing contacts, there were obviously far fewer than one might expect to see at a book fair, but I did get to meet people from [AmazonCrossing](#), [Two Lines Press](#), [McSweeney's](#), [City Lights Books](#) and [Transit Books](#) – who had just launched, right there in Oakland! There were also several of the new breed of translator/publishers, such as David Shook of [Phoneme Media](#) (see issue #47 of *In Other Words* again!) and our very own Deborah Smith of [Tilted Axis Press](#). There were plenty of attendees from the world of academia, many of whom wear several hats, are literary translators in their own right, and could be useful contacts for future lecturing/workshop opportunities, grants, residencies and publication through some of the smaller university presses. Over a pint or two of fine American craft ale, it was great to quiz colleagues about such fascinating projects as the [Emerging Translators Collective](#), a "DIY micro-press dedicated to transforming the literary translator's task through the use of alternative and collaborative publication models", or [Cedilla Company](#), a new venture from a group of eight New York based translators who have set up a literary translators' collective that aims to

function as an agency for their translation projects as well as providing related services to the publishing industry.

So was it worth the transatlantic trip? Well, here are the views of two UK-based colleagues, Polish to English translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Co-chair of the Translators Association) and Portuguese to English translator Zoë Perry:

“ALTA was a useful opportunity to catch up with US colleagues, and also to continue the exchange of experience between UK and US translators. As TA co chair, it was particularly helpful for me to be able to collaborate with the American PEN co chairs, Alex Zucker and Allison Markin Powell, and also with Maria Jose Gimenez from the Canadian equivalent of the TA, to work out a checklist for translator contracts. We all have the same issues when it comes to contracts – that some aspects of them are a mystery to us, and that we need to understand what we are dealing with in order to negotiate properly. So we pooled our experience and created the checklist, then tried it out on a group of translators by giving them real contracts to test it against. We're going to hone the checklist on the basis of what we learned from this workshop, and hope to try it out again soon in London. I wish more UK translators had the opportunity to attend ALTA, and hope there will be resources to help with that in the future, as the cross-fertilization of these practical ideas is immensely valuable. We have so much in common and so much to learn from each other.”

(Antonia Lloyd-Jones)

“For my first ALTA conference last year, I went with the sole intention of getting to know the ‘other half’. As a literary translator based in the UK, but originally from the US, I often feel stuck somewhere straddling the two continents, with neither foot very firmly planted. ALTA conference provided a valuable opportunity to attend panel discussions that were new and different to what I've encountered at International Translation Day and the Literary Translation Centre at London Book Fair, as well as enabling me to engage in person with fellow translators and publishers of translations (many of them translators themselves) working within the North American publishing world. Networking is a long-game, and returning this year was important to me as a means of building on what I started at the Tucson conference in 2015, to continue conversations and get a much-needed dose of inspiration for new and current projects. It's also not a bad excuse to tack on some extra days and make a holiday out of it!”

(Zoë Perry)

I couldn't have said it better myself! See you in Minneapolis?